



ICY BLUE WONDERS

NICK WALTON BOARDS ONE OF THE WORLD'S
FEW EXPEDITION SUPERYACHTS ON A UNIQUE
CHARTER VOYAGE THROUGH THE FROZEN
LANDSCAPES OF THE ANTARCTIC PENINSULA.

PHOTOS: Reeve Jolliffe



The horizon, a silver line that seems to drift in and out of sight as if in a dream, is gradually broken. The effect is subtle at first, almost like a trick of the eye, but as the towering icebergs rise above the sea like the vanguard of an approaching horde, there's no mistaking their icy blue majesty. It's dawn – or at least the transition between the shades of twilight that represents the birth of a new day this far south – and I'm manning the bridge on a state-of-the-art expedition vessel as she silently slices her way through near-frozen seas into the depths of the rarely explored Antarctic Sound.

Being able to go where others rarely do has become a central theme for well-heeled world wanderers. Luxury travel was once defined by how large a resort's infinity pool was, how many stars the chef had, or how many hundreds of Egyptian threads dressed the bed. Today, however, experiential travel, the pursuit of something more than leisure at its most somnolent, rules supreme and suddenly everyone wants to see the Northern Lights from a hot tub, track Serengeti game on foot, or – at the top of many bucket lists – visit the vast, desolate beauty of Antarctica.

So how do the wealthy stay ahead of the game, you might ask? Just as they do in the air, they go private, with a luxury charter yacht opening up a world of possibilities even the most intrepid can only dream of.

That's where EYOS Expeditions comes in. A ground-breaking charter business founded and led by a clutch of hardy yet passionate travellers with the kinds of rolodexes that would have Don Draper in a whisky-laced sweat, EYOS will take you, your friends and your superyacht (if you're fortunate enough to have one) to almost anywhere on the planet. Don't have a superyacht? No problem. The company also offers access to myriad of world-class charter yachts, costing up to to US\$1 million a week, complete with a hand-selected expeditionary crew, offering affluent travellers the unique combination of luxury and logistics. All you have to choose is the locale, from the tropical atolls of the South Pacific to the superyacht hubs of the Caribbean, the polar bear hunting grounds of the Arctic, or in our case, the towering peaks and frozen landscapes of the Antarctic Peninsula.



One of EYOS' most popular charter yachts is the *Hanse Explorer*. Part superyacht, part rugged expedition craft, the *Hanse* is one of the few vessels globally that can truly claim to be an 'expedition yacht' and has lines that wouldn't look out of place in a Monaco marina. But beneath the Ferrari-like aesthetics lie cutting-edge environmental systems, the highest rating for an ice strengthened hull, powerful engines, a 9,000-nautical-mile cruising range and the types of built-in redundancies that come in handy when you're charting courses far from the beaten track.

I'm on the second day of a week-long Antarctic cruise aboard the *Hanse* and I'm already seeing the difference a private charter yacht offers over my previous voyages to the White Continent. Describing Antarctica's weather and that of the dreaded Drake Passage – an oceanic 'line in the sand' between South America and the ice – as temperamental, is being kind. Huge currents and rapid shifts in water temperature whip up storms from nowhere, often delaying even the best-laid plans.

Having flown from the Chilean town of Punta Arenas to the gravel air strip on the King George Island in the South Shetlands, we were now a day late because of one particularly vicious squall that would have made life a nauseating misery for regular cruisers tackling the Drake. However, having a private vessel at our disposal meant we could be more flexible with our itinerary. See something you like? Land on a beach where you just might be the first human visitor. Greeted by pods of humpbacks in the Gerlache Strait? Launch the Zodiacs and put the champagne on ice. Even the shy Portuguese chef, Luis Galego Pião, follows the 'destination first' mantra.

So our captain and the expedition team, led by intrepid adventurer and EYOS expedition leader Richard White, mix things up and instead of heading southwest, following other, larger commercial vessels down the west coast of the peninsula, we duck and weave east and south across the tip of the continent and into the calm waters of Antarctic Sound, where great slabs of glacial ice the size of suburban shopping malls, dominate the landscape.





Gentoo penguins patrol a rocky outcrop against a thrilling backdrop of ice and water.

It's difficult to get a sense of scale in Antarctica. What appears to be an island in the distance becomes a great wall of ice that at times glares with white-hot intensity and at others glows with a deep-blue resonance. Cracks in the icy facades become cathedrals as they slip from the mist, great shrines to the elements that forge and shape Antarctica's frozen crown. A whiff of spray, gone in an instant, heralds the arrivals of killer whales and slate-coloured rifts in the brilliantly white landscape become curious crabeater seals, basking on the sea ice, which eye us as the *Hanse Explorer* silently approaches.

In the shadow of Brown Bluff, a towering rocky peak wreathed in ancient ice, we cruise a bay packed with beached icebergs on the ship's complement of Zodiacs. Gentoo penguins and storm petrels rest on the snow-dusted slabs, unperturbed by our presence and Antarctic fur seals sneak peaks at us from the inky waters before diving beneath our boats in a silvery shimmer. At an Adélie penguin colony at the base of the peak, thousands of

tuxedoed birds feed and groom their young, the thick grey fur of the chicks moulting away to reveal a slick waterproof coat beneath, the cacophony of their gossip echoing off the peaks that ring the deserted bay.

Another great thing about a private charter yacht is the company you keep – you only share these remarkable experiences with a hand-picked clutch of friends and family. The *Hanse Explorer* caters to 12 guests in spacious, modern staterooms replete with king-sized beds and en suites. There's also a beautifully appointed dining room, a lavish lounge with wet bar and covered and uncovered rear decks. These offer great vantage points as we cruise again, now following the peninsula's west coast through the Orléans Strait and into the acclaimed Gerlache, the whale superhighway. There's also time for stops at Spert Island and Mikkelsen Harbour, home to roaring fur seals and the weathered wrecks of timber longboats dating from the region's bloody whaling days.

CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW LEFT: Fur seal on Spert Island; yet another photo op; Gentoo penguin colony; Zodiac excursion from Hanse Explorer.



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BELOW: Despite sailing through one of the most remote and inhospitable regions on earth, there's no shortage of home comforts aboard this luxury charter, and new friends are easy to make with its small complement of passengers.



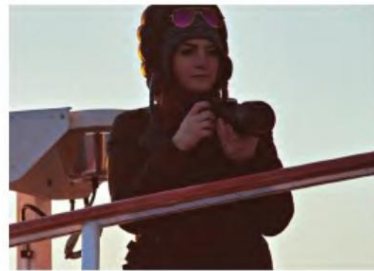
The *Hanse Explorer* has the manoeuvrability that larger commercial cruise ships could only wish for and German captain Jens Koethen isn't afraid to show us how she handles. In the Grandidier Channel, far further south than commercial ships venture, the captain carves through great swathes of last season's sea ice before ploughing into one tennis court-sized piece that allows us to step from ship to float for the perfect Antarctic photo opp as the light begins to fade, casting the shimmering grey landscape – sea ice and icebergs ranked to the horizon – in a breathtaking golden hue. There's time enough, too, for another Zodiac trip. After two or three Zodiac excursions each day, we're now old hands, as the drivers race the powerful inflatables through the silky waters and weave between the great sheets of ice, the *Hanse* easily maintaining station behind.

It's the final day of our private and very personal foray into Antarctica and as we cruise towards King George Island again we're escorted by pods upon pods of humpbacks, many with young calves in their wake. Under indigo skies we experience these majestic beasts up close and personal as they breach and fluke metres from our Zodiacs. We're mesmerised, even after returning to the *Hanse Explorer*, where we sip champagne in the bow, toasting to the magnificence of the White Continent, the luxury of the *Hanse*, and the opportunity to experience this remote corner of the world with just a handful of new-found friends. **W**

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LEFT & BELOW: The *Hanse Explorer* has the manoeuvrability that larger commercial cruise ships could only dream of amid the wonders of the White Continent.



CHARTERYACHT ESSENTIALS

Understanding how charters work is essential to a successful superyacht vacation. There are many factors that influence the charter fee, including seasonality, especially for remote destinations like Antarctica. Typically, yachts are priced in low and high seasons, usually with specific dates setting the seasons. Notable events, from large regattas to international film festivals, might also inflate the rates within each season. Other factors include the size of the yacht, its reputation, the experience of its crew and captain and its amenities.

As charter yachts are privately owned, each comes with its own set of rules and inclusions. Charter yachts also have an Advance Provisioning Allowance which permits the vessel to be provisioned before the charter. Any unused funds will be returned at the end of the trip. Alternatively, if you've hit the champagne harder than anticipated, additional funds may be required and are often held by the charter broker for just such an eventuality.

Other costs in addition to the charter fee will include fuel, harbour fees and dockage, communications, including internet access and, in more remote cases, a delivery fee. Typically, these costs are combined in a +35 per cent add-on to the original charter, which in the case of *Hanse Explorer*, is €135,000 per week.

PACKING FOR ADVENTURE

Unlike conventional cruise vessels, you'll need to bring all your polar gear with you, although companies like EYOS Expeditions have fixers on hand to sort last-minute or specific requirements. Essentials for any trip to Antarctica include:

- Durable, waterproof outer layer jacket with hood
- Lightweight fleece or down inner jacket
- Polarizing sunglasses (plus spares)
- A woollen hat that covers your ears
- Waterproof boots that can cover trousers and reach the upper calf
- Water- and windproof outer trousers
- Waterproof gloves. Some travellers also like inner gloves for additional warmth
- Sunscreen
- Telephoto zoom lenses, preferably with polarising filters
- Moisturiser to combat the Antarctic's low humidity
- Travel sickness medication