

Hotting up in the Arctic

Steve Newman provides a comprehensive look at this summer's vast array of Arctic Ocean cruise options

The beauty of the Arctic with Lindblad Expeditions



Hapag-Lloyd's *Hanseatic* is a regular Arctic visitor

Like something out of a science fiction film, the Arctic is changing, both as a result of global warming and ever more gas and oil research into the pristine areas. As a result, it is increasingly popular with adventure cruise companies, with people wanting to see one of the last great wildernesses before it changes forever.

However, the term Arctic now includes Greenland, Iceland, Spitsbergen, Alaska, the Canadian and Russian Arctic and you can even visit the North Pole itself with a helicopter ride over the ice pack, so you're not short for choice.

We've highlighted what's on offer, from Polar Bears to the Midnight Sun and the Northern Lights, including two 'soft adventure' cruises for those who like to keep your feet dry. Enjoy, but keep your toes warm!

Hurtigruten

With the Norwegian line, you can visit Spitsbergen to meet polar bears and walrus; walk inside glaciers; or have a meal with an Inuit family in Greenland. The choice is terrific.

Hurtigruten use Polar Circle boats, which are higher off the water than Zodiacs, have bench seating and you disembark by steps. Their expedition ship *Fram* has real touches of luxury and is widely regarded as one of the finest afloat.

For the softer option, their famous Classic Voyage along the Norwegian coast offers numerous coach and walking excursions above the Arctic Circle, including the Northern Lights and the North Cape.

More info: call 0203 393 9929 or visit www.hurtigruten.co.uk.

Hapag-Lloyd

Two first-of-a-kind voyages are scheduled for expedition ship *Hanseatic* this summer. Carrying just 184 guests and 12 Zodiacs, she is a beautiful ship and highly popular with her guests and will be setting course for the scarcely accessible Wrangel Island in the remote Chukchi Sea.

The island is the northernmost UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site and an untouched refuge for polar bears, walrus, seals and countless smaller plant and animal species that exist nowhere else.

The Chukchi Peninsula is on the most north-easterly tip of Russian Siberia and is also an ideal destination for bird-watching.

More info: +49 40 3001 4580 or www.hl-cruises.com.

Compagnie du Ponant

The French line has to be one of the best for elegance, with intimate yacht *L'Austral* offering spacious suites, impeccable service and excellent food and wine. This is travel as

it used to be in the Golden Age of the grand voyage.

L'Austral sets sail for Spitsbergen where Zodiacs take passengers as close as possible to the polar landscapes, ice floes, glaciers and icebergs.

The ship then heads for Iceland on a new itinerary from Grimsey Island. Her second cruise, from Nome in Alaska, heads for the wilderness of Kamchatka in the Russian Far East.

More info: 0800 980 4027 or <http://en.ponant.com>.

Quark

Few people can say they have stood at the North Pole on a cruise. Crushing through ice, admiring soaring seabirds and visiting Franz Josef Land, Quark have helicopter excursions and even offer an optional hot air balloon ride rising to 90ft at the top of the world.

Their voyages also visit Baffin Island and the Canadian high Arctic as well as Greenland, Spitsbergen and Iceland, actually combining all three on one of their cruises. In addition to wildlife excursions by Zodiac, kayaking and tundra hikes, they offer time visiting fishing villages and mixing with the locals.

More info: 0808 120 2333 or www.quarkexpeditions.com.



Meeting the Inuit with Hurtigruten

G Adventures

MS Expedition is a much-loved ship. Small and cosy, she has a fleet of Zodiacs to carry her 140 guests around glaciers and icebergs whilst observing a pod of Narwhal or Beluga whales on cruises to Iceland, Spitsbergen, Greenland and Norway.

Amongst the activities on offer are taking a turn on a Polar Bear watch with an expert guide or a swim in the Arctic. You can explore the massive fjord system of North-east Greenland National Park or walk on the tundra and watch the Musk Oxen feeding.

More info: 0844 272 0000 or www.gadventures.com.

Lindblad Expeditions

Arctic specialists for 30 years, it's no wonder their flagship *MV National Geographic Explorer* is often called the most technologically advanced, fully stabilised and accommodating expedition ship in the world.

It carries 148 guests in 81 cabins (13 with balconies) to Iceland, Greenland, Spitsbergen and the North-West Passage, while it boasts technical additions such as the Remotely Operated Vehicle, capable of reaching 1,000ft below the surface to view the sea-floor from the lounge!

More info: +1 800 397 3348 or www.expeditions.com.

Un-Cruise

This is another company that does not use Zodiacs to ferry passengers ashore. Instead, the DIB is employed, a rigid catamaran-like structure with seats running either side of the hull. You're higher up and can see more, also disembarking at the front.

Un-Cruise are Alaska specialists, where you can kayak up to the beach to watch bears and deer feeding or marvel at the fiords and glaciers of two National Parks.

Their vessels carry just 22-88 guests and whale-watching is another of their strengths.

More info: +1 887 263 9888 or www.un-cruise.com.

Noble Caledonia

If you're visiting the Arctic, then Noble Caledonia's small, comfortable ships – including the highly-rated 114-guest *Island Sky* – are well worth a look.

Greenland, Spitsbergen, Northern Norway and the active volcanoes, gurgling mud pools, steaming hot springs and lava fields of Iceland are all on offer, as well as trips into the North-West Passage in the wake of the great early explorers.

They also offer a cruise to the pure and beautiful Aleutian archipelago of almost 200 islands, where the Pacific meets the Bering Sea.

More info: 020 7752 0000 or www.noble-caledonia.co.uk.

Zegrahm

This American company was founded when several expedition leaders decided to form their own line to allow Zodiacs to be launched when and where they wanted rather than stick to a rigid itinerary.

Today, they have an epic reputation with their excursions. Their Arctic voyages visit not only the standard places but also the Russian White Sea, an area long closed to Western travellers.

This expedition exposes visitors to the region's culture and natural beauty, magnificent architecture and a long, fascinating history, as well as the resident wildlife, including the beluga whales often spotted near the Kuzova Archipelago.

More info: +1 206 922 7122 or www.zegrahm.com.

Aurora

This Australian company are popular with British customers for their Russian Arctic cruises, which offer Zodiac landings, kayaking and other activities.

Their 'Jewels of the Arctic' cruise combines the best of Spitsbergen's rugged

north-west coast of mountains, tundra and fjords plus Greenland, with a taste of Iceland.

While crossing the icy waters of the Greenland Sea, their onboard experts share their knowledge of the region's plants, animals and history as the remote east coast with its fantastic icebergs and granite spires passes by.

More info: +61 2 9252 1033 or www.auroraexpeditions.com.au.

One Ocean Expeditions

One Ocean is offering an exciting opportunity to travel through the North-West Passage on a special cruise to mark the 70th anniversary of the first ever single season transit of the legendary route.

During the 12-night voyage, there will be chances to see pods of beluga or bowhead whales, rafts of ringed, harp or bearded seals and herds of walrus, all against a fabulous backdrop of stunning Arctic fjords, cliffs and glaciers.

More info: +351 962 721 836 or www.oneoceanexpeditions.com.

Cruise and Maritime

If you want the soft option with no Zodiacs but theatre and late-night cabaret, then the all-British 450-guest *Marco Polo* may be for you as she heads off to the North Cape and the Land of the Midnight Sun.

Visiting the Lofoten Islands with their dramatic landscape and Kirkenes before cruising into Russian waters for a call in Murmansk, there is also a visit to Tromsø for an exciting cable car ride to the summit of Mount Storsteinen.

After a day at sea, with a chance to view the magnificent Svartisen Glacier, there is also the option to while away some time in the inviting pool or sauna.

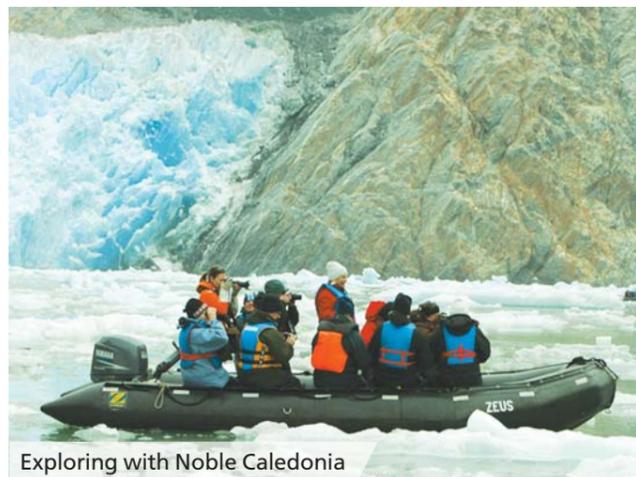
More info: 0845 430 0274 or www.cruiseandmaritime.com.



A polar bear



Orca encounter



Exploring with Noble Caledonia



G Adventures MS Expedition



Kittiwakes fly past the Zodiac on an Aurora expedition