

Cruise holidays

The science behind a great expedition cruise

Emma Featherstone set sail on the new Viking Octantis to discover the secrets of a ship designed to take passengers to the ends of the Earth



CHRIS CALDICOFF FOR THE TELEGRAPH

Studying microplastic samples under the guidance of a doctor in geochemistry, watching a weather-balloon launch and boarding a £4.2 million submarine are three things I never expected to experience on a cruise. Yet I've just spent a little over a week having daily access to scientists on board Viking's first expedition ship, Octantis. It was certainly an education.

The word "expedition" evokes thoughts of adventure and tracing the passages of Scott or Amundsen. It entices us with the prospect of watching polar bears, penguins or giant tortoises in their natural habitat and of venturing to regions that, for most of the human race, will remain forever alien. Yet for many the concept of cruising remains stultifying. Its reputation is lumbered with continuous buffets, staid entertainment and – at worst – a disregard for the areas and populations on which a vessel's passengers descend. Is the seeming oxymoron of "expedition cruises" enough to convince the naysayers?

This particular form of consumer travel is actually long established. It began in 1966 when Lars-Eric Lindblad launched pioneering trips to Antarctica. The 1990s saw options grow with the addition of commercial expedition sailings from Hapag-Lloyd, Quark Expeditions and Aurora Expeditions. Between the turn of the century and 2020, what is a relative sliver of a wider ocean cruise industry (which pre-2020 attracted 30 million passengers) has expanded. Debuts and repeats have arrived from Hurtigruten, Silversea, Seabourn and Scenic. Expedition cruising increased by 30 per cent between 2017 and 2018.

"With nine new expedition ships entering the market this year alone, we're expecting demand to remain high as international travel continues to open up and more people tick off their post-lockdown [dream trips],"



said Andy Harmer, managing director of the industry body Cruise Lines International Association UK & Ireland.

The ships themselves will be, to some, a comfortable facilitator. For others, the vessel may confer further boasting rights. On Octantis, passengers can make claim to investing in scientific research. The line has forged partnerships with several institutions, including the University of Cambridge (it has endowed a professorship at Cambridge's Scott Polar Research Institute), and has chosen Liv Arnesen – the first woman to ski to the South Pole solo and unassisted – to be its godmother.

In terms of number of ships, including river and ocean, Viking is the largest operator thus far to enter the expedition arena. It is, however, firmly in the high-end category. Antarctic voyages on its two expedition ships (Polaris is the twin vessel to Octantis) cost from £12,995pp; other destinations include the Arctic, and the Great Lakes. The ships carry 378 guests, include spas complete with hydrotherapy pools, and feature fine dining restaurants. Other highlights include the Aula theatre and a hidden bar called the Hide, where crew run storytelling sessions.

"Given the regulatory constraints of Antarctica and the Arctic, it's unlikely

▲ Emma keeps a weather eye out for whales

▲▲ Continental drift: Viking Octantis in Antarctica

Passengers were keen students and raved about the science-lab sessions

the larger ships will ever sail these regions," said Dr Jennifer Holland, a cruise and tourism researcher. "It will remain niche, as it's too expensive without the scale of economy that large ships offer for return on investment."

Viking is building its own space within that niche: the focus on science. Dr Damon Stanwell-Smith, its head of science and sustainability, has 27 years' experience in polar research, three of which were working at a British Antarctic survey base. He was quick to point out that visitors to the Antarctic can become advocates for the continent.

During my cruise, I found it somewhat dizzying to learn about the many different strands of study and how they linked in with various institutions – the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration among them.

Yet other passengers proved to be very keen students indeed. A 7.15am appointment for the launch of a weather balloon was well attended; hands shot up at question time in the theatre as Tess Hudson, a marine biologist, completed her lecture on whale identification; and throughout the sailing, attendees raved about the science-lab sessions. Meanwhile, the whale-watching sessions drew plenty of passengers out on deck.

Many on board were repeat customers, including Jill and Chris Marsh. The couple, in their 60s and from Lincolnshire, were on their fifth cruise with Viking. "I think they are rightly aiming at people who are really curious and interested in what's going on around them," said Mr Marsh. "The fact that it's really comfortable and there are all these lovely meals doesn't do any harm either." Citizen scientists, take note.

Viking (020 8780 6516; viking.com) offers a 13-day Antarctic Explorer itinerary from £12,995pp, including return flights from the UK



▲ Go with the flow: kayaking in Antarctic waters

Two subs, science labs and SOBs: on board the Octantis

The science lab

Brandi Revels is nothing like the chemistry teachers I remember from school.

"This is where boffins are born," she announces as the class put on their lab coats.

As I peer into my microscope, counting the blue fibres tangled between biological remnants on my sample, my mind never wanders – and I immediately want an A* in microplastics, or at least the approval of Dr Revels.

"Do passengers ever tell you they'll change their behaviour after your lab sessions?" I ask.

"Always," says Dr Revels. My sample was picked up around the Falklands and was littered with plastic threads; another was chock-full of plastic-bag fragments. Passenger efforts in the lab help Dr Revels's work: they act as additional adjudicators, and the information is fed back to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

She also offers a look at the FerryBox, which sucks water in from under the ship and into sensors. It measures a number of parameters, such as temperature and salinity, plus GPS tracking of the ship's location, and the data is sent to the Norwegian Institute for Water Research.

The mini subs

John and Paul, the fluorescent-yellow submarines (which seat six passengers, plus the pilot), are the stand-out pieces of equipment in the Hangar, an in-ship marina that is in itself a first among expedition vessels. Aled Harries, one of the pilots, explains that they

can venture as deep as 1,000ft, but that "the best stuff to look at" is within about 160ft. Sharks and rarely seen jellyfish were among the creatures encountered during their first season at sea. Passengers are briefed that those who suffer from claustrophobia should probably avoid the dives. This helps to cut down on the high demand: 378 guests and 12 spots per ride mean that some could leave a voyage missing out on the experience. Viking is looking at how to manage expectations on this point. With three staggered, and revolving, seats on either side, and 270-degree spherical windows, I – as someone who doesn't struggle in tight spaces – found the subs to be spacious.

The polar-tested kayaks

These two-person boats are more sophisticated than usual. As we slice through the water, my kayaking partner keeps us tracking smoothly with a small steering lever; there's one to the left of each seat. The boats also have underwater fins which mimic the flap of a penguin's wings. Kayakers can drive these with foot pedals, leaving hands free to take photos or gaze through binoculars at the icy terrain and any nearby wildlife. The seats are high-backed and not dissimilar to ergonomic office chairs. Nicki Bunting, our kayak leader on Octantis, has guided (in different forms of travel) across all seven continents. Passengers are provided with a drysuit for going in the kayaks and waterproof trousers and jacket for other polar excursions.

The weather-balloon launch

The expedition cruise equivalent of a rocket launch, the release of a weather balloon entices about 150 passengers away from their cabins and the well-stocked restaurants and out into the bracing wind on deck, binoculars dangling from neck straps and smartphones primed to catch the countdown. These large, biodegradable latex balloons are kitted out with meteorological apparatus to measure factors such as humidity, pressure and temperature, and are regularly launched from Octantis.

Shortly afterwards, Sam Mitchell, a geologist, presents the weather data, which arrives in real time on a screen in Expedition Central, an area where the expedition team lingers to hold sessions and chat to passengers.

The balloon launches are part of Viking's partnership with the NOAA, with the US National Weather Service sanctioning an official station on both of the line's two expedition vessels. They add to the 102 in operation and are the world's first civilian ships to have this facility.

The special-operations boats (SOBs)

Twin, military-grade "SOBs" dominate the Hangar (which also contains the fleet of Zodiacs and kayaks). As I perch on one of the suspended seats (an addition that makes for a far smoother ride than you might expect on a rigid inflatable boat), the process of backing out down the slipway provides a spy-film-like moment that continues as the skipper speeds off to the nearest point of interest. Among the features of the SOBs are an ice-strengthened aluminium hull and two 450-horsepower engines. These were put into action during my try-out of the SOB, causing a much-needed adrenaline boost after a morning of gentle lounging on Octantis.

Viking requires all guests to be fully vaccinated and to take a pre-departure Covid test



▲ That sinking feeling: Emma aboard one of the submarines

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