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AN EPIC EXPEDITION

EXTREME CRUISING IS NO VOYAGE FOR THE MEEK, BUT IF YOU'RE READY FOR THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME, YOU'LL GET TO VISIT PLACES NOT MANY WILL EVER SEE.

BY SARA VENTIERA

AT THE END OF THE 15TH CENTURY — not long after Christopher Columbus's expedition returned from the New World — European nations began sending sailors and navigators to North America in search of new trade routes. For more than 300 years, explorers braved the icy waters and freezing temperatures of the Canadian Archipelago, dubbed the Northwest Passage, in hopes of finding a shorter route to Asia.

Roald Amundsen set out in 1903, becoming the first explorer to successfully find a route through the passage on his small ship, *Gjøa*, manned by just six men. Amundsen knew he'd made it through three years later when he ran into whaling ships from San Francisco.

Amundsen and his predecessors braved icy temperatures, icebergs and sea ice that blocked channels and frequently damaged, crushed or clutched ships — in 1829, John Ross and James Clark Ross survived four years trapped in the freezing environment.

While the passage is still far from being hazard free, in 2007, satellite images revealed that (possibly due to climate change) the retreating sea ice had made it an option for commercial routes — and cruising.

Whether you're looking to follow in the footsteps of

the early explorers or visit the desolate, otherworldly landscape of the Antarctic, visiting the planet's polar regions is becoming an increasingly viable option. That being said, extreme cruising is not for the faint of heart or for those who like to fly by the seat of their pants. Careful planning and preparation are key to a safe and successful journey.

Ben Lyons is CEO of EYOS Expeditions, a company that specializes in organizing yacht expeditions to extreme locations, such as the Arctic, Antarctic and South Pacific. He stresses that experience is key: "You simply have to know what you're doing in these areas. It's inherently dangerous if you don't. The Arctic and Antarctic are absolutely the most beautiful areas on the planet, but you have to treat them with respect."

Expedition yacht
Hanse Explorer in
Antarctica



Trip Planning

Tim Soper, founding director and expedition leader for EYOS, suggests starting polar expeditions with a trip toward the North Pole, following with the Antarctic.

“The Arctic is much less windy and much calmer, but you still have ice to deal with in both places,” says Soper. Over the past few years, the Northwest Passage has increasingly become a usable option for vessels looking for a quicker — and oftentimes less expensive — route to travel from the Atlantic to the Pacific than going the traditional Panama Canal route.

Timing is an important aspect of planning an itinerary. The best time to traverse the Northwest Passage is late August to September. Thomas Lennartz, the expedition director for Arctic Kingdom, which specializes in Arctic safaris, expeditions and motor yacht excursions through the polar regions, says it’s a three-week minimum to make it entirely through the passage.

The Antarctic season runs from November through March. The ideal time to visit depends on what one would like to explore. “The earlier you go the more white you’ll see,” says Lennartz. “In January you’ll see chicks being born; February you’ll see more whales.”

While Lennartz does assert the wildlife comes easier in the Antarctic, he prefers the diversity of the Arctic. “There are birds, polar bears, caribou, seals, arctic foxes, beluga whales, orca; there are no huge herds or flocks,” says Lennartz. “You almost have to earn it, but when you do see it, you really savor it.”

In addition to the general issues of traveling a remote location, the waters of the Antarctic and getting to and from the region can be treacherous; however, according to Soper, even small sailing yachts can make the trip. As is the case with any crossing, keeping a close eye on weather conditions is key.

Cape Horn, the southernmost point of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago, and the Drake Passage are known for being some of the most treacherous waters in the world.

“The worst case is very bad,” says Soper. “It’s fre-

quently windy because of the geography, and you can have the big Southern Ocean swells. The Southern Ocean is the only place on earth where swells can go around the world. It can be an uncomfortable crossing, but the weather passes quickly.”

Obviously, to make a trip to the Antarctic, the vessel must be capable of passing through the Drake Passage and everything on board must be safely fastened and stowed properly. Because of the conditions, many owners and guests fly into research or military air stations on Antarctica to meet the yachts.

Timing and preparation aside, Soper and Lyons say that the hassle of securing the yacht is well worth it in the end. “The area is overwhelming in a number of ways,” says Lyons. “There are hundreds of thousands of penguins onshore, beautiful mountains, snow covered peaks and crystalline icebergs that look like castles. It’s a feeling of being so totally remote it’s like being on another planet. People leave Antarctica emotionally changed.”

Vessel Preparation

The first step in preparing for a trip to the polar regions is ensuring the vessel is up to par for the harsh environment. From stabilizers to propellers to tenders, it’s important to consider whether the yacht can handle the ice and freezing temperatures — EYOS and other companies offer guides that will carry out an inspection. “You have to make sure your vessel is suitable for the task,” Lyons says. “For example, does the bridge have window heaters? These are the things you wouldn’t think of if the vessel hasn’t been to the polar regions.”

The tender needs to be carefully considered; those fancy, million-dollar limousine tenders are just not going to cut it in the Arctic and Antarctic. According to Lyons, a simple Zodiac or other inflatable tender is the safest and most versatile mode of transportation to and from land and other attractions.

In addition to ease in the water, it’s important to make sure the cranes and crew are capable of dropping the tender from the vessel in an instant, even in rough conditions. “Wildlife is a big part of these trips,” says Lyons. “If you see a humpback whale, you want to be able to just drop the tender and go immediately.”

Currently underway to South Georgia and Antarctica, Capt. Don Feil brought *M/Y Asteria*, a 49-meter converted oceangoing tug with a 10,000-mile range, through the Northwest Passage from east to west in the summer of 2010. Feil started the planning process for *Asteria*’s latest polar expedition eight months in advance by completing a Lloyd’s five-year survey.

Feil’s planning procedures for each trip highlights the differences in each polar region. “At the advice of



Itasca's captain, Dale Winlow, we installed a pre-heater for the watermakers as their production slows significantly in the near-freezing waters of Antarctica," says Feil. "As a former tug, *Asteria* is very sturdy, and we already had metal storm covers for [the] windows and ports on the lower levels."

It's this remoteness of the southernmost continent that poses other problems for those wishing to explore its coastline. Ensuring you have enough food and fuel aboard can be an issue. According to Lennartz, one of the greatest issues in planning for a trip to either the Arctic or Antarctic is provisioning for food and fuel: "Anyone going to these remote areas needs to [understand] that produce may not be available," he says. "Knowing the range of how far a vessel can go with fuel is also imperative."

While vessels such as Feil's *Asteria*, which carries 175,000 liters of fuel and has three large walk-in refrigerators and freezers, don't have as much of a problem, all yachts do have to plan out when and where to refuel and restock in advance — during his Arctic trip, Feil refueled in Reykjavik, Iceland, and Nome, Alaska.

As it's more remote, provisioning in the Antarctic poses greater difficulty. Just as the yacht and the number of persons on board dictate the amount of food and fuel that needs to be stored aboard, the itinerary governs what needs should be considered for entertainment purposes.

"If you want to visit Inuit villages and archaeological sites, you'll need to bring a guide," says Lennartz. "Do you want Scuba equipment, ATVs, landing craft or a helicopter? A lot of the preparation needs to be figuring out what your guests would like to do and ensuring you have the proper permits and equipment for your shore excursions."

Crew Preparation

As with yacht prep, crew need to ready themselves for the unusual requirements of these trips, as well.

With temperatures ranging from the high 30s to the 80s in the Arctic and low 30s to high 50s in the Antarctic, waterproof and all-weather gear is essential for all guests and crew. According to Lennartz, flotation devices are a necessity for anyone partaking in watersports of any kind.

Lyons stresses that the bridge team must be very comfortable operating the vessel in these waters, and an officer capable of manning the ship should be on watch at all times; the crew must be prepared for 24-hour operations while traveling through both the Arctic and Antarctic. "It's imperative to make sure the crew knows what to expect," says Lyons. "The polar regions are unlike anything you would expect to see on a Mediterranean charter; it's a different tempo, different place, different demand."

Capt. Feil agrees. "We have a tough work schedule and are underway for long periods. The work is more physically demanding, requires greater attention to safety and total self-sufficiency is a frequent mandate," he says. "Currently we are punching through four-meter seas in thirty knots of wind with twelve guests on board. This two-week charter requires six days at sea in the Southern Ocean where the temperature has averaged thirty-four degrees. Every shore excursion is a Zodiac beach landing in near freezing water. Yesterday we cleared two inches of snow from the decks before getting underway. In exchange for those challenges, we experience a world of scenery and wildlife most people only see in zoos or on TV."

Unlike the average trip to the Caribbean or Mediterranean, navigating in the Arctic and Antarctic circles requires first-hand knowledge. Ice pilots, which are required by most insurance companies, are strongly suggested as are guides and, in the case of the Arctic, polar bear guards.

"Captains have to put aside the notion that they don't need extra help," says Lyons. "We always put an ice pilot on board who can read ice and navigate through it. There are areas you can't research as they are mostly uncharted and no matter how much research you do, it's nowhere near the same as someone familiar with the area."

To help with the preparation of Feil's Northwest Passage voyage in 2010, Feil hired EYOS and brought in Capt. Pat Toomey, a former Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker captain, as an ice pilot. Feil also brought an expedition leader and polar bear guard for the trip, "which ensured we saw the best of what is there," he says. "It also relieved the crew of the responsibility of acting as polar bear guards on shore excursions."

Whether it's the epic landscapes of the southernmost continent or following in the footsteps of early explorers, a visit to the polar regions should be the trip of a lifetime, as long as you've properly planned and prepared. **DW**