

21st Century Landscape Sustainability, Development
and Transformations: Geographical Perceptions

Giovanni Messina, Bresena Kopliku (Eds.)

Preface by Elena dell'Agnese

*21st Century Landscape Sustainability, Development and Transformations:
Geographical Perceptions*

Giovanni Messina, Bresena Kopliku (Eds.)

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Geoethics focuses on how scientists (natural and social), arts and humanities scholars working in tandem can become more aware of their ethical responsibilities to guide society on matters related to public safety in the face of natural hazards, sustainable use of resources, climate change and protection of the environment. Furthermore, the integrated and multiple perspectives of the Environmental Humanities, can help to more fully understand the cultures of, and the cultures which frame the Anthropocene. Indeed, the focus of Geoethics and Environmental Humanities research, that is, the analysis of the way humans think and act for the purpose of advising and suggesting appropriate behaviors where human activities interact with the geosphere, is dialectically linked to the complex concept of Anthropocene.

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Preface

Dealing with the sustainability of cultural landscapes seems to be a challenge today. Cultural landscapes, as Carl Sauer (1925) wrote, are nothing more than the phenomenologically observable expression of the relationship between humanity, understood as a social system, and the context in which it moves, lives, prospers, decays, and dies.

The examples of transformation are innumerable, and it is certainly not easy to account for them, as is attempted in this volume, which articulates its research questions in a series of spatial and transcalar perspectives. Thus, the book begins by considering landscape features as symptoms of decline and change, then moves on to talk about neighborhoods that need to be revalued and capitalized, then to consider regional spaces, and finally it broadens its gaze to global perspectives of contrasts and growth differentials that are in danger of being exacerbated, rather than mitigated, by technological change, which casts sometimes its negative fallout (its waste) on the poorest and most marginal spaces.

Within this articulated framework, the Mediterranean Fair (Palermo) becomes a visible symptom of the crisis in the economy that made it necessary, or at least useful, a crisis made even more explicit by the advent of the pandemic, and also of the end of “a Mediterranean productive dream,” as the authors of the contribution write. A similar crisis of a system that wanted to focus on productive development at all costs is manifested in Taranto, again through a landscape of abandonment and ruins. Reinventing functions to the territory, which are expressed through the landscape, or recovering its history, therefore becomes essential. Beyond the urban landscape, which needs to be reinvented or heritagized, the rural landscape also presents significant challenges, which can be addressed, also in this case, by processes of patrimonialization, as it is happening in the rural spaces of the island of Salina, or in the Etna Nord wine “district”.

If society changes, and consequently the territory and the landscape that are its expression change, the way of looking at the landscape, framing views of it, and examining and disseminating particular aspects of it can also change. A university degree can certainly play a role in changing your attitude towards changes, as demonstrated in the chapter about students enrolled in different courses at the University of Turin and their attitude towards climate change. But even the way you look at the landscape can play a role. New media become a way to emphasize certain aspects of daily life (the bakeries), and a tool for “mediatizing” nature. Tourism landscapes may be enhanced

by social media, be revitalized by a process of patrimonialization thanks to them, or simply be discovered/rediscovered (such as the cases of Magna Grecia Park, in Crotone, or of Sicilia Archeologica). Platforms can play a relevant role in changing the urban landscape, as in Tirana, as the digital transition, in general, can do, albeit with a different velocity in different contexts, with the risk of increasing, instead of bridging, geographical gaps (and of producing a big amount of E-waste, which difficult disposal is likely to fall precisely where the benefits of transition are least, and where development and transformation not always go hand in hand).

So, from the urban scale of a single urban item, albeit quite big, such as the Fiera del Mediterraneo in Palermo, we ended up reasoning about Africa, and of the consequences on the territory (and on the landscape) of the digital transition. Society changes, and its cultural landscape as well.

At all levels, and at all scales.

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THE AUTHORS

Cruising to the poles: narratives and representation of “last chance tourism”

Gaetano Sabato

Cruising to the poles: narratives and representation of “last chance tourism”

*Gaetano Sabato*¹

Abstract

Despite the setback that cruise tourism suffered between 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more recent years have seen an important recovery in this tourism sector. For over a decade, alongside the typical cruise offer, the possibility of going on a cruise to the poles has increasingly established itself. Currently, some cruise companies propose this type of route as a form of “last chance tourism”: visit the Arctic and Antarctica environment and live an experience represented and perceived as difficult to repeat considering the rapid changes that these regions of the planet are undergoing. This chapter aims to reflect on this dynamic from the point of view of cultural geography by analyzing some online products, such as advertisements texts on the website of one of the companies offering various cruises to the poles, the Ponant Cruise Line. Indeed, through the analysis of these narratives it is possible to reconstruct the symbolic imagery on which the cruise offer at the poles is based: a typical example of “last chance tourism”. In particular, the study focuses on the way in which marketing rhetoric combines economic and tourist needs with the sustainability needs of travel, tourists, and ships, making it attractive to visit natural environments and anthropic landscapes already subject to potentially disastrous climate changes. Furthermore, reconstructing narratives and representations of cruise tourism at the poles allows us to reflect on the way in which the fragility of natural and anthropic environments that are still extreme in many ways is perceived.

Keywords:

Geography – Cruise Tourism – Poles – Arctic and Antarctica – Last Chance Tourism - Cultural Geography – Sustainability and Landscapes – Narratives

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1. Introduction

After the setback that cruise tourism suffered in 2020 globally due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this type of tourism has started to grow again. Indeed, «the lockdown imposed a no entry to the routes (prohibited by law in many countries or implemented as a precaution by cruise companies), but obviously, at the same time, the freezing of national and international travels and various tourist services would have caused anyway the drastic reduction of passengers unable to reach most destinations» (Sabato, 2023, p. 125). According to CLIA's (Cruise Lines International Association which is the trade association that collects the largest number of registered cruise companies in the world) data published in September 2023, the previous year ended with a significant recovery from the start of the pandemic (CLIA 2023, p. 9). Indeed, the number of total passengers in 2022 was 20.4 million, compared to 5.8 million in 2020 and 4.8 million in 2021. Figures that, as mentioned, betray a major setback when compared to the pre-pandemic era in which there had been steady growth in cruise demand: in 2019 total passengers numbered 29.7 million, ending a decade of excellent results for this type of tourism. However, forecasts for 2023² indicate some recovery, with 31.5 million passengers sailing and even around 36 million for 2024. Moreover, according to the CLIA, «Cruise continues to be one of the fastest-growing sectors of tourism» (*ibid.*).

Geographically, the main (and oldest) destination market for cruise tourism has always been North America (and in particular the Caribbean, Bahamas and Bermuda), followed by Western Europe (Mediterranean Sea, North Sea and Baltic Sea). Asian destinations have increasingly joined the market, with numbers that can almost compete with the European market. In 2019, about 4 million passengers travelled to Asian destinations, compared to over 6.7 million for all European destinations, including the eastern Mediterranean (*op. cit.*).

However, an interesting niche in the cruise market is represented by so-called 'exploration cruising'. These cruises, which in some cases may have educational or scientific as well as recreational purposes, are typically operated on smaller vessels with fewer passengers and crew, and they often visit remote and hard-to-reach destinations where natural elements dominate or where there are only small traditional communities. Classic exploration destinations include, for example, Alaska, parts of Norway, Antarctica or the Galapagos Islands. In 2022, 5 of the 16 ocean-going member ships that entered service

² The data are not yet final at the time of publication of this work.

in CLIA member companies were expedition ships (CLIA 2022). The routes of these cruises do not always follow fixed patterns and may vary according to many elements, including contingencies, being linked to environmental, climatic, supply needs, passenger response, etc. One can also refer to a niche because such cruises are considerably more expensive than mainstream cruises and are primarily targeted towards enthusiasts who are willing to invest significant amounts of money and occasionally even longer periods of time than a typical cruise holiday. As Ligget et al. (2023, p. 2) stated, «the high price of polar cruise itineraries, the vulnerability of human activities in remote ice-strewn polar waters, as well as the health risks associated with life on board cruise ships, make polar cruise tourism especially susceptible to pressures on global demand via, for example, pandemics, conflict, and economic recession».

As mentioned before, one of the most popular destinations for expedition cruise tourism is Antarctica: a destination that has grown in recent years (excluding 2020 and 2021 due to pandemic-related shipping restrictions). Also, according to the CLIA, «search results for expedition cruise travel to Antarctica increased 51% in 2022 compared to 2019. In addition, during 2022, 137,000 cruise travelers sailed on expedition ships. Though this number is lower than 2019 when 187,000 cruise travelers chose an expedition cruise, 2022 expedition passenger volume was nearly 70% higher than it was in 2016» (CLIA 2023, p. 26). The figures suggest that the appeal of Antarctica could remain high in the coming years.

Interest in expedition cruise tourism to the poles (and other ‘remote’, ‘exotic’ and ‘wild’ destinations, such as Galapagos Islands or the Great Barrier Reef³) is part of what is popularly called “last chance tourism” (also known as “catastrophe tourism”, “disappearing tourism” or “doom tourism”) (Smith, 2008; Eijgelaar, Thaper and Peeters, 2010), «a niche tourism market where tourists explicitly seek vanishing landscapes or seascapes, and/or disappearing natural and/or social heritage» (Lemelin *et al.* 2010, p. 478). However, this form of tourism presents a paradox. The attraction of visiting fragile ecosystems is certainly an opportunity to draw the attention of potential (and existing) tourists to key issues of the day, such as global warming and climate change pushing them and public opinion to environmental protection actions. On the other hand, increasing numbers of tourists (with

³ The quoted terms are intentionally used to emphasise that these qualities of destinations are part of a tourism imaginary built on the extraordinary/ordinary axis. The definition of what is considered ‘remote, exotic and wild’ should be discussed in the light of a complex cultural dynamic that inevitably positions those who use these adjectives with respect to a given destination/object of observation and (re)semantisations.

all the environmental impacts that this implies) may, in the long term, risk further compromising the fragility of such ecosystems, thereby accelerating the process of environmental degradation that is already underway (Burns and Bibbins, 2009; Dawson et al. 2010; Lemelin et al. 2010). Similarly, while this tourism brings economic benefits to local communities in the medium term, it can also become a threat to the communities themselves in the long term, as it risks further impoverishing their cultural and natural heritage. This ambivalence of last chance tourism has given rise to an intense scientific (and popular) debate on its sustainability, testifying also to how topical the issue has become in the last decade (cf. at least Eijgelaar, Thaper and Peeters, 2010; Lemelin et al., 2010; Lück, Maher and Stewart, 2010; Stonehouse and Snyder, 2010; Maher, Stewart, Lück, 2011; Huddart and Stott, 2020; Liggett et al., 2023). The public and private narratives that underpin the tourist experience also play an important role in this ambivalent process. As in other forms of tourism, the interweaving of both levels of narrative gives rise to a vast imaginary that is both producer and reproducer of the tourist experience. As has been shown in other studies (Sabato 2017; 2018; 2023), the imagery of cruise tourism also plays an essential role in its attractiveness to those who choose or have chosen this experience. This imaginary involves suggestions from various cultural productions that also convey a value system with which tourists (and to some extent communities) can either identify or oppose (Sabato, 2023). Indeed, a complex interweaving of public narratives (such as the advertising system, novels, movies, the figurative arts in the broadest sense, paintings and even video games) and private narratives (the word-of-mouth of passengers, the sharing of posts and photos on blogs and social networks) contribute to the formation of a symbolic universe that makes the cruise experience extraordinary and desirable.

As with the imagery of other types of tourism, cruise tourism has a ‘concrete’ impact on the economic side, orienting spending behaviour. Furthermore, the economic benefits of cruise tourism are not limited to the short term. In fact, they can become even more significant in the long term as cruise tourism helps to showcase a destination, creating a positive image that can attract not only other cruise passengers but also tourists in general (Sabato, 2018).

In the case of remote natural destinations or small communities within ecologically fragile contexts, the imagery of cruises is found to convey important concepts related to (environmental, social, economic) sustainability. Therefore, the narratives that compose this imaginary assume an important role.

From these premises, this study aims to explore, from a geographical

perspective, how certain narratives in the advertising system present the experience of some expedition cruises to potential (or returning) cruise passengers. To this end, some online advertising texts are considered and analysed here. More specifically, these are significant texts taken from the web pages of the cruise line Ponant that include last chance tourist offers to the poles. Through their analysis, carried out using a qualitative method, it is possible to reconstruct some of the narratives of the advertising system that substantiate the imagery of expedition cruise tourism at the poles. The analysis of some significant passages from these texts is given in section 3.

2. Cruising to the poles

Last chance tourism and, in particular, expedition cruises to the poles often raise important issues, such as environmental, geopolitical and socio-economical implications. One of the most important issues is the fragility of these ecosystems, which for decades have been suffering the most obvious effects of global warming and climate change. It is now well known the risk we face with the rapid deterioration of the poles. Antarctica, which contains 90% of all the world's ice, would cause the oceans to rise by 57 meters in the event of a total meltdown: historically, more than 250 billion tons of ice have disappeared since 2009 (in the 1980s 40 million of ice disappeared). Melting Arctic ice, on the other hand, would cause the oceans to rise by 6 meters (Gemenne and Rankovic, 2021). Furthermore, the rapid deterioration of the Arctic, the rate of melting for which in recent years is higher than in other areas of the Earth, has made it easier to open up new sea passages and consequently easier to exploit new hydrocarbon deposits, which have added further agents of progressive pollution and environmental depletion (*ibid.*). Therefore, there is an environmental fragility that, especially in our times, cannot be ignored even by the tourism industry. With specific reference to cruising, it must be said that almost all ships must already comply with the regulatory guidelines of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), which are then imposed at regional and general levels through the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL). This convention deals with preventive actions to counter pollution from oil, sewage and waste from ships. Some technical annexes (e.g. Annex V) refer specifically to ships sailing in polar waters, which are regarded as special world areas (CLIA, 2021a). According to the CLIA, its «members satisfy and often exceed the regulatory structures set by the International Maritime Organization's

(IMO) International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) and more stringent regional standards, where applicable» (*Op. Cit.* p. 1).

Liggett et al. (2023) recently showed how over the years the collaboration among polar tourism researchers has grown and self-organised international research groups (such as International Polar Tourism Research Network) and scientific committees (such as the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research's Antarctic Tourism Action Group - Ant-TAG; the Academic Consortium for the 21st Century's -AC21 - Antarctic Tourism Research Project) have formed. Thus, the scientific literature on the subject of the sustainability of tourism and cruises at the poles is extensive⁴ and takes into consideration several aspects (Stewart, Liggett and Dawson, 2017), such as the ethical debate on last chance tourism including cruise tourism (Eijgelaar, Thaper and Peeters, 2010; Lemelin et al., 2010 with particular reference to the case of the Canadian Arctic), the debate on respect for sustainability concerning different types of cruise tourism at the poles (Bauer and Dowling, 2006; Lück, Maher and Stewart, 2010; Huddart and Stott, 2020), the comparison between past and present expeditions (Orams, 2010), the development, the management and governance of polar ship-based tourism (Liggett et al., 2023), as well as the international regulations and local policies (Cajaiba-Santana, Faury and Ramadan, 2020).

The dimensions of tourism in the Arctic and in Antarctica are diverse. As far as Arctic tourism is concerned, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (which, as mentioned above, was a watershed in the tourism and, thus, cruise market) one can observe a rapid growth of some destinations such as Greenland (about 25,000 passengers), and instead a steady positioning of more mature destinations such as Alaska (about 1 million), Svalbard Islands (about 75,000) and Canadian Arctic (about 5,000) (Liggett et al., 2023, p. 2). According to the International Association Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO, 2022), visitors (in the sum of disembarked passengers and cruise passengers) to Antarctica increased from about 74,000 in 2019-2020 to a forecast⁵ of over 106,000 in 2022-2023, with greater variability than the situation of tourist flows in the Arctic.

Due to the different geopolitical status of the Arctic and Antarctica, tourism arrives in the former by different routes: especially in European areas, tourists

⁴ The scientific literature and research topics concerning pole tourism, and thus also cruise tourism, are seemingly endless. In the knowledge that it is only possible here to propose a quick review of the studies closest to this work, some of the most significant publications are cited below. For more in-depth studies see at least: Stewart, Liggett and Dawson, 2017.

⁵ At the time of publication of this chapter, available IAATO data refers to the year 2022.

in many cases may also choose aircraft or land-based means, such as trains and cars, for their trips and activities. Instead, in Antarctica, tourist flows are almost exclusively shipborne. In addition, 98% of the journeys in the Antarctic Peninsula region are operated during the seven months of the austral summer season, between October and April, with departures from the port of Ushuaia (Argentina) or other ports in the north of the Antarctic Treaty Area⁶ (IAATO, 2022).

Ship-based tourism to the poles is today mainly operated by expedition vessels that, possibly, can be (re)deployed in both macro-regions (Liggett et al., 2023). Cruise ships arriving in Antarctica can be of different types: size and structural capacity is reflected in the variety of supply and demand, routes and costs (Berger, 2010). Larger ships, those used for mainstream ocean cruising with thousands of passengers, are limited to sailing in Antarctic waters, with a few stops at the most accessible ports, but far from the continent (e.g. Falkland Islands, Tierra del Fuego). On the other hand, smaller cruise ships with reinforced hulls and other structural features to protect them from the ice (*ibid.*) can disembark passengers in some areas of Antarctica. Of course, the latter type of ships are the ones that offer more expensive and time-consuming cruises (on average, these are two-week cruises), while maintaining high-profile, in some cases even luxurious, services on board. Expedition ships are, therefore, not necessarily more spartan, but appeal to a different audience: «The passengers on the small ships [...] are not interested in the mainstream cruise experience, but in having a learning experience, an adventure, and actually setting foot on Antarctica. This means that the marketing of these cruises focuses upon the experiential and existential aspects of being on Antarctica rather than on the luxurious nature of mainline ocean cruisers» (Berger, 2010, p. 85).

3. The imaginary of polar tourism: the case of Ponant cruises

As we have seen, there are certainly several companies offering cruises to the poles. Since, as mentioned above, the Antarctic tourist market relies

⁶ The Antarctic Treaty Area is an international treaty that regulates the area between the South Pole and the 60th Parallel South Latitude initially signed in 1959 by 12 states claiming geopolitical interests and sovereignty rights over Antarctica (Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, Japan, Norway, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Russia, the United States and South Africa). Today there are 56 states party to the treaty, of which 29 are consultative parties with voting and veto rights.

almost exclusively on shipping, it may be interesting to focus briefly on this macro-region to understand the dimension of cruise tourism. It is estimated that the number of ships (and yachts) in Antarctica in 2019-2020 had reached 62, while in 2021-2022 it had fallen to 48, to become around 86 in the forecast (see footnote n.4) for 2022-2023 (IAATO, 2022 – *my own processing*). In the two-year period 2021-2022, if we exclude the companies operating yacht voyages to Antarctica, there were about 24 cruise companies and operators offering cruises on the Peninsula Region. In the biennium 2022-23, it is estimated that the companies and operators are expected to exceed this figure, with more than 30 (*ibid.* – *my own processing*). In the last four years, among the companies most present in Antarctica is the French Compagnie du Ponant, with four ships in service. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, here we consider some texts on the web pages of the cruise line's website to reconstruct the symbolic imagery that underpins some expedition cruises to the poles. It appears to be an interesting case study, not only because it is one of the companies with the most ships engaged in the Arctic and Antarctic macro-regions, but also because of the care taken in online media communication. To give an example, the company dedicates an entire website to its flagship, the most recent, *Le Commandant Charcot*⁷, which entered service in 2021 (CLIA, 2021b). The website, that offers multimedia contents, such as videos, background music and sounds, presents the ship and the experience onboard in these terms:

1) Unique experiences amidst the ice. / On board the only passenger ship in the world with a Polar Class 2 hull, which allows for navigation through multiyear ice, enjoy rare moments communing with nature, unique experiences that only / *Le Commandant Charcot* can offer you. (CommandantCharcot)

The text addresses the potential tourist by focusing on two topics: the experience of the journey as “extraordinary” (the idea behind many tourist offers) as opposed to the “ordinary” of everyday life, and the technology, the means (the ship) to reach it. The experience on board is unique, as it allows one to connect with a remote nature (the multiyear ice). The extraordinary capabilities of the means (the ship with a special hull, ranked among the

⁷ From 1904 until 1907 the explorer and doctor Jean-Baptiste Auguste Étienne Charcot was the leader of the French Antarctic Expedition that reached the west coast of Graham Land in the Antarctic Peninsula. From 1908 to 1910, he led a second Antarctic expedition, exploring the Bellingshausen Sea and the Amundsen Sea.

highest in ice capabilities) allows one to reach such remote places (and nature). Indeed, the text seems to confirm the concept of the cruise ship as a destination in itself (Löfgren, 1999; Sabato 2017 and 2018), rather than as a simple mean of transport.

On Ponant's English-language website, the offer of cruises specifically dedicated to the poles is divided into Arctic and Antarctic. Starting with the Arctic, 7 cruises are proposed, with several routes including passage from the Geographic North Pole and various destinations such as Alaska, Svalbard Islands, Iceland. These are mostly very expensive exploration cruises aimed at a high-spending audience: prices for basic packages range from nearly 38,000 euros to over 41,000 euros (prices also include flights to and from Paris and transfers). The duration varies from 15 to 20 nights on board. Each of the cruises on the webpage has its own map where the route taken by the ship is plotted.

A short introductory text presents the Arctic offer:

2) Kangerlussuaq, Grindarfjörður, Longyearbyen, Kivito... If there are any town and village names that truly evoke the Far North, it's those of Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Canada. The scenery in this part of the world is simply spectacular. Icebergs, sea ice and volcanic mountain landscapes extend as far as the eye can see. And amidst it all roams the polar bear, king of the Arctic, in complete peace and tranquillity. To take an Arctic cruise is to allow yourself to be transported to a world where man is simply a spectator and nature reigns supreme. (Ponant 1)

The text opens with two rhetorical figures: enumeration and metonymy. Some of the most famous locations in the Euro-American Arctic are listed. Metonymy is made explicit with reference to their respective countries and with the aggregate 'Far North', shifting the destination space to a remote elsewhere. The description of some typical elements of the Arctic natural landscape reinforces the symbolic evocation of the places that potential passengers will observe on the cruise. Reference is also made to the polar bear, one of the best-known symbols of the Arctic (Dawson et al. 2010), another metonymic device used by the text to represent nature and the remoteness of it in physical and symbolic space in relation to the tourist. Moreover, the picture of a polar bear opens the section on Arctic cruises. The text concludes with an explicit reference to the position that the passenger-visitor, defined as a "spectator" will hold towards nature. The primacy assigned

by the text to the act of observing is one of the most widely used aesthetic tensions in tourism (see at least Urry and Larsen, 2011 for the theoretical question; see Sabato, 2018 for its possible application to cruising dynamics).

After the detail on the cruises operated, another text on the webpage indicates the:

3) 3 reasons to discover the Arctic / It is said to be mythical, or at least as much as its opposite, the Antarctic. Only rarely do we get to know its most isolated regions. That is what makes it so appealing And yet, the Arctic includes eight countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark and Iceland) and many more marvels to discover. Here are three reasons to go to the Arctic. 1) To meet the local communities; 2) To discover grandiose nature; 3) To follow in the footsteps of the great explorers (Ponant 1).

Each of the subsections is further explained. Point 1) mentions the Inuit population; no. 2) mentions the primary forests of Alaska, icebergs, glaciers, geysers and volcanos, then «exceptional fauna» (*ibid.*) such as whales, finbacks, narwhals, orcas and seals, polar bears, walruses, musk oxen, Arctic foxes and Svalbard reindeer, terns, puffins, sea eagles, gannets and bald eagles; no. 3) mentions the early Viking explorers, then the exploration voyages of Cook, Amudsen, Victor and Charcot.

The Antarctica cruises section of the website features 25 expedition cruises. This is a varied offering, although some routes are repeated, but with different fleet ships and at different times of the year. Routes touch on different destinations, depending on the package chosen: Argentina, the Falkland Islands, the Shetlands, the Antarctic Peninsula, South Georgia, the Sub Antarctic Islands of New Zealand, and the Ross Sea.

Prices are lower than those of Arctic cruises, but still aimed at a select clientele: the basic offers range from about 8,000 euros to 20,000 euros (prices also include flights and transfers). Even in the case of these cruises, there are maps on the webpage tracing the route taken by the ships.

There is also a separate section dedicated to the Antarctic Peninsula, which will be discussed here later. However, the routes now listed on the site can be found both in this section and in the section dedicated to Antarctica more generally.

The introductory text to the Antarctica section is articulated as follows:

4) A legendary land with a history of attracting the great explorers, the White Continent continues to exert a strong fascination today.

Embark for an Antarctic expedition cruise and sail along the continent's incredible coasts, admire its unique wildlife — from king penguins to whales — and navigate through immaculate white scenery, where icebergs glimmer and shine in an explosion of blues, from turquoise to the darkest of tones. (Ponant 2)

In the text, Antarctica is immediately placed in a mythical, 'legendary' elsewhere, so much so that it is not named with the toponym, but with the familiar adjective of 'White Continent' that ideally brings it closer to the sensitive experience of the future passenger. The spatial elsewhere is reinforced by the chronological one, as the past of naval and geographical exploration on the continent is evoked. Immediately afterwards, the possibility of observing, by sailing, the Antarctic nature is mentioned: the morphology of the coasts, the typical wildlife. Finally, the text briefly describes the glacial landscape through the colours and light reflections that can also be observed from the ship's vantage point.

The webpage then lists the

5) 5 reasons to visit Antarctica / A trip to Antarctica is the ultimate travel goal. These ends-of-the-Earth lands are tough to access and offer constant changes in scenery. Here are five reasons to set off on an Antarctic cruise. 1) Treat yourself to a unique adventure; 2) Witness exceptional wildlife; 3) Move through incredible scenery; 4) Follow in the footsteps of the greatest explorers!; 5) Visit historical sites and scientific bases. (Ponant 2)

Also in this case each of the subsections is further explained. No. 1) affirms that Antarctica is one of the «few preserved areas on the planet. Tourism is regulated. Vessels [...] do not carry more than 200 passengers at a time» and presents the trip as an extraordinary experience to «create unforgettable memories» (*ibid.*); no. 2) calls Antarctica a «sanctuary for wildlife», enumerating the terrestrial and marine fauna; no. 3) describes the «dream-like» natural landscape of glaciers, fiery sunsets and dazzling colours; no. 4) recalls the voyages of the explorers who first reached the continent, such as Cook, Charcot, Shackleton, etc.; no. 5) refers to the «secrets» of the continent and the modern attempt to study them through scientific foundations. It also mentions the former whaling stations, the ravages of seal hunting and the southernmost post office in the world. The

text ends with these lines: «As you can see, there are so many reasons to embark on this unique adventure to a continent that's like no other» (*ibid.*).

The sixth text considered here is one that introduces the company's cruise offerings on the Antarctic Peninsula:

6) Succumb to the magic of a place unlike any other. To this day, the mythical Antarctic Peninsula still holds real fascination and promises its visitors unforgettable moments. Throughout your adventure in this icy realm, you will find yourself in the heart of a spectacular decor in subtle shades of blue and white, surrounded by exceptional wildlife. Penguins, humpback whales, seals and giant petrels are at home here [...]. Depending on which sites you will be lucky enough to visit, you may get the chance to observe them and share with them the beauty of these extreme parts. / Each day, based on ice conditions, the Captain and the Expedition Leader will suggest zodiac outings or landings to discover the infinite riches of the Antarctic Peninsula. Glaciers, ice floe, tabletop icebergs, mountain peaks that plunge straight into the sea, volcanic beaches, research stations, enchanting bays, and vestiges of the whaling industry: these are the faces of the Antarctic that will likely reveal themselves to you, in a hushed and surreal atmosphere. You will sail in the wake of Jean-Baptiste Charcot, Adrien de Gerlache and Sir Ernest Shackleton, great Antarctic explorers who, from the 19th century, set out to conquer these remote and uninhabited lands. (Ponant 3)

As in text n. 4, this opens by placing Antarctica in an elsewhere (this time 'magical') and emphasising how the experience of the continent today is connected to a history of exploration and 'conquests' of remote lands that are more explicitly revealed at the end of the text. The term 'adventure' reveals precisely the universe of meaning in which the cruise experience is placed. Nature is first represented through the transfiguration into an 'icy realm' and the use of colours and shades of light. Subsequently, nature is represented through the enumeration of observable fauna. Precisely with regard to the activity of observation, the text introduces an element of exclusivity, as it opens up the possibility (i.e. the 'randomness') of such an experience occurring under certain conditions. Here the reference is both to the difficulty of encountering wildlife and the unpredictability of weather conditions that also determine the consistency of the ice. In addition, the exploration of nature is brought back to a protected experience, less exposed and carried out in subordination to the apex figures of the company under sail (the captain and the expedition

leader). Thus, natural and anthropic elements ('faces of the Antarctic') can be revealed to the passenger-visitors and made accessible through smaller, more agile boats (zodiac) that allow direct contact with the otherness of Antarctica.

4. Conclusions

As mentioned in the introduction, exploration cruise tourism at the poles is a niche in the cruise offer that takes up some of the demands of so-called last chance tourism. It gives rise to a paradox that perhaps sums up some of the contradictions of our contemporary times: on the one hand, it can contribute to a greater awareness (and knowledge) of the issues affecting increasingly fragile ecosystems such as the Arctic and Antarctica (Gemenne and Rankovic, 2021), but on the other hand it risks contributing to the very fragility it can make known (Burns and Bibbins, 2009; Dawson et al. 2010; Lemelin et al. 2010). Despite the fact that exploration cruise tourism to the poles remains a product often aimed at a high-spending clientele, the fact remains that after the crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been on the upswing since 2022 (if current forecasts are confirmed), with tens of thousands of tourist-passengers per year deciding to embark on a cruise. A result that cannot be taken for granted, especially if one considers the many technical difficulties (special ships; variability of weather and ice conditions due to seasonality; reduced logistics; compliance with careful international environmental regulations, etc.) that characterise these cruises (Ligget *et al.*, 2023) compared to those in more canonical markets.

However, quantitative data alone do not explain some of the motivations for embarking on these cruises. It therefore becomes useful to study the symbolic universe that substantiates cruising at the poles, reconstructing some public narratives of the advertising system. In the case study presented here and conducted using the perspective of cultural geography, the analysis of some of the texts of the Ponant Cruise Lines company's web pages dedicated to cruises in the Arctic and Antarctica revealed some evidence. In fact, from all six texts taken into consideration there is a fundamental focus on the naturalistic value of the destinations, whose ecosystems are exalted from their morphological and faunal peculiarities. The Arctic and Antarctica are transfigured through a narrative process that likens them to a mythical elsewhere, remote both in space and time from the ordinary everyday life of potential passengers. The 'extraordinariness' of this experience is made possible by boarding special, unique ships capable of transforming the journey into an 'adventure'.

Implicitly, in the texts analysed, the ship remains a mobile destination that (more explicitly) allows above all a visual enjoyment of polar environments. We can therefore speak of an agentive aestheticization process produced by the narratives: such peculiar and fragile destinations are given a very high value but at the same time they become accessible to the few who could/can get there.

This chapter has limited itself to proposing a reflection on the theme of the imagery of cruises in the Arctic and Antarctic, both by contextualising this tourism geographically and by presenting a case study. Certainly, for a wide-ranging study, other texts of the cruise advertising system, both online and in information brochures, should be considered with a comparative approach. These are lines of research that the author reserves the opportunity to develop in other studies.

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