

Arctic Park to Get Visitor Centers

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Northbrook Island in the Franz Josef Land archipelago, part of the Russian Arctic national park.

At their simplest, they are Quonset huts filled with stuffed specimens of the local wildlife. At their best, visitor centers at national parks can be state-of-the-art museums with interactive guides and plenty of distractions for the children.

But whatever the budget, every self-respecting national park needs a visitor center. And Russia's newest national park in the Far North is no different.

The director of the Russian Arctic national park, established on the far northern Archipelagos of Franz Josef Land and Novaya Zemlya in 2009, said Wednesday that the islands would get their own centers for tourists.

Given the climactic conditions, however, they are likely to double as hotels.

"They will be places where visitors could stop not for a couple of hours, but for several days," park director Romash Ershov told Interfax on Monday.

The buildings will presumably also serve as work places for Ershov and his colleagues. The park is so remote and inhospitable that he currently oversees it from an office several hundred miles away in Archangelsk.

Ershov said the visitor centers would form the center of a network of trails and viewing platforms to turn the remote islands into a Mecca for eco-tourists.

"We're taking scientific advice on how to organize visits and accommodate and decide on the optimal number of people," he said.

Getting there will not get any easier, however. Despite Defense Ministry plans to reopen several abandoned airbases on both archipelagoes, the only way to the islands for civilians remains by sea.

And tickets on icebreakers do not come cheap. Poseidon Arctic Voyages, which operates cruises to the territory from Murmansk, is offering tickets for a 12-day cruise to Franz Josef Land this August from \$6,450 for a place in a shared four-berth cabin.

The Russian government earlier this month invited bids for an estimated 1.5 billion-ruble (\$45 million) contract to clean Franz Josef Land's main islands of military and industrial detritus left over from the cold war.

A research expedition including scientists from the Russian Academy of Sciences and the World Wildlife Fund will depart from Arkhangelsk next month on a mission to glean greater understanding of the territory.

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