



Top 10 trends

Smaller ships and shorter trips are just some of the exciting innovations in the world of expedition cruising, says Dave Monk

1 EXPEDITION CONTINUES TO BOOM

Dreaming of sailing to Panama or Palau? You're not the only one. According to the Expedition Cruise Network (ECN), which represents 23 cruise lines and 900 travel agents, sailing to distant destinations is the cruise industry's fastest-growing sector.

The market almost tripled between 2021 and 2023, with 71 per cent of expedition lines seeing their business grow last year, and none reporting a decline. The ECN forecasts further growth in 2024, led by rising demand for the polar regions, especially from American, German and British cruisers.

Seabourn now operates two ultra-luxury expedition ships, and the line's European vice president, Lynn Narraway, says, "The growth in our

expedition business shows that UK travellers are increasingly looking to fulfil their bucket-list ambitions and travel to some of the world's hardest-to-reach destinations."

2 FROM BABIES TO 90-YEAR-OLDS

Even babies are joining expedition cruises now, as working parents hop aboard.

While the average customer age for most cruise lines is still 56 to 75, some operators report that it has dropped to between 46 and 55.

Lindblad Expeditions' chief commercial officer, Noah Brodsky, says, "We have no minimum age on any of our ships – we have babies and children of all ages." He adds that with better internet connection on ships and the spread of working from home, young

executives find it easier to carry on their businesses, even at sea.

At the other end of the age scale, longer, healthier lives mean that 90-year-olds can go snorkelling – and take along their children and grandkids. "We sometimes have family groups of 10 or 20 people travelling together," adds Noah.

Meanwhile, Swan Hellenic's CCO, Patrizia Iantorno, says, "We are seeing younger guests and more children. Some couples take the trip as an educational experience for their kids. We have also seen an increase in solo bookings."

The latter point is echoed by ECN, which reports a 'noticeable increase' in single travellers, while the French line Ponant says that singletons now make up a quarter of its expedition customers.

"The solo travel trend is on the rise," agrees Silversea's UK managing director, Peter Shanks. ▶



PREVIOUS PAGE *Scenic Eclipse* typifies the new small but luxurious expedition ships
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Exploring Alaska's fjords; a polar bear encounter; Scenic guests can enjoy helicopter flights

savvy customers book closer to the departure date. Either way, there are bargains to be had during the 'Wave' season of January to March. ECN's co-founder, Akvile Marozaitė, says, "In the expedition cruising sector - more than in any other - the clients who benefit most from Wave season are those who book with a company that effectively matches the operator and ship to their expectations and budget."

6 SMALLER SHIPS
 The world's fleet of around 100 expedition ships carry an average of just 160 people each. In size they range from the likes of Heritage Expeditions' 18-guest *Heritage Explorer* to the 228-passenger *Scenic Eclipse* twins and HX's ships with up to 500 on board - still a small number in cruise industry terms.

Swan Hellenic's Patrizia Iantorno says, "Small ships are attractive because of their one-to-one service, the opportunity to explore remote destinations and the chance to connect with like-minded people on board."

In Antarctica, only 100 people can disembark at any one time. Lindblad's Noah Brodsky says, "On a 500-person ship you might get off only once in five days. With us it would be twice in a day. You can only really do this type of experience on a small ship."



Keyaking - Seabourn; Costa Rica - Ganz Twins/Shutterstock



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Kayaking in College Fjord, Alaska; warmer climates such as Costa Rica are increasingly popular with expedition cruisers

"There's a growing demand for more adventurous off-ship experiences, such as helicopter landings"

7 NEW EXPERIENCES
 From the moment you sign on the dotted line, the whole expedition experience is changing, with the advent of more luxurious ships, immersive excursions and door-to-door transfer services.

Polar specialist Quark Expeditions reports a growing demand for more adventurous off-ship experiences, such as helicopter landings, visiting Inuit communities or hiking miles over Snow Hill Island in Antarctica to visit a colony of emperor penguins. The company's chief customer officer, Paul Brousseau, says, "The travel void of the pandemic has created new demand for the extraordinary. Our guests tell us that experiences like these are the 'must-haves' for a re-energised era in expedition travel."

Antarctica21, which provides fly-cruises to the White Continent, has opened the Explorers House in Punta Arenas, Chile - a new private pre-departure club for travellers with its own restaurant, bar, library and presentation space.

Other lines, such as Silversea, lay on door-to-door chauffeur services to ferry customers to airports.



Keyaking - Seabourn; Costa Rica - Ganz Twins/Shutterstock

8 SHORTER TRIPS
 Travelling to Antarctica is a serious time commitment when you factor in flights to Chile or Argentina and sailing the Drake Passage. But more cruise lines are now offering shorter trips for travellers with limited annual leave, with guests flying to Antarctica to join a ship already there. For these 'working wealthy' cruisers, Seabourn is offering an 11-night voyage, while Silversea operates 'Antarctica Bridge' sailings, following in the wake of fly-cruise pioneer Antarctica21. Lindblad's Noah Brodsky says, "Now we can get you to and from Antarctica in

who want to follow in the footsteps of Charles Darwin and experience these islands' unique wildlife for themselves.

4 WIDER CHOICE OF OPERATORS
 Expedition cruising used to be the preserve of specialised lines with hardy ships, such as Russian nuclear-powered icebreakers. But now established expedition companies are introducing more luxurious craft, such as Quark Expeditions' Ultramarine with its twin helicopters.

More traditional lines - including Viking, Seabourn and Scenic - are also entering the market, while newcomers from the hotel industry - such as Atlas Ocean Voyages - are expanding into the expedition sector.

All these developments mean more comfort, greater flexibility and amazing new facilities - such as the submarines on the twin *Scenic Eclipse* ships and Seabourn's two expedition craft.

5 COMPETITIVE PRICING
 With long flights, personal service and specialised equipment, expedition cruising isn't cheap. More than half of ECN members say their average booking is £8,000 per passenger, but the growing number of operators and ships - and a desire to reach a younger market - means more competitive prices.

According to Seabourn, many cruisers like to book their bucket list holidays well in advance, giving themselves plenty of time to research their destination and enjoy the anticipation. Swan Hellenic, in contrast, is seeing

a week, but the number of days you spend there is the same as before."

Conversely, Viking is seeing more demand for longer voyages from travellers with time on their hands, such as 'longitudinal' world cruises sailing north to south. Lindblad, too, offers 31-day Antarctic and 25-day Northwest Passage cruises, both of which sell out well in advance.

9 CITIZEN SCIENCE
 Passengers on expedition ships are increasingly enjoying hands-on research experiences.

ECN reports that more than 90 per cent of its members work with charities and citizen science projects, performing tasks such as tracing whale migration or observing cloud formations.

Scientific partnerships between cruise lines and universities can produce ground-breaking results - for example, researchers aboard *Viking Octantis* have been able to catch rare glimpses of giant phantom jellyfish.

HX's European MD, Nathaniel Sherborne, says, "For many years now, we have actively encouraged guests to participate in citizen science projects, as we want to help them understand the places they visit."

10 THE GREEN AGENDA
 The three strongest trends reported by ECN members all related to sustainability, with seven in 10 saying that this will play a bigger role in customer choice.

Ponant has announced plans for a zero-emission ship, while other lines are changing to cleaner fuel, eliminating plastic, connecting to shore power in ports and using dynamic positioning rather than anchors to remain stationary.

Seabourn's Lynn Narraway says, "We are investing in future fuels and decarbonising ships. We are also looking at reducing power consumption on board or replacing it with green energy."

Climate change is affecting itineraries, making previously closed routes such as the Northwest Passage accessible while encouraging more sustainable tours. ■



Alaska - Seabourn; polar bear - Tetyana Dostenko/Shutterstock; helicopter - Scenic

3 WARMER DESTINATIONS
 Antarctica remains the most in-demand destination for expedition cruisers, followed by Greenland and the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard - home of the polar bear.

However, there is an emerging trend for intrepid cruises to warmer parts of the world. In 2023 Swan Hellenic visited Africa's east and west coasts for the first time, and in 2024 HX (formerly Hurtigruten Expeditions) is returning to the same region, to Cape Verde and the Bissagos Islands off the coast of Guinea-Bissau.

Lindblad heads to remote beaches in Costa Rica, while Seabourn and Scenic are planning voyages to Australia's wild and empty Kimberley region. Viking's two expedition ships sail the Great Lakes of North America when they're not in Antarctica, and the Galapagos archipelago off the coast of Ecuador remains a huge attraction for those