

C R U I S I N G
T O
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Part of a fleet of rugged-and-ready explorer yachts for charter, the Hanse Explorer allows cruises unprecedented access to the world's most remote locales, including Antarctica

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STORY BY NICK WALTON





↑ Above: An emperor penguin in the foreground of the Hanse Explorer. The emperor can dive deeper and longer than any other bird – up to 700 feet – and can stay underwater for up to 18 minutes

It's that magical moment between day and night, when the sun puts on an awe-inspiring encore while the inky darkness of night swallows up its stage. Far below, another performance is being enjoyed by guests of a sleek superyacht; a pod of inquisitive humpback whales rings the vessel, slapping their flukes against the shimmering water and filling the air with honey-hued mist as they prepare for their next dive. Not content with simply watching this awe inspiring performance from the decks, we bundle up and take to the water in a fleet of military-grade zodiacs for a mesmerising up-close-and-personal Antarctic encounter.

It's one that an increasing number of yacht owners and charterers are seeking, as they soar over conventional destinations like Monaco and Tahiti in their private jets, en route to the world's farthest flung corners, where a small fleet of expedition-ready superyachts offer creature comforts and unforgettable memories in equal measure. The global superyacht charter market is growing in leaps and bounds, with leading charter companies reporting significant growth year-on-year. But not all charter vessels are created equal. Destinations like Antarctica, the Arctic, Melanesia and North Asia require specialist vessels with ice-strengthened hulls, sophisticated navigation systems, and the kinds of built-in redundancies that will have you thanking your lucky stars if things go awry thousands of kilometres from help.

We're cruising the Antarctic Peninsula aboard the beautiful *Hanse Explorer*, one of the custom-built yachts used by specialist superyacht charter gurus EYOS Expeditions. A ground-breaking charter business founded by Tim Soper and Rob McCallum and operated by a clutch of hardy-yet passionate travellers, including experienced marine officer turned-CEO Ben Lyons, EYOS offers a one stop shop, whether you're a yacht owner or charterer. This includes preparing the vessel for the expedition, securing permits, and providing both clients and crew with the guidance and expertise they need to operate in remote waters. In Antarctica, the company provides the guides and the ice pilots that will be onboard the yacht, offering the perfect marriage of luxury and logistics by ensuring both the safety of the guests and crew while also enriching the client's experience and understanding of the region.

If you don't count a superyacht among your most prized possessions (or don't fancy scraping the paintwork of your palace at sea) EYOS also offers access to a myriad of world-class expedition-ready charter yachts, like the *Hanse Explorer*, priced up to US\$1 million a week.



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Passage – a tumultuous strait between Antarctica and South America that's often regarded as the most violent on the planet – landing by charter flight at King George Island, on the cusp of the Antarctic Peninsula. Leave the mainland after breakfast and you can be cruising the likes of the infamously ice-choked Antarctic Sound by lunch.

The Sound, our first stop, is a thrilling landscape rarely visited by the larger commercial vessels, which ply the west coast of the Peninsula on regular but inflexible itineraries. Among the towering icebergs of the Peninsula's northeastern tip is where our agile vessel comes into her own. With her navy-blue hull and sleek, rakish lines, the *Hanse Explorer* is one of EYOS' most popular charter yachts and wouldn't look out of place in a Mediterranean marina. But beneath the Ferrari-like aesthetics lie cutting-edge environmental systems, the highest rating for an ice strengthened hull, powerful engines, and a 9,000nm cruising range. In addition, she accommodates 12 guests in spacious ensuite staterooms, and boasts sublime lounges and dining rooms, open sun decks, and an experienced hotel crew who cater to every guest's whims.

A few days into our week-long adventure, I rise just before dawn – or at least the transition between the shades of twilight that represents the birth of a new day this close to the South Pole – and join captain Jens Köthen, a perpetually cheerful German

“Expedition yachting only continues to grow in popularity. It is now not uncommon to find five charter yachts available in Antarctica in a given season, with a variety of different sizes and capabilities,” says Lyons. “Some of the larger yachts are now able to offer helicopters and private submersibles, and skiing – both assisted with helicopters and touring – has been an increasingly popular activity for EYOS clients in the last few years.”

He says the polar regions are clearly the ‘hot’ destination now for expedition yachts and that EYOS Expeditions is seeing more and more yachts venturing into more distant itineraries. “People that travel with us on expeditions want to see, learn and do more. They're interested in where they're going, and they have a different view of what luxury and privilege mean. To them, luxury isn't getting into the top restaurant in St Barts – it's about going somewhere nobody else can get to,” says Lyons as he steers our zodiac.

A key component in this growth is the ability to now fly over rather than battle your way through the dreaded Drake



⌚ **Clockwise from bottom:** The open public spaces include three floors of entertaining and dining options; experiencing Antarctica's legendary stillness on the deck; the Hanse Explorer's steel hull makes it strong enough to nudge its way through ice floes



Photo credit: Reeve Jolliffe/Nick Walton

with the effortless grace of a luxury hotel manager, on the bridge. The *Hanse Explorer* has an open bridge policy, offering guests a unique perspective on the challenges of Antarctic navigation. The horizon, a silver line that seems to drift in and out of sight as if in a dream, is gradually broken by great slabs of ice the size of city blocks, each emerging from the morning mist like the vanguard of an approaching horde.

Each evening, over canapes in the saloon, expedition leader Richard White, an adventure veteran, outlines the plans for the day ahead, but there is an inherent flexibility sewn like gold threads into the best laid plans because there's no telling what mother nature might offer. See something you like? Land on a beach where you just might be the first human visitor. Crave new-found friends? Arrange a visit to a remote scientific base. Greeted by pods of orca in Neko Harbour? Launch the zodiacs! Even shy Portuguese chef Luis Galego Pião follows the mantra "the destination comes first", the Baked Alaska be damned.

"Private charters mean freedom for a select few," says White, who, during one such outing, expertly guides our zodiac through narrow channels between towering cliffs, Arctic terns dipping and darting high above. "These are people who are well off and want to use their money to discover the wonders of the world, and we're only too happy to take them there."

Each day offers a new adventure, a new discovery. In Antarctic Sound, we cruise through great sea caves and brave ocean



Clockwise from top left:
The Antarctic fur seal; a humpback tail; icebergs refract hues of white, blue and green; kayaking through the ice

swells before beaching at Brown Bluff where, in the shadows of snow-dusted cliffs, ranks of ice cathedrals, some blindingly white, others majestically blue, litter the bay. In Mikkelsen Harbour, we're welcomed by roaring fur seals, oblivious Adélie penguins, and the weathered wrecks of timber long boats dating from the region's bloody whaling history; and to the south, in the Grandidier Channel, farther than commercial vessels dare to tread, we discover great sways of sea ice floes, which jostle for space with icebergs that rival Notre Dame in size and intricacy. After slicing and ploughing our way through the ice, the captain positions the bow against a tennis court-sized floe, offering us

the perfect Antarctica photo op as the snow fall clears and the sun bathes the shimmering landscape in gold.

While Antarctica is the most popular, many other destinations are seducing adventurous superyacht travellers. "Papua New Guinea in particular has become a key destination," says Lyons. "There's intact culture, excellent diving and WWII history. It's an anthropologist's dream." He also counts the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Indonesia's Raja Ampat as emerging locales, but for us, the magic is here in Antarctica, where the heavens meet the ice, and where the crowds of city life are a distant memory. eyos-expeditions.com

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