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LUXURY MAGAZINE

FALL/WINTER 2024

The Great White

Exploring Antarctica aboard a small-vessel expedition yacht sets the stage for an interactive ice and wildlife show like you've never experienced.

BY FRANK VIZARD

EYOS expedition guide and spotter Richard White hesitates. “Let’s just go and see what happens,” he says. Moments later, two Zodiac rubber boats power away from the *Hanse Explorer* mother ship. The search party pursues Antarctic sea life, working around icebergs

bigger than the ship itself and smaller ice floe sheets that are often sun decks for leopard seals digesting their last meal or stops for penguins pausing to consider their next one. The Zodiacs don’t travel far before the telltale blow of a bowhead whale advertises its presence and breaches the water in a majestic swoon, landing with a splash and then flourishing its distinctive fluke as it disappears.→





Courtesy Matt Hardy/EYOS Expeditions (3)

Surfacing once more, the whale rolls on its back, pectoral fins waving for applause for a dance maneuver well executed. Those on the Zodiacs are too stunned by the giant awesomeness of the sight to clap. They also are close enough to worry that next time the massive whale might land in their laps, so the Zodiacs slip away.

This kind of whale spotting almost becomes routine in Antarctic waters in a small vessel, for Antarctica is a natural theater; something is always happening on its vast white stage. The bowheads are always keen to avoid orcas, deadly critics of whale performances, which also call Antarctica home. Penguins are by far the biggest ensemble; one colony may have as many as 100,000 tuxedo-styled members jostling from side to side for position. A note about the penguins: They can be bossy. Penguins like to walk through people in their way; they have the numbers in Antarctica, and they know it. (Antarctica isn't called the "Land of the Penguins" for nothing.) "Penguins are moving gradually farther south due to climate change," notes White in his British accent.

White's "let's just go and see what happens" becomes a mantra of sorts and an often thrice-daily signal to dress for the cold sea. That spontaneity is what makes small-vessel cruising in Antarctica different from that experienced aboard the more monstrous ships that ply the waters of the southern polar region. The key is the small size: There are only 12 guests on board the *Hanse Explorer*. That's in marked contrast to larger ships with hundreds of passengers that must disembark guests in color-coded waves for more necessarily organized excursions. That's not to say the large-ship experience is a negative one nor that the wider choice of amenities (the variety of onboard restaurants for one) is unwelcome. By contrast, there is no menu on the *Hanse Explorer*; the ship's chef makes the meal choice (you won't complain) and there are no other options. On a small vessel the experience is different than that of a large ship, but either way is good. Or as White puts it: "Just get to Antarctica any way you can."

Antarctic wildlife is the star of the show, but the ice is the scene stealer. The vastness

of the ice that covers the White Continent is unimaginable in scale. The *Hanse Explorer* sails 982 miles on this particular trip, voyaging south along the western edge of the Trinity Peninsula, south along the coast of Graham Land to Prospect Point and the Doyle Glacier (one of many), before doubling back around the peninsula's tip to slip south once more through the Antarctic Sound into the Erebus and Terror Gulf that opens to the Weddell Sea. The final stop and disembarkation point is King George Island in the South Shetlands, where a Zodiac deposits passengers on the beach for airplane connections. Such is the vastness of Antarctica that even after days and nights staring at the White Continent, it feels like the place has been but glimpsed. It's like

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trying to comprehend North America by only seeing New York's Long Island.

Shipboard views inland are both forbidding and alluring, making Antarctica feel like a white sin. There are few beaches and landing spots, as the ice often rises like a barrier at the shoreline. The most accessible areas are often just broad spits of rock, approached through floating ice that may close in behind the unwary. Penguins have already claimed most of the best spots and in the case of large colonies like the ones at Brown Bluff and Paulet Island, the smell can precede a sighting. Most visitors get used to it and indeed, a scattering of research bases like one operated by Chile often share the space. Other species stake their claims to certain spots such as Tay Head on the south coast of Joinville Island. It's basically a seal riviera with scores of animals lying out before views across Erebus and Terror Gulf toward the

Weddell Sea and the ice wall beyond.

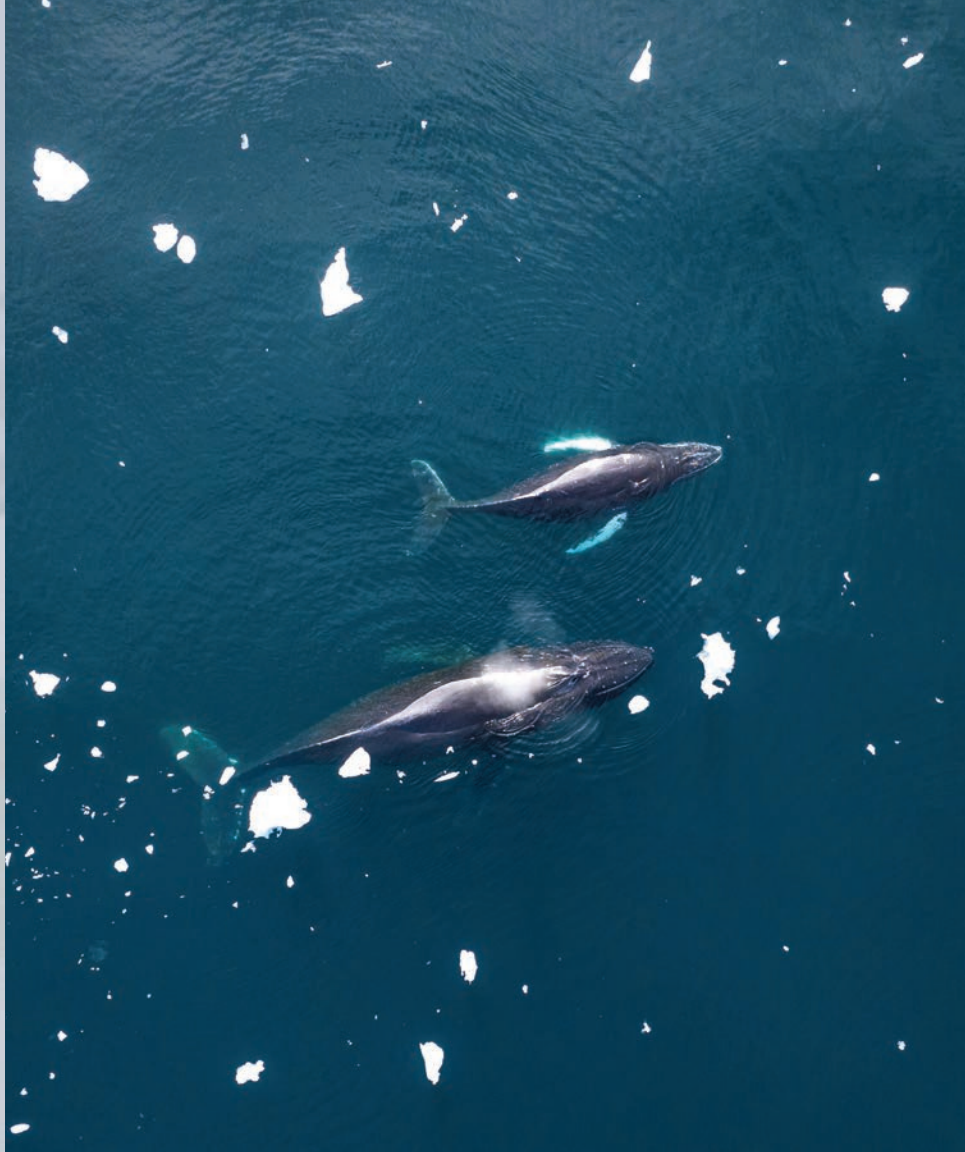
The *Hanse Explorer* expedition yacht, managed by charter company EYOS, boasts an extra-thick, ice-strengthened hull that can break through pack ice (ice class GL-E3). "Expedition yachts are for those comfortable with leaving luxury at home," says Tim Soper, founder of EYOS and a shipmate. EYOS also arranges trip logistics and organizes off-ship excursions. Soper, a marine scientist and veteran Antarctica traveler, has the White Continent in his blood—his father, Tony Soper, wrote a book about Antarctic wildlife while also developing nature television programs for the BBC and National Geographic. Interest in expedition yachts has surged in recent years due to the rising popularity of extreme destination cruises.

At 156 feet, the *Hanse Explorer* is relatively small but far from uncomfortable. The seven guest cabins are very pleasant and surprisingly spacious, and the ship's anti-rolling system generally ensures smooth sailing even when the seas are not (sleeping on your back helps too). The *Hanse Explorer*, launched in 2006 by the German company Fassmer Werft and refitted in 2020, cruises at 10 knots with a maximum of 12 knots. From an engine room perspective, it's like a small vessel with a larger one packed inside.

Shipboard life is intimate in that meals are taken together at a single large table in the dining room, while the adjacent lounge is effectively a large living room. The ship has an interior design award to its name, but the overall decor is best described as light, functional, and relaxed. There also are outdoor decks aft and topside, a Finnish-style sauna and hot tub, and a fleet of kayaks.

Hot chocolate with a liberal dollop of Baileys Irish Cream is the daily warm-up beverage after a rugged outing. Also note that while larger expedition ships generally supply a parka and waterproof, knee-high boots, the small size of an expedition yacht means you're bringing your own.

The place to find your inner polar explorer is on the bridge, which is accessible to passengers at any time. Captain Andriy Bratash is a congenial host (likely to appear at dinner) and commands the international, →



14-member crew. The bridge is attractive for its wide-angle view of the sea ahead, where passing tabular icebergs are often much bigger than the ship, with their flat tops resembling frozen cargo ships. Other icebergs are beautiful carvings created by an unseen, artistic hand. And the ice has its many names. Shuga, for example, is the spongy-looking lumps that form as the sea begins to freeze. Glaciers, meanwhile, creep toward the shoreline with large hunks occasionally and suddenly calving into the sea with a loud boom.

The *Hanse Explorer* uses modern navigation equipment, but two old-school touches create a sense of continuity with historical polar explorers like the legendary Ernest Shackleton of *Endurance* fame. One is a functioning wooden steering helm that Shackleton and his fellow explorers would have been comfortable with, and the other is a chart table with paper maps from the

British Admiralty and the Royal Antarctic Survey. Place names leap off the charts, each with its own adventure to tell. The Antarctic Sound 25 miles east of Paulet, for example, is named for a ship crushed by the ice in 1903, with the 20-man crew managing to survive through winter in a rock hut with only the loss of one seaman. The Erebus and Terror Gulf is named for two ships that visited Antarctica before being lost in the famous 19th-century Franklin expedition in the Arctic. The long and narrow Forbidden Plateau, meanwhile, is well named as it stymied all attempts to reach it until 1957.

Indeed, the dream of exploration is not a fleeting flight of fancy in Antarctica aboard a small vessel. While large ships stick to well-charted sea routes, the *Hanse Explorer* can go where none have been before. One such place near Wilhelmina Bay (loved by whales) is a channel between two islands: Nansen (named for the famous polar explorer and discovered

by the heroic 1897–1899 Belgian Antarctic Expedition) and Brooklyn (named for the hometown of the famous American polar explorer Dr. Frederick Cook, who served on that same Belgian expedition alongside the legendary Roald Amundsen). With no previous soundings indicated on the map, the *Hanse Explorer* measured the channel's depth for the first time. There are still lots of gaps of knowledge about Antarctica. It's a continent that is still relatively unvisited—the number of annual visitors would fill up a football stadium on a weekend afternoon.

And that's really the crux of it. Small expedition yachts like the *Hanse Explorer* can travel to otherwise inaccessible polar places as easy as an ice floe. Larger ships may be spotted in passing but when the *Hanse Explorer* stops, the only audience around is a dozen shipmates to witness such a wealth of whales, seals, and penguins. eyos-expeditions.com ♦

Courtesy Matt Hardy/EYOS Expeditions (4)