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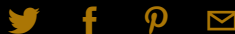
Expedition Cruising 101: What You Need to Know

by J U D Y K O U T S K Y

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This isn't your standard cruise, in any way.



Cruising has long been a **favorite mode of travel**. But as travelers focus more on where they are going, less on how they're getting there, a new breed of traveler is finding that smaller ships with fewer passengers, more active excursions that focus on nature, and environmentally friendly practices are the experience they're really after. Welcome to expedition cruises. Wondering what they are and how they differ from an ocean cruise or a river cruise? Read on for our primer.

Size and flexibility

When it comes to **expedition cruising**, smaller is considered better. Most agree that 200 passengers or less is the ideal size. "An expedition ship can respond nobly to changes in weather or to make the most of wildlife

opportunities,” says Susan Adie, expedition operations manager for G Adventures. That means that the ship doesn’t have to stick to a strict itinerary the way that large ocean liners do. If there is a group of humpback whales spotted in Antarctica or polar bears are seen off in the distance in the Arctic, the ship can change its course to get closer to the action—optimizing the experience for guests.

Often on an **itinerary from Uncruise**, for example, a day’s schedule might say “captain’s choice,” which means the captain will look at a number of criteria—including nature viewing and weather—to determine the best place to visit that day.

The presence of fewer passengers also means the opportunity for more activities. Most expedition cruise lines can accommodate two different landings a day, so people are spending more time off the ship and in the environment. (If you have 4,000 passengers, it takes additional time and manpower to organize everyone and get them off the ship.) The smaller passenger size makes for a more intimate vibe on the ship, too: you generally form close relationships with people on expedition ships, because you’re with the same ones each day.

An Uncruise ship in Alaska.

Courtesy UnCruise Adventures

Ports of call and shore excursions

“Ocean liners tend to call at ports with docks, harbors, and piers that the ships can dock alongside, allowing large numbers of guests to visit the locations largely unaccompanied,” says Cedar Swan, CEO of **Adventure Canada**. “Expedition ships usually stay clear of these types of visits, opting for remote locations known for nature, wildlife, and intimate experiences with small communities.” In essence, expedition cruises go where the big ships don’t.

While some expedition cruises focus exclusively on the Arctic and **Antarctica**, others may go to Hawaii, Mexico, and Costa Rica, but they dock at under-the-radar beaches or landings where few other ships go. For many travelers, this translates into a more authentic travel experience.

“We believe a certain group of travelers are looking more for adventure, true exploration, and candid wildlife encounters—especially in very remote, seldom visited regions,” says Malcolm Ellis, senior vice president of operations for **Quark Expeditions**. While large ocean liners may offer more than 100 shore excursions on a one-week itinerary, expedition cruises offer fewer options, but focus on active adventure or an immersive nature experience.

Onboard entertainment and the environment

Another big part of expedition cruising is the focus on education on the ship. While luxury may be a component for some expedition lines, broadly speaking, lounging by the pool with a drink in hand comes second to lectures from guest scientists, naturalists, and historians. Travelers on expedition cruise ships want to know about the nature and history of where they’re going, and the ships also offer easy access to get outside for wildlife viewing.

Environmentally safe practices are a **major concern for most expedition cruise lines**, who tend to operate in vulnerable destinations. In many cases—such as in Antarctica and the Arctic—cruise lines are required to adhere to certain practices to even be permitted to sail in those waters. And smaller ships burn less fuel and create less waste. But because a large part of expedition cruising grew out of scientific research, much of these efforts are baked into the practices of the cruise lines that excel in it—such as Hurtigruten, who earlier this year launched the world’s first expedition vessel powered by a hybrid of LNG fuel and electric battery, or lines including Ponant, Lindblad, and Scenic, who invest in fuel-efficient systems and stabilizers, as well as wastewater treatment efforts that go above and beyond. “Expedition vessels limit their impact and operate in an environmentally responsible way—in all aspects of their visit, into those sensitive areas—in order to protect the destination,” Adie says. ♦

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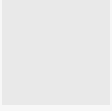
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