

Warming up

Polar voyages have long been the poster child of expedition cruising, but warm-water adventures are on the rise, writes **Jane Archer**

Mention expedition cruising and thoughts immediately turn to the polar regions, but there are myriad other destinations for adventurous types who prefer their thrills without the chills.

Warm-weather destinations such as the Kimberley in Australia, Mexico's Baja California region, Indonesia and the Galápagos Islands are not new on the cruising scene – but the demand for them is.

That's partly down to the way the sector has matured, with the likes of Seabourn and Scenic entering the niche and bringing luxurious new ships with them. But it also reflects a growing trend among travellers for experiential holidays that are more rewarding and enriching than a beach fly-and-flop.

"We've seen a significant surge in bookings for our itineraries in the Kimberley, Melanesia [in the South Pacific] and Africa, proving that the British sense of adventure extends far

beyond the ice," says Anthony Daniels, UK and Ireland general manager for Ponant Explorations Group.

Warm-water expedition cruising is not confined to the oceans. The Ganges and Brahmaputra in India, Mekong in Laos, Red River in Vietnam and Amazon in Peru all offer exciting cruises that go off the beaten track, where days are filled with trips to remote villages, wildlife safaris or jungle expeditions.

To help agents sell this up-and-coming sector, National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions has launched a 'warm-weather' mini-brochure exclusively for the UK, offering flight-inclusive packages to its most-popular destinations.

"Awareness [among agents] of the full range of warm-water expedition destinations is still developing," says UK head of sales Danielle Bates.

WOW FACTOR

Understanding the three Ws – what, why and who – about warm-water expedition cruises is vital for those trying to sell them. As with the poles, these are more about the places they

go to than the means of getting there. They are on small vessels, mostly holding 200-300 passengers, and are guided by experts in everything from history to marine science to ornithology, who lecture on board and lead guests on Zodiac excursions ashore.

The appeal of these cruises is easy to understand: the chance to see exotic wildlife, set foot in places few tourists have been to or learn more about other cultures, offering exciting experiences for even the most well travelled.

Then there is the 'who'. Whether past cruisers or those who have never set foot on a ship, these cruises appeal to those who are adventurous, keen to break away from the norm and looking to discover places away from the crowds. They also need to be flexible because they are often weather and wildlife dependent, and able to stump up the higher price tag that comes with travel to more-remote locations.

Bates says: "Guests are often new to expedition cruising, attracted by immersive but less-extreme environments, close interaction with wildlife [and] active experiences." ➔

EXPEDITION



ABOVE: Fruit seller on banks of the Red River, Vietnam; a macaw in the Amazon PICTURES: Pandaw, Aqua Expeditions

WHAT'S NEW

One challenge for expedition cruise lines is what to do with their ships once the Antarctic season has ended. Some relocate to the Arctic, but demand there is less than for its southern counterpart, giving rise to the constant search for adventures elsewhere.

“**Warm-water destinations offer as much wildlife as the polar regions, plus profound cultural interactions**”

New this year, Swan Hellenic introduced cultural cruises around the Asia-Pacific region, taking guests to such places as Papua New Guinea and Raja Ampat to visit isolated villages and snorkel in coral-rich waters.

The line returns in 2027 to explore the waters around New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. A 13-night Solomon Islands Secrets cruise from Honiara to Sorong in Papua in April promises guided nature hikes and cultural encounters. Prices start at £8,450 per person, excluding flights.

National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions has kicked off its inaugural season of adventure cruising on the Rhine and Danube with voyages accompanied by expedition teams and National Geographic naturalists and historians. An eight-day Rhine River: Castles, Culture and Culinary Delights cruise in September 2027 includes tours of German author Goethe's home and wine-tasting with nuns in a Benedictine monastery. Prices from £4,269 per person, excluding flights.

Looking further ahead, Viking is making its debut on India's Brahmaputra in 2028, with a 15-day Wonders of India cruise that pairs a week on new river ship *Viking Brahmaputra*, stopping off to visit temples, villages and national parks, with a Golden Triangle tour of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. A second vessel, *Viking Ganges*, launches in 2029. ●

Ask the experts



“Warm-water expeditions are not well known, but there are incredible destinations that offer as much wildlife and scenery as the polar regions, while including profound cultural interactions. The experience will appeal to active travellers who want to explore coral reefs and visit communities open to sharing traditions, sacred ceremonies and life in the most remote regions on Earth.”

Shaun Powell,
director of expedition
operations, Seabourn



“Since entering the UK market, we've seen strong interest in warm-water destinations. These itineraries resonate with UK clients, particularly due to a perception of being easier to access than polar regions. The destinations are less extreme and have a broader appeal across demographics, with many families and multigenerational bookings.”

Danielle Bates,
UK head of sales,
National Geographic-
Lindblad Expeditions



“With the popularity of the polar regions, warm-water expeditions often fly under the radar, but our Scenic 'discovery yachts' are built to be as at home in tropical seas as they are in the polar ice caps. Warm-water itineraries, such as our bestselling Kimberley coast expedition, are the perfect way for guests to combine their adventurous spirit with comfort, cultural immersion and scientific discovery.”

Jonathan Davies,
head of sales, Scenic
Luxury Cruises & Tours