

A group of approximately ten people wearing bright orange expedition gear are seated in a black zodiac boat. The boat is positioned in the lower center of the frame, passing through a large, natural archway formed by a massive, translucent blue ice wall. The ice arch is covered in icicles hanging from its upper edges. The water is a deep blue-grey, and the sky is overcast. In the background, other ice formations are visible under a grey sky.

# INTO *the* WILD

Exploring remote places is at the heart of expedition cruising, and more travellers than ever are jumping onboard. By Jocelyn Pride.



Considered the pioneer of modern-day expedition cruising, Lars-Eric Lindblad led 57 adventurers on the first ‘citizen voyage’ to Antarctica on a chartered Chilean naval vessel in 1966, hoping if people experienced a place firsthand, they would become ambassadors for its protection. Backing up with another ‘first’ to the Galápagos in 1967, and the launch of the 100-passenger *Lindblad Explorer* in 1969, the idea ‘ordinary’ people could travel to faraway places started to catch on. And hasn’t stopped.

“Expedition is one of the fastest growing areas of cruise tourism,” says Joel Katz, managing director Australasia for Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA). “Passenger volumes on expedition itineraries have increased 71 per cent from 2019 to 2023.”

Expedition ships go where conventional cruise ships can’t. Typically carrying between 100 and 300 passengers and built for extreme conditions, they



01 Discover untouched lands © David Merron/Quark Expeditions 02 Expeditions are a twitcher’s paradise © Swan Hellenic 03 Crystalline ice in the Arctic © Acacia Johnson/Quark Expeditions 04 See the Kimberley in a new light © Seabourn 05 Outdoor dining on icy waters © Julien Fabro/Studio Ponant 06 Incredible wildlife encounters © Samantha Crimmin/Quark Expeditions

manoeuvre into far-flung tropical coves, navigate through glacier-filled bays, and cross the roughest stretches of water on the planet, to touch a place and be touched by it. To be pared back, and refilled with humility. With a flexible itinerary, an expedition leader and team of specialised guides work with the captain to make the most of every day through small group excursions. “We call it a safari at sea,” says Cameron McDonnell, key account manager Australia & New Zealand, National Geographic Lindblad Expeditions. “Where expedition cruising truly sits is when the destination is the hero.”

Who is onboard?

This type of travel attracts people looking for an authentic, in-depth experience. From couples and solo voyagers to multigenerational travellers and friendship groups, expedition cruising is a leveller. Companies tailor their niche in line with their philosophy and specific itineraries. Viking is well known for its adult-only clientele;

Silversea, Seabourn, Scenic and Ponant (with the exception of *Le Commandant Charcot*) welcome kids over a minimum age (usually 12 years old), making it clear there aren’t child-specific facilities or activities. National Geographic Lindblad Expeditions has a family focused Global Explorer program and UnCruise Adventures offers curated Family Discoveries itineraries. Perfect for couples or a small group, On Board Expeditions boutique 12-guest, six-crew catamaran, *Odalique III*, ventures into the Tasmanian wilderness.

Solo travellers are well catered for on Quark’s *Ultramarine* and *Ocean Explorer* with studio single cabins; HX (Hurtigruten Expeditions) waives the single supplement on a range of itineraries, and Michael Heath, CEO of Aurora Expeditions, recently announced that 10 dedicated single berths will be available with no single supplement on every sailing in the Arctic and Beyond 2026 season.

“Multigenerational travel has really taken off across the cruise industry,”

Katz says. “Expedition is a popular choice, especially as kids and grandkids reach early adulthood.”

As this trend continues, and the age of 80 becomes the new 60, accessibility is front of mind. HX has elevators and carefully appointed mobility-friendly cabins; Viking, Scenic, Silversea and Quark expedition ships follow suit with facilities for accessible travel.

A ‘once in a lifetime’ expedition cruise often leads to another, and loyalty to a specific company is strong. Atlas Ocean Voyages spokesperson Jason O’Keefe reports: “We’re in our strongest booked capacity to date.” Oliver Critchley, senior PR consultant with True North, agrees, “One in four guests return for another adventure and our most ‘regular’ guest has cruised with us more than 40 times,” Critchley says. For Dan Blanchard, CEO of UnCruise Adventures, seeing guests moved to tears is the best compliment. Adds Katz, “We used to say there’s a cruise for everyone. Now we add there’s an expedition cruise for everyone.”



Paying it forward

“Our aim is for destinations to be better off for a ship visiting,” Katz says. “Understanding what communities and environments need, and how challenges can be overcome, is a focus.”

“We have a deep connection to the conservation and continuing protection of the islands we visit – guests directly support when travelling with us,” says Aaron Russ, commercial director and expedition leader with family owned and operated Heritage Expeditions, the original concessionaires of permits to the Subantarctic Islands.

In a world first for the cruise industry, earlier this year Seabourn named the Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners garrangarru (godparents) of the *Seabourn Pursuit*, an elegant new expedition ship cruising the Kimberley. Guests gain an insight into the Wanjina Wunggurr culture through smoking ceremonies, rock art interpretative tours, dance and storytelling.

True to Lars-Eric Lindblad’s original ethos, the company has flourished under the leadership of his son through a long and strong partnership with National Geographic. “It’s a wonderful joining at the hip of two companies that are dedicated to preserving the destinations we travel to for future generations,” says McDonnell.

Advancements though technology

“We also know many cruise lines continue to prioritise their sustainability initiatives because of the nature of the environments they’re visiting,” Katz affirms.

Innovation in sustainability is the mantra of HX and sister company Hurtigruten, which are aiming to complete Sea Zero – a zero-emission electric ship – by 2030 and working in partnership with Lyngen Seaweed to grow and harvest seaweed, a ‘blue’ superfood and source of natural CO2 capture. B-Corp certified, Aurora Expeditions built the first passenger-carrying ships using game-changing Ulstein X-Bow technology for a smoother ride and fuel reduction, and is

currently in partnership with Eyesea to test and incorporate marine mapping for pollution on their vessels, and Ponant’s *Le Commandant Charcot* with a Polar Class 2 rating, is powered by liquified gas and can venture to places no other expedition vessel can reach.

Luxury at sea

The thought people need to rough it to be on a ‘true’ expedition is passé. Creature comforts like drying rooms, heated floors,

expeditions into three categories: polar, epicurean and cultural. National Geographic Lindblad Expeditions features a glass igloo where guests can have a camping experience without leaving the ship and, for a unique experience, guests on the *Le Commandant Charcot* bathe in snowflakes in the snowroom.

Specialised local dining is also in vogue. Deep in the Amazon, Aqua Expeditions’ ‘rainforest to plate’ menu is served on exclusively designed ceramic tableware. Dining in a lava cave in the Galápagos is the latest innovation for Silversea’s signature S.A.L.T-inspired (sea and land taste) menu, and Quark Expeditions’ Inuit chefs use 1,000-year-old ice and ancient rock to present a ‘tundra to table’ degustation.

New horizons

Looking ahead, cruise lines are riding the wave of demand for expedition cruising. CLIA research shows five new expedition ships are currently on order from the world’s shipyards with a combined value of US\$500 million.

Where to

Named in honour of Sir Douglas Mawson, Aurora Expeditions’ latest vessel will take 130 passengers to retrace the steps of the Australian legend on an Australasian Antarctic Expedition leaving from Hobart in December 2025. Hurtigruten has launched an innovative tour for the 2025/2026 season where small groups of 20 will follow the Northern Lights on land and sea; Aqua Expeditions is set to dip into waters teeming with biodiversity in Zanzibar, Tanzania, and the Seychelles with its sixth vessel; and True North is ready to introduce guests to Cenderawasih Bay in West Papua, a hot spot for whale sharks. “Every part of the world has places that appeal to the curiosity of people looking for an experiential voyage,” says Katz. ♦

saunas, hot tubs, gyms, spa treatments and wellness rooms abound. There are libraries, citizen science labs, art spaces, theatres, photography classes, guest speakers for enrichment, and exploration essentials such as Zodiacs, kayaks, snorkelling, diving and snowshoeing equipment, in addition to signature features.

Scenic has the only ships in the industry with both helicopters and submersibles, and Swan Hellenic offers Chopra ‘explore and restore’ wellbeing expeditions pairing ‘inward journeys with outward exploration’. Atlas Ocean Voyages has redefined its luxury



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07 Explore the world’s most remote locations © Pia Harboure/Atlas Ocean Voyages 08 Awe-inspiring icescapes in the Arctic © Swan Hellenic

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