TRAVEL

Can Taking a Cruise Actually Be...Cool?

Thanks to a new focus on smaller, go-anywhere ships with uncompromising luxury cred, the answer, decisively, is yes.

Forget floating cities pitting between overcrowded, overwhelming ports. As the cruise industry defuses from its Covid-imposed yearlong hiatus, it’s radically refocusing by launching a spate of nimble new vessels that combine voyages to far-flung destinations with abundant high-end amenities.

“These ships are the best of both worlds,” says Expedition Trips founder and president Ashton Palmer, whose agency focuses on this very niche. “We’re in an unprecedented boom period for small-ship cruising—every line is trying to outdo the others, whether on hardware or the itineraries.” He adds that even charter vet should consider booking one of these adventurous trips. Larger ships are more stable, of course, and better equipped with essentials like helicopters to reach even the most remote, wildlife-populated spots. Take Ponant’s 121-cabin Le Commandant Charcot, which launches next month with a polar itinerary that whisk's guests via the ships island, nanesake island to see the emperor penguins, a voyage that’s been largely inaccessible to all but research vessels until now. “No one in the history of small-ship cruising has been able to do what it does,” says Mary Curry of Adventure Life, another cruise specialist, who says the ship’s icebreaking PC2 rating is just one notch below most scientific boats. There are even onboard lab areas where passengers can pitch in as citizen scientists—plus, for downtime, an indoor pool, heated blue lagoon baths and a ➤
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pair of restaurants. Curry also recommends Aurora’s Sylvia Earle, with an X-bow design that allows for smooth sailing even in the choppy waters around Drake Passage, and virtual anchor technology that helps protect the sea floor. The mushroom-shaped, naturalist will be on board for its first voyage next spring, around South Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, in Baja, California.

Think of Seabourn’s newest vessel, the expedition-primed Venture, which launches next April as a cruise ship that breaks the mold of a super yacht, with an onboard garage stocked full of cutting-edge toys: alongside Zodiaks and e-bikes, you’ll also find two custom-built submarines.

National Geographic’s new Resolution retains the line’s signature focus on education—and it’s unapologetically highbrow—but boosts the onboard luxury experience beyond the rest of its fleet with two restaurants and an infinity-style hot tub.

In the Galapagos, SilverSea just debuted its purpose-built Silver Origin, with Butler service in all suites and a nearly 1:1 crew-to-guest ratio for a maximum of 100 passengers. Richard Turen of Churchill & Turen, a cruise specialist agency, notes the ship’s spectacular 1,700-square-foot owner’s suite: “The views from the balcony, which is 96 square feet, are amazing as you go through the Galapagos.”

He says, “People who charter a yacht would be very comfortable with that.” Yacht veterans might also consider the new 16-passenger catamaran Curatana II, with its grand, balcony-equipped suite, or the 20-passenger megayacht Evolve, from Explorer.

Both of these vessels, of course, are ideal for private charter—most of the cruise lines also offer full charters, with a seven-day custom voyage with Seabourn, for instance, starting at $2.6 million—but Turen recommends considering a partial charter, where an intimate group can customize excursions, dinners and other onboard activities, much like a ship within a ship, even on the smaller vessels.

The best destinations for first-time expedition cruisers? Think of Antarctica as a Broadway show and the Arctic as a modern art museum, per Palmer. “Antarctica is a slam dunk, in-your-face experience, but you have to work harder to appreciate the Arctic, which is contemplative and subtle,” he says. Antarctica’s sailing season is the northern hemisphere’s winter, but Arctic voyages take place in summer, offering welcome respite from increasingly unsettling temperatures at home. “A luxury traveler doesn’t want to compromise on anything—an experience over and above what the average person does, yes, but without forgoing creature comforts like a [large] cabin,” he says. “They want it all, and now they can have it.” —Mark Elwood