

Take a voyage into the unknown

Expedition cruises are a great way to see the world's most spectacular and far-flung destinations in comfort. **David Hartley** picks out 10 of the best

The heat is on, as expedition cruise lines slug it out to see who can come up with the most exotic itinerary, from the smouldering volcanoes of the Kamchatka peninsula, in Siberia, to the rainforests of Papua New Guinea. Adventurous? Certainly. Risky? To an extent, yes – although we're not talking about being forced to eat your huskies or fend off cannibals. Expedition voyages are meticulously planned and all ships have, at the very least, a bar and comfortable cabins. Some even offer butlers and hot tubs.

In the polar regions, in particular, weather and ice dictate the route, which makes the trip all the more exciting. Needless to say, exploring the furthest reaches of the planet comes at a price: even the most basic expedition will set you back about £400 a day. You'll need to book way ahead, too: some trips are already sold out for 2017. It's never too early to start planning.



The Avenue of the Baobabs, Madagascar

outdoor hot tubs and a fleet of Polarcirkel inflatables for exploring the shoreline. From £8,843pp, including flights from Oslo to Longyearbyen to join the ship; departs on August 24, 2017 (hurtigruten.co.uk)

Svalbard

G Adventures offers the unusual experience of sea kayaking around the Svalbard archipelago, deep inside the Arctic Circle, as part of a week-long exploration on the 134-passenger Expedition. You'll need sea-kayaking experience, as it can be choppy as well as icy. Polar bears are the holy grail of voyages here, but you're also likely to see Arctic foxes, reindeer and vast seabird nesting colonies deep in the



Plain sailing



Betty/Klamy

From £12,054pp, including flights from Cairns; departs on December 7, 2018 (northstarcruises.com.au)

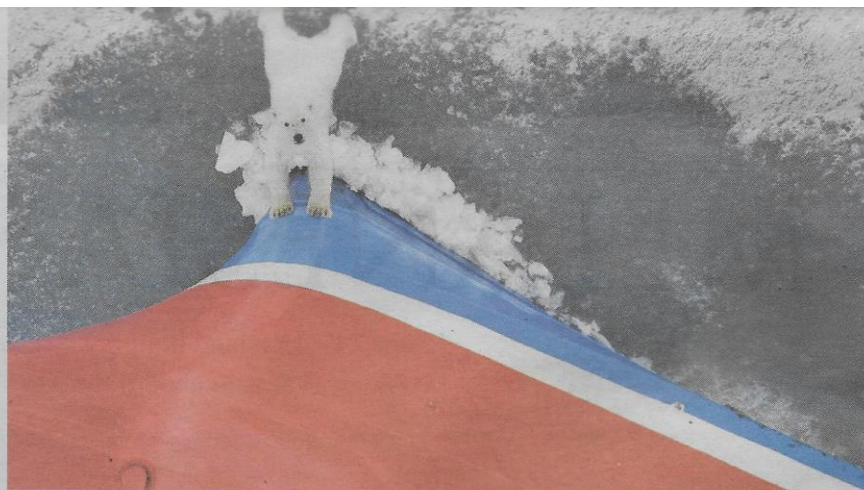
Madagascar

One of the most rewarding aspects of expedition cruising is that you get to see places in depth. Noble Caledonia's 12-night Mauritius, Madagascar and Mozambique voyage on the 100-passenger Arenissima is no exception: it will spend nine days pottering around Madagascar, where you should see lemurs, chameleons and mongooses, as well as all manner of birdlife, coral reefs and giant baobab trees. There are stops at volcanic Réunion and uninhabited Atropa Island, in the Mozambique Channel — Noble Caledonia has special permission to land passengers here, to observe the sea-turtle nesting grounds. From £6,885pp, including flights and drinks with meals; departs from Mauritius on January 2, 2018 (noble-caledonia.co.uk)

Bay of Bengal

There's real kudos in getting somewhere first, particularly if you turn up in a

glassy lagoons, mangrove
is a voyage so exotic that
ed with the islanders



luxury ship. Silversea Expeditions' voyage to Bangladesh on the sumptuous, all-inclusive Silver Discoverer has taken years to plan and will be the first in the history of cruising. The itinerary — which also includes time in Sri Lanka, India and the Andaman Islands — eschews the region's seething cities, heading instead to tiny islands to visit villages, schools, craft workshops and sleepy fishing communities. A highlight is the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world, and hunting ground for an estimated 350 wild Bengal tigers. The 16-day journey from Colombo to Calcutta starts at £11,350pp, including drinks; departs on February 11, 2017 (silversea.com)

South Atlantic

The craggy islands of Gough, Nightingale and Tristan da Cunha don't get many visitors, and the penguins and seals far outnumber the human inhabitants. You could visit all three on this voyage from Ushuaia to Cape Town with the expedition line Ponant. The ship, Le Lyrial, calls at some of the smaller, uninhabited islands of the Falklands archipelago, as well as South Georgia — one of the best spots to see whales, seals and king penguins. The three-week cruise includes long spells at sea, but there's a spa on board, talks from wildlife experts will be laid on and, this being a luxury French-owned vessel, you can expect fine food and an open bar. From £7,925pp, including flights from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia, a balcony cabin, drinks and Zodiac excursions; departs on March 4, 2017 (en.ponant.com)

Antarctica

A great expedition leader or a guest expert can make all the difference on an Antarctic voyage. There's still space on Wildfoot Travel's 12-night Antarctica off the Beaten Track expedition this November. It's escorted by the television presenter David Lindo, aka the Urban Birder, who is swapping Wormwood Scrubs for the Antarctic peninsula, in search of skuas, albatrosses, petrels and, of course, penguins. You'll be spending six days at the landing sites of the peninsula, with chances to go ashore by Zodiac and to explore the ice by kayak



Northerly bearing
Meeting a local on a Svalbard cruise with G Adventures

or with snowshoes. There's even an optional overnight Antarctic camping experience. The trip is on the sturdy Akademik Ioffe, originally a Russian polar-research vessel. From £5,951pp for three people sharing, including activities; departs from Ushuaia on November 8 (wildfoottravel.com)

Deeper Antarctica

Visiting the fringes is no longer enough: there's now competition to get deeper into the White Continent, ice conditions permitting. One Ocean's 12-day Deep South expedition in 2018 will visit two spots rarely reached by passenger ships. Crossing the notorious Drake Passage normally takes two days, but this trip starts with a flight direct to King George Island, off the tip of the Antarctic peninsula. From there, your ship, the Akademik Sergey Vavilov, picks its way south through the ice to Detaile Island, a British base in the 1950s, but evacuated in a hurry when the ice became unstable. Because the men working there couldn't take much with them, the base has become a time capsule, revealing the harshness of life in Antarctica during the 1950s. The itinerary also includes Marguerite Bay, home of two research stations and the base for the Australian explorer John Rymill's Graham Land expedition in the 1930s, which mapped part of this previously uncharted area. From £7,907pp if booked before November 1, including a one-way flight from Punta Arenas to King George Island; departs on February 20, 2018 (oneoceanexpeditions.com)