



Why Has Expedition Cruising Become Travel's Hottest Ticket?

By Zachary Laks

You're hovering at the waterline in an inflatable Zodiac off your expedition cruise, exploring one of the most remote corners of the world. You could be in arctic waters as a humpback whale breaches, close enough that you can count its barnacles. Or you're snorkeling in the Galapagos, encountering a playful pack of sea lions. Expedition cruises bring you close to unspoiled wonders of the world with unmatched convenience and ease.

These small ship cruises aren't just a trend; they're redefining modern travel by bringing the furthest corners of the world within reach. The sector is experiencing significant growth. Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) reports a 150% increase in global capacity for expedition and exploration ships from 2019 to 2029 (including ships on order), with more than 40 small ships sailing today that are specifically built for this type of cruising. Among the many staggering statistics that point to the meteoric rise in popularity of expedition and exploration cruising, there was a 22% rise in passengers from 2023 to 2024, alone.

This booming new cruise sector has become the go-to for ultimate, bragworthy adventures worldwide.

Experiencing the Ocean

Driven by a traveler fascination with exploration and first-hand encounters, expedition cruises have never been more popular. The industry has seen a rapid increase in customer demand not just to see the world, but to adventure through its outermost frontiers. New, boutique-sized ships are equipped with advanced technology and reinforced hulls, enabling them to navigate waters that were once unavailable for consumer travel. Expedition cruises are often the only way to reach remote places such as South Georgia Island, the North Pole, or the Northwest Passage, easily and safely.

For passengers who have explored the world's most popular ship routes and newbies alike, expedition cruises offer unique, off-grid itineraries. Immersive, adventure-focused excursions, always bespoke given the unpredictability of nature, are the highlights of these sailings. Whether you're kayaking alongside penguin colonies in Antarctica from a luxurious Seabourn

expedition ship or snorkeling alongside sea turtles and stingrays in the Galápagos on the upscale Celebrity Flora expedition ship, these immersive nature encounters leave you with memories of a lifetime.

Appealing to New Generations

Expedition voyages have contributed to interest in cruising from younger travelers, particularly Gen Z and Millennials. These guests are often first-time cruisers, seeking extraordinary experiences – with pent up wanderlust and opportunity to brag on social media driving demand for remarkable journeys. Younger travelers seek authentic travel adventures where they can travel with purpose, and are eager to learn about ecosystems, cultures, and climate through expert-led excursions.

Keeping Up with the Demand

The exponential growth in expedition fleets has encompassed a remarkable roll out of new, boutique ships, new routes, and uncharted itineraries. New ships are slated to debut in the coming years, including the Scenic Ikon from Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours in 2028.

Luxury brands are also expanding the expedition experience beyond the ship. Silversea will launch its first-ever hotel, The Cormorant at 55 South, for the 2026/2027 Antarctica season. The new luxury lodge is in Puerto Williams, Chile – the world’s southernmost town. The cruise line’s entrant into land-based accommodations will offer a stylish launch pad for its Antarctica sailings.

The Cutting Edge of Sustainability

Sustainability is a core mission of all CLIA member cruise lines, with a commitment to pursuing net-zero emissions by 2050. Passengers are eager to see expedition fleets doing their part to help protect the environment, and the cruise industry is meeting the challenge.

Technological breakthroughs in sustainability include the LNG-battery hybrid propulsion on Ponant’s Le Commandant Charcot (with net-zero operations when on battery); Silversea’s first-ever Galapagos waste solution, diverting all non-organic waste away from island landfills; Quark Expeditions’ micro-turbine energy, which delivers one of the cleanest, lowest-footprint polar expedition ships; and HX Expeditions’ award-winning sustainability leadership efforts to reduce their environmental footprint with hybrid ships, shore power, and biofuels.

Ponant is also developing the Swap2Zero, a next generation sailing ship, to debut around 2030.

Future Horizons

A world of new exploration awaits from the North and South Poles to remote destinations in between. CLIA member cruise lines continue to meet the demand for expedition sailings,

pioneering voyages that take guests on the most thrilling adventures – complemented with special interest programs targeting, for instance, birders, citizen scientists, and photographers.

Expedition cruising's popularity, blending rugged exploration with premium onboard amenities, shows no sign of slowing as small-ship fleets (and their mighty sustainability efforts) journey to the far reaches of the earth.

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