



A Seabourn Venture passenger takes a polar plunge

# Age of adventure

Expedition cruising is the hottest – or perhaps coolest – way to travel, and its star is on the rise, finds **Jane Archer**

**W**hat is so appealing about expedition cruising? Just a few years ago, it really only attracted adventurous souls happy to shack up in dorms on old Russian icebreakers; now it is the fastest-growing sector of the cruise industry and pairs adventure with luxury.

Clia says exploration destinations saw a 53% increase in passenger numbers in 2023 (by contrast, classic ocean cruising rose about 35% year on year), while a glance at modern expedition ships shows that far from roughing it, today's adventurers enjoy luxuries such as suites, butlers and champagne on tap.

Tempting indeed, especially when you throw in the excitement of seeing penguins or polar bears in the Antarctic or Arctic, and getting up close to giant tortoises and blue-footed boobies in the Galápagos. But there has to be something else persuading customers to fork out on expedition cruises, which come with hefty price tags.

## RISING TIDE

Cruise lines cite many reasons, from a determination to travel after the months of lockdown to the 'noise' created by the recent flurry of ships launched by Seabourn, Swan Hellenic, Scenic, Silversea, Atlas Ocean Voyages, Aurora Expeditions, Quark Expeditions, Viking and others.

“With expedition cruising, it is as much about the destination as the ship

Lynn Narraway, Seabourn's vice-president for the UK and EMEA, attributes growth to having successfully extended the line's trade reach beyond traditional cruise agents. “We are working with more travel partners, ➤

SUSTAINABILITY  
AT SEA

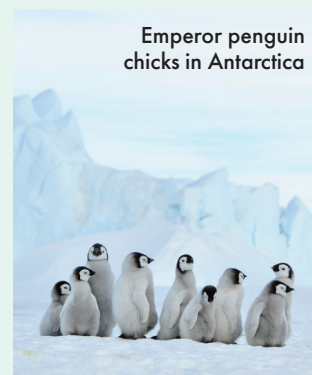
In common with the rest of the cruise industry, expedition companies are investing millions of dollars to improve the sustainability of their vessels and reduce environmental impact.

Some new ships operate for short times on battery power and have GPS positioning to avoid dropping anchor and damaging seabeds; all have eliminated single-use plastics, use less paper and have waste-water recycling plants.

Viking is working on ways to operate at zero emissions in port through a hybrid propulsion system of liquid hydrogen and fuel cells. It also hopes to foster a greater understanding of the environment among passengers through partnerships with various scientific and wildlife bodies.

Whether any of this influences passengers is a moot point. AE Expeditions' Andrew Turner says consumers are increasingly conscious about spending money with companies that are operating sustainably, but Ponant's Stephen Winter admits it is not something its guests ask about. "They are more concerned about the size of the ship," he says.

Silversea has released a 'Mission Expedition' webinar for agents, in association with *Travel Weekly*, that answers questions about Zodiacs, packing and travelling to Antarctica. "Those are all the things guests want to know," says Shanks.



Emperor penguin chicks in Antarctica

PICTURE: silverphotography.ru



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A yoga session on Swan Hellenic's *SH Diana*; a Ponant vessel in Magdalenfjord, Spitsbergen; snoeshowing in Senja, Norway, on an excursion with HX

PICTURES: Sylvain Adenot Photography; Espen Mills



many [of whom] specialise in luxury adventure holidays rather than cruise."

The Expedition Cruise Network, which launched in April 2023 and has 23 cruise line and 1,150 travel trade members, says word is spreading among agents, operators, organisers and more.

"We are capturing a different type of [cruise] seller and getting more people talking about expedition cruising, which is brilliant," says ECN co-founder and chief executive Akvile Marozaitė.

HX (Hurtigruten Expeditions) sales director Mark Walter hails the support from agents but fears they get "distracted by easier – as in cheaper – sells". Finding cheaper is not hard given the line's 12-day Antarctica cruises start from around £6,500 per person, plus flights.

At Ponant, a 28-day Hobart to Cape Town expedition, departing in February 2026 on the icebreaker *Le Commandant Charcot*, starts from an eye-watering £38,000 a

**top tip**

Network with expedition cruise lines and get the latest on adventure travel trends at this year's Atas Conference, taking place in Leeds on October 15-16. Register at [atas-conference.com](https://www.atas-conference.com)

head. Nevertheless it is attracting incredible interest, according to international sales director Stephen Winter. "Agents are starting to understand the commission they can

make from our type of cruising. There is fierce competition but room to grow in the UK."

Peter Shanks, Silversea Expeditions' managing director for the UK, Ireland, Middle East and Africa, says all the new expedition ships have undoubtedly focused attention on the sector, but adds that customers are as happy with the line's older *Silver Cloud* and *Silver Wind* as the shiny new *Silver Endeavour*. "In expedition, it is as much about the destination as the ship," he emphasises.

He welcomes the fact there are just a handful of new expedition ships on order over the next few years. "There will be more modest growth but that is a good thing as it allows us to consolidate."

ON THE RADAR

Antarctica and the Arctic are the top two expedition favourites, but proving that cruising off the beaten track doesn't have to mean ➤

### BEST *new* EXPEDITIONS

#### BEST FOR THE ROSS SEA

AE Expeditions' new ship *Douglas Mawson*, launching in December 2025, will sail from Australia to east Antarctica and explore New Zealand's subantarctic islands. The vessel will hold 154 passengers and offer single cabins to cater for the growing number of solo travellers.

#### BEST FOR SHORT EXPEDITIONS

HX Expeditions has released 10 new seven-night Ultimate Norway cruises round-trip from Tromsø, operating between January and March 2026. Sailings on the 160-passenger *Spitsbergen* visit the Lyngen Alps, Senja, Lofoten and Vesterålen in northern Norway.

#### BEST FOR POLAR BEARS

Polar bears and walrus await as Scenic's *Scenic Eclipse I* circles Svalbard on a 12-day Arctic expedition round-trip from Longyearbyen, departing August 17, 2025. Prices from £14,165 include flights and transfers, a night in Oslo plus drinks, tips and expeditions ashore.

#### BEST FOR PENGUINS

Atlas Ocean Voyages is off in search of glaciers, penguins and orcas on a 13-night voyage from Ushuaia that visits Chile's Magdalena Island, Argentina's Isla de los Estados and West Point Island and Stanley in the Falklands. Prices for the March 3, 2026, departure are from \$6,999 excluding flights.

#### BEST FOR WELLNESS

Swan Hellenic is offering two five-night Explore and Restore cruises from Salvador de Bahia in Brazil this autumn. Both include daily yoga and meditation sessions, self-discovery workshops and Ayurveda-inspired meals. Prices start from \$2,480 including the wellbeing package.

#### BEST FOR ISLANDS

The remote archipelagos of Vanuatu, Solomons, New Guinea and the Federated States of Micronesia come under the microscope on a trilogy of new expedition voyages from Coral Expeditions departing in January and February 2026. Two voyages are 16 nights, the third is 21 nights, and between them they offer wildlife, culture and opportunities to dive and snorkel.



ABOVE: Scenic Eclipse II's helicopter in Kimberley, Western Australia

cold, the Galápagos Islands are also up there, while the Kimberley across the top of Western Australia is going great guns. The region is deliciously warm during the dry season, when ships are there, which this year includes Seabourn and Scenic joining stalwarts Coral Expeditions, Silversea and Ponant.

All that's just for starters. HX reports strong interest for Greenland, while Marozaitte picks Antarctica's Ross Sea, Africa and the British Isles as next year's rising stars.

AE Expeditions sales director Andrew Turner says its Wild Scotland voyage in May (to be repeated in 2025) was a bestseller for the line, adding: "For travellers from the UK, we put this down to the growing desire for no-fly trips."

For 2025, Silversea and Atlas Ocean Voyages are following AE's lead with new expedition-style voyages in the UK. Silversea's sailings on *Silver Wind* explore islands and lesser-known harbours in Ireland and Scotland. "We expect 25% of guests to be from the UK as it is close to home, so very attractive," says Shanks.

Ponant is offering a slew of new expeditions that explore remote islands in Indonesia, subtropical islands in Japan and Canada's St Lawrence River in winter. A 20-night Arctic cruise from Nome in Alaska to Longyearbyen in Spitsbergen attempts to reach both the geographic and magnetic North Poles,

“Agents are starting to understand the commission they can make – there is fierce competition but room to grow

while the aforementioned month-long expedition from Hobart to Cape Town ventures deep into eastern Antarctica.

Both fit a trend for longer cruises that's being noted across the industry. Examples include HX's 96-day Pole to Pole voyage this summer and Coral Expeditions' 60-night circumnavigation of Australia in October 2025, while Seabourn has two 23-day Northwest Passage sailings in August 2025, which Narraway calls the "ultimate adventure".

They are fine for the majority of expedition cruisers, who are generally retired, aged 60-plus and have time and money for longer voyages. To attract a younger audience, HX also has new shorter itineraries for 2026 (see box). Silversea's fly-in, fly-out Antarctica cruises spend six nights in the White Continent and also appeal to those worried about cruising across the often turbulent Drake Passage. Similarly, AE Expeditions has new 10-night Fly the Drake cruises, starting in 2026, targeted at the same audience. **TW**