



OPINION

CRUISING'S NEW WAVE

Lauren Ho on why cruising might finally be cool

Smaller ships, luxury suites and more intrepid itineraries are giving cruising a reputational lift.

The modern traveller has high expectations. The rise of the “sharing economy” and short-term rental companies such as Airbnb have made booking last-minute getaways in out-of-the-way destinations effortless. Immersing yourself in local cultures and living amongst the natives is a breeze. All of which has made more traditional holidaying options such as mainstream cruising – with its planned itineraries, group entertainment and buffet meals – seem outdated and, ironically, unadventurous. The hipper alternative, relatively speaking, is small-ship cruising, which offers a more boutique, intimate experience and – because they are able to nip into smaller, less discovered ports – more in the way of adventure and exotic itineraries.

Small-ship cruise companies are thriving: Windstar, which boasts the world’s largest sailing yacht in its retinue, has recently doubled the size of its fleet; river cruise specialists Aqua Expeditions has launched a Mekong River cruise in addition to its Amazon adventures; and French company Ponant is now finding success internationally.

One company, though, is leading the mission to redefine contemporary cruising. Established in 1986, Seabourn might have been around for three decades, but its understanding and approach to the modern traveller’s demands has made it a leader in the small-cruises sector.

It has three ships in its current fleet, each accommodating only around 450 guests (compare that to the gargantuan cruise ships of operators such as Royal Caribbean International, which can carry close to 7,000 people). And in terms of service and facilities, Seabourn aims to come off more private yacht than floating grand hotel.

Guest accommodations – most with balconies – are suites, with nearly one staff member assigned to each passenger; and with an all-inclusive policy, the bars are always open. “We have a high amount of space per guest on board our ships. We build them to be very comfortable and spacious,” explains Richard D. Meadows, president of Seabourn. “We provide incredible, personalised service that is very much part of a high quality experience overall.” And as a subsidiary of Carnival Corporation – one of the world’s largest ship operators – Seabourn conveniently benefits from its parent company’s research and investment into technology and speedy on board wi-fi, a common challenge on cruise lines. “There’s no question that technology is woven deeply into all of our lives,” says Meadows. “Our guests are often still – or partially – working, so the ability to connect with their businesses is very important.”

These ultra-luxury offerings, along with Seabourn’s more daring list of destinations, set it apart. Of course, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean feature, but it’s the far-flung options – from Alaska to Antarctica and Patagonia, usually the territory of no-frills expedition companies – that are the real draw.



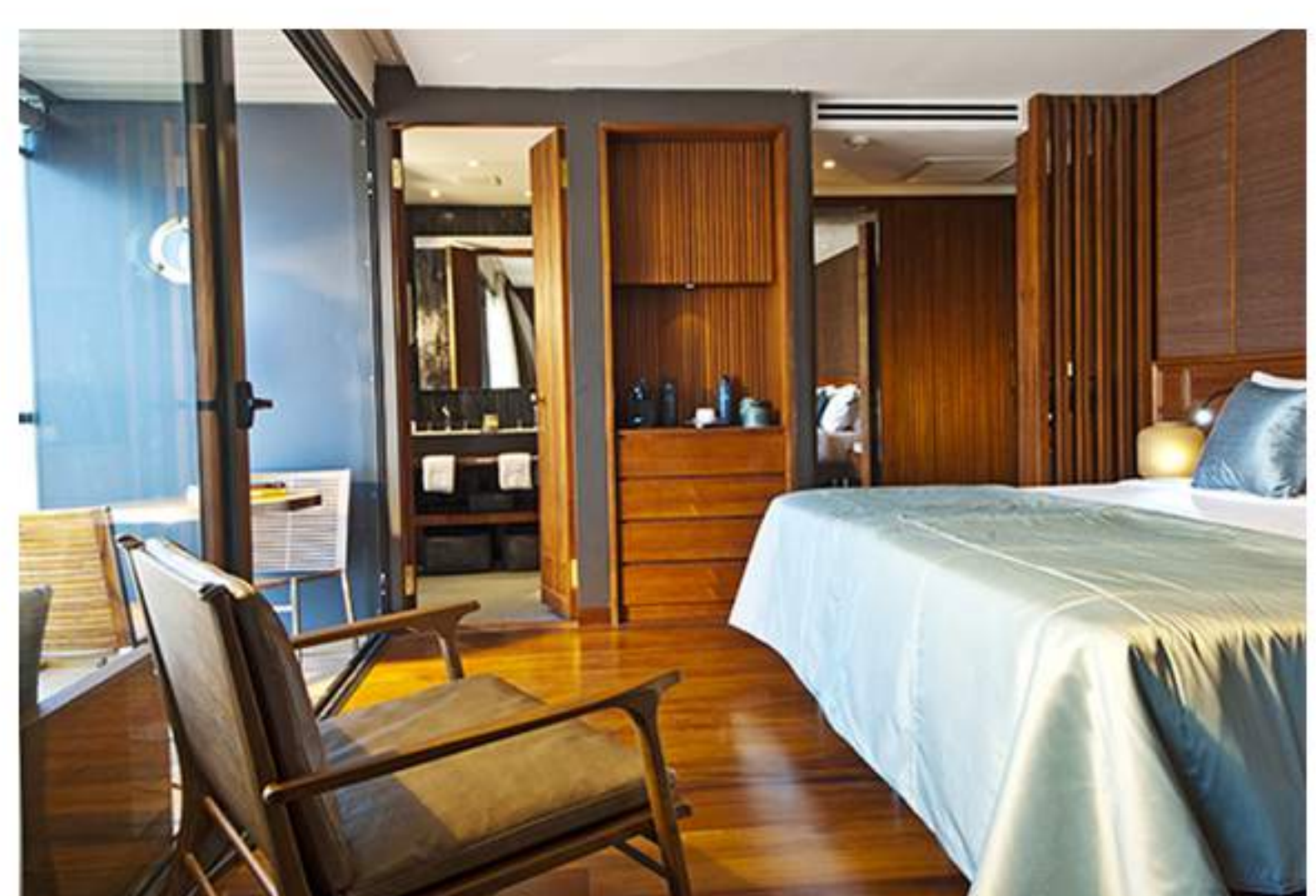
Seabourn's Antarctica Cruises offer excursions on zodiac landing craft. Credit: © Seabourn

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Aqua Expedition's daytime diversions include kayaking down the Amazon.

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A suite, with river views, on the Aqua Mekong.

Seabourn executes these expeditions with flair, particularly in Antarctica, where it provides a series of zodiac landing-craft experiences during which guests can go ashore with a specialised expedition team to explore. “Most ships that go through the Antarctic don’t actually disembark guests to zodiacs to go ashore,” says Meadows. “This is one of the reasons we’ve had a level of success. The expedition team is a team of twenty-four, who are leaders in what they do. When you add them to the luxury element and you add that to the zodiac landings, it is a powerful programme.”

Back on board, food is also a serious step up from the standard. Super-chef Thomas Keller – proprietor of Michelin-starred restaurants The French Laundry in Napa Valley and New York’s Per Se among others – has devised the menus on all of the ships. His first standalone restaurant – a classic American chophouse called The Grill – is due to launch this spring on the *Seabourn Quest* and rolled out across the fleet after that.

Of course, there are larger lines that provide this heightened level of luxury, but intimacy, exotic destinations and pursuit of authenticity are what drives Seabourn’s popularity. So much so that two new ships – *Seabourn Encore* and *Seabourn Ovation* – are set to launch at the end of this year and in 2018 respectively. Both will boast interiors by hospitality design veteran Adam D. Tihany, the man behind Heston Blumenthal’s Dinner in London and a host of Mandarin Oriental and Four Seasons resorts.

Led by such innovation, small cruise ships might do for cruising what the boutique hotel did for the hotel industry: appeal to a younger, hipper clientele – and finally make cruising cool.

seabourn.com

Five of the best small-cruise lines

1 Windstar Cruises

With six yachts in its fleet that carry just 148 to 310 guests each, Windstar cruises to fifty countries, calling at 150 ports throughout Europe, the South Pacific, the Caribbean and Central America, including the Panama Canal and Costa Rica.

windstarcruises.com

2 Ponant

Founded in 1988, French cruise-ship operator Ponant comprises four 264-passenger ships and Le Ponant, which carries just sixty-four guests. The line travels to remote destinations such as Alaska, Antarctica and the Arctic, but its speciality is offbeat itineraries in the Mediterranean, Caribbean and Asia.

ponant.com

3 Un-Cruise Adventures

Catering to those who might not normally cruise, Un-cruise Adventures comprises just eight vessels that carry between twenty-two and eighty-eight guests. As the fleet is highly diverse, from upscale expedition ships to yachts, onboard offerings vary. The US-based line currently sails to Alaska, Hawaii, British Columbia and Mexico’s Sea of Cortez, with voyages to Costa Rica, Panama and the Galapagos Islands to begin soon.

un-cruise.com

4 Uniworld

A boutique river-cruise brand, Uniworld has eighteen vessels opulently decorated in plush fabrics, antique furnishings and original artwork. Carrying from 56 to 159 passengers, the line navigates rivers within Europe, China, Vietnam and Cambodia, Russia, Egypt and India.

uniworld.com

5 Aqua Expeditions

Based in Peru, Aqua Expeditions is the long-term ambition of Francesco Galli Zugaro, who founded the company to introduce passengers to the remote region of Peru’s Amazon River with just three ships in the fleet, each carrying between twenty-four and forty passengers. Two ships continue to navigate the Amazon, while the latest cruises the Mekong River through Vietnam and Cambodia. Understated and elegant, interiors on the Aqua Mekong are by Saigon-based architect David Hodkinson, and feature polished wood floors, a neutral colour scheme and floor-to-ceiling windows.

aquaxpeditions.com



Aqua Expedition's Aria Amazon.



One of Un-Cruise Adventures' small ships in Alaska. Credit: Peter West Carey

Main image: One of Seabourn's three small-but-perfectly chic cruise ships. Credit: © Seabourn