

Antarctica offers some spectacular spots to rest

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ANTARCTICA is an unlikely place for relaxation, but perhaps its very solitude and isolation is what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad needs for a break.

Dr Mahathir will be there as part of his month-long vacation after attending the just-concluded World Economic Forum in New York. The two places could not be more contrasting.

Antarctica, now in its summer months, is populated by penguins and about 4,000 people, most of whom are foreign scientists scattered in several research bases.

Larger than Australia, its total area is about 14 million square kilometres, of which 97 per cent is covered with ice. It has an average annual temperature of -35 degrees Celsius. Howling winds at speeds of up to 160km per hour blast its surface.

Despite such hostile terrain, parts of Antarctica are disputed by seven countries (Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway and United Kingdom) as national territory.

Such claims, however, are not recognised under the Antarctic Treaty of 1959. Forty-four nations are signatories to the treaty which is the legal framework for the management of the continent. Malaysia is not party to the treaty.

Of the signatories, 27 nations have voting rights (consultative members). Antarctica is administered through the decisions of the consultative member nations.

The treaty essentially demilitarises the region, promoting instead

peaceful and non-commercial use of Antarctica for scientific endeavours.

Tourism has also picked up, with about 13,000 visiting in the summer months between 1999 and 2000, up from 10,000 visitors in 1998.

Most tourists come by commercial ships or yachts and stay about two weeks. According to tour guidebooks, a 14-day cruise costs between US\$3,000 (RM11,400) and US\$5,000.

For all its starkness, Antarctica offers some spectacular sights. They include the Lemaire Channel, a series of sheer cliffs that fall straight into the sea.

There's also the desolate Dry Valleys where the air is so dry it cannot sustain any ice or snow. Scientists believe no rain has fallen there in two million years. This valley was described by explorer Robert Scott as "the valley of the dead".

It's also possible to take a dip in Antarctica at Deception Island where an active volcano heats the shallow waters of a cove.

Unregulated tourism, however, is becoming a concern for Antarctica's fragile environment. As no one country "owns" the continent, no visas are required.

Two groups of Malaysian scientists have conducted research there. The first team of four Universiti Malaya scientists studied pollution there in October 1999. The second team, comprising microbiologists and fish experts, was there from December 2000 and February last year.