

## CRUISING

**E**ver wanted to see the mighty glaciers of Antarctica, the colours of Tahiti that inspired Paul Gauguin, the unique wildlife of the Galápagos Islands or the beauty of the Amazon — without having to rough it like a backpacker? Expedition cruising allows you access to these unique places from a small cruise ship with expert guides. The following trips offer the winning combination of off-board adventure and on-board comfort.

### Antarctica: final frontier

The two-day journey from Tierra del Fuego, the “Land at the End of the World”, to the world’s southernmost territory passes quickly on **Silversea’s** Antarctic cruise. According to the crew of the *Silversea Explorer*, the Drake Passage was uncharacteristically calm. As the never-ending ballet of Antarctic cormorants, southern giant petrels and skuas plunging into the ocean to feed gives way to increasing pack ice, I know we’re reaching the remote, otherworldly expanses of the mystical Antarctic Peninsula: the modern explorer’s final frontier.

In the tradition of expedition cruising, each day the captain and expedition leader determine our course to take advantage of favourable weather, ice conditions and wildlife. We cruise around the ice-capped, 745m-high, flat-topped Brown Bluff on the Tabarin Peninsula, named for its prominent cliff of reddish-brown volcanic rock and a favourite nesting site for adélie and gentoo penguins, kelp gulls and pintado petrels.

As we motor past huge glittering white, calving glaciers, threading through icebergs that reflect and refract the light against the water in impossibly beautiful iridescent hues, leopard seals slip off ice floes to tail our Zodiac dinghy like languid torpedoes, while others continue to bask in the crisp sunlight, utterly unperturbed by either the dinghy or the ship gliding past.

We call into Port Lockroy, a former whaling station and World War II military operations base. Half of the island is open to visitors and the other half reserved for penguins so that conservationists can examine the effect of tourism on penguin populations. So far, the experiment suggests that we’re a boon — most likely because the sight of us stomping around in bright red parkas deters kleptoparasitic skuas from stealing penguin eggs and chicks.

Despite having a strengthened hull with a Lloyd’s Register ice-class notation (1A) for crushing ice, *Silver Explorer* is a purpose-built 132-passenger expedition cruise ship that wrote the book on creature comforts. Food and beverages are complimentary; there are 117 crew members to 132 passengers; every cabin comes with a butler in a dicky bow; and most suites have French balconies or large private verandas.

No seating plan or dining schedule means I can dine whenever and with whomever I want. Some evenings I eat alfresco at The Grill, followed by a dip in the adjacent whirlpool, as the captain manoeuvres the ship to maximise views of the glaciers and intermittent flukes of migrating whales. Most evenings I head to The Restaurant to enjoy selections from *La Collection du Monde*, a series of signature dishes created exclusively for Silversea by the Grands Chefs Relais & Châteaux, paired with wine and animated conversation about the sights and experiences of the day. And in the land of the midnight sun, there’s no shortage of talking points:



one evening I join a handful of passengers for a nightcap at the bar. We stand, speechless, as a pod of humpback whales breaches just off the bow, the intensity of the 2am light further accentuating the ethereal quality of the moment. [www.silversea.com](http://www.silversea.com)

### Tahiti: picture paradise

“*La Orana!*” exclaims the tattooed, leaf-festooned Gauguine, one of the Tahitian ambassadors on board **Paul Gauguin Cruises’** ship as we explore Tahiti and the Society Islands. She is greeting us with her arms aloft, waves lapping her knees, as we splash out of the motorised dugout to wade ashore. I smell the sweet, spicy aroma of roasting meat before my toes touch dry sand. As we approach the parasol-shaded table set within the azure waters of a palm-tree-fringed lagoon, the cooks open up the traditional oven to provide a shimmering, smoke-shrouded glimpse of our imminent feast: suckling pig and chicken with local spinach, sumptuous platters of plantains, bread fruit and the delicious *poisson cru* — a Tahitian-style poke of raw fish finished with coconut milk — all washed down with Moët & Chandon champagne. Although





# ACCESS ALL AREAS

WHETHER IT'S ANTARCTICA OR THE AMAZON, GEMMA Z PRICE FINDS EXPEDITION CRUISING ALLOWS HER TO EXPERIENCE SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST STRIKING AND REMOTE LOCATIONS IN STYLE

**Above:** Silversea's *Silver Explorer* (seen here in the background) has been designed specifically to navigate the Antarctic region. A fleet of Zodiac dinghies allows expedition guests to access hard-to-reach locations

this is our second beach feast in two days, this time I feel I have earned it: during the past few hours snorkelling, I've swum with zebra unicorn fish, brilliantly hued parrotfish and emperor angelfish in the coral gardens, hand-fed stingrays in the sandy shallows and plunged from the dugout to spot blacktip reef sharks appearing and disappearing as they cruised the depths of the South Pacific Ocean.

Inspired by this utopian setting, when Paul Gauguin arrived in Tahiti in 1891 he captured the local, flower-bedecked peoples and breathtaking scenic landscapes of the Society Islands (also known as the Leeward Islands) in oils. Today, his namesake, the *Paul Gauguin* — the longest-running cruise ship in this part of the world — transports up to 332 passengers to the same visually arresting vistas of French Polynesia. Designed specifically to sail the shallow seas and tiny ports of Tahiti, Fiji and the South Pacific, the ship feels pleasantly intimate, but spacious enough to accommodate a water sports marina, three restaurants (one of which features dishes developed by Michelin-starred chef Jean-Pierre Vigato), a casino and piano bar, and innumerable nooks in which to curl up

with a good book. Alongside dance performances and handicraft workshops, guest lecturers in anthropology, archaeology and photography provide a cerebral interface with the tropical setting. But the real show stealer is the panoramic scenery that greets me every morning from beyond my suite balcony.

I spend the first day lounging on the beach on Huahine, known as the garden island for its abundant vanilla orchards, banana groves and coconut plantations. On day two, most passengers while away the afternoon on private islet Motu Mahana, just off Bora Bora, kayaking, snorkelling, playing volleyball or sipping mai tais in fresh coconuts from palm-frond-shaded sun loungers as the crew and Gauguines prepare a sumptuous alfresco lunch.

When we moor off Moorea, I explore the lush, steamy forests and lowland pineapple and breadfruit plantations by ATV, against a backdrop of craggy volcanic mountains and impossibly blue bays fringed by swathes of golden sand. I later learn that, while I was ascending to the Belvedere lookout for a few quiet moments of reverie overlooking Opunohu Bay and Cook's Bay, volcanic craters reclaimed by the sea and the islands' most beautiful bays, another



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group of passengers on a snorkelling tour encountered a pod of three humpback whales and spent a life-defining hour interacting with these denizens of the deep.

To explore this quintessential tropical island paradise is to fall instantly in love; Marlon Brando famously purchased the atoll of Teti'aroa, just north of Tahiti, after discovering it on a location-scouting trip for the 1962 film *Mutiny on the Bounty*, describing it as “more gorgeous than anything I had anticipated”. [www.pgcruiises.com](http://www.pgcruiises.com)

### Galápagos Islands: wildlife wonderland

I had my first run-in with some Galápagos sea lions during my initial foray into deep water. One moment I'm surrounded by shoals of slim surgeonfish, parrotfish and clownfish, winding between the grey rocks and drifting in the current; the next, there are six sea lions darting around me — fat, sleek bullets that zoom right up to my mask, upside down and mouths open, before twisting away at the last minute, sending me lurching sideways in alarm.

Aboard the conservation-focused *National Geographic Endeavour* as part of **Lindblad Expeditions'** Galápagos Islands cruise, the daily schedule is packed with naturalist-led snorkelling trips and Zodiac excursions to the main islands in the Galápagos

*“There is literally nowhere else in the world where you can have this kind of experience”*

National Park, more than 3,000sq m of islands and islets located 600 miles off Ecuador's mainland. I'm astonished by how little fear the animals show; the animals either ignoring or approaching me are endemic to these islands, so there's literally nowhere else in the world where you can have this kind of experience.

We meander through prickly pear trees along a sandy path to Santa Cruz's aptly named Cerro Dragon (Dragon Hill). Despite their natural camouflage against the arid scrub and ruddy golden sand, we spot 28 dusty, yellow-brown Galápagos land iguanas, smashing naturalist Giancarlo Toti's previous top tally of 14.

The volcanic island of Genovesa, with its rough, lunar landscape, seems inhospitable but teems with seabirds. They include half a million red-footed boobies (the largest population in the world) and an entire Hitchcock movie cast of frigatebirds, blue-footed boobies and storm petrels soaring erratically over the island's rocky, wind-blown, fissured plateau.

Hearing the story of Lonesome George, the last known of the Pinta Island tortoises and the symbol of the Galápagos, who passed away at the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) on Santa Cruz in 2012, really brought home the importance of strict conservation controls and restoration initiatives on the islands. After years of predation, only 14 tortoises remained on Española, too few to maintain the population, so the CDRS brought them in for a captive rearing program. With the addition of “Super” Diego, an especially virile Española tortoise returned to the Galápagos from San Diego Zoo, this small group has produced thousands of babies. “Eighty per cent of the centre's hatchlings (anywhere from 70 to 150 hatchlings a year) come from Diego and his five girlfriends,” naturalist Gilda Gonzalez tells me with a wink.

Santa Cruz is also a great place to see giant tortoises in their natural habitat. After a quick stop at a local sugar cane mill — and



**Top:** spectacular views from Silversea's *Silversea Explorer*, its hull designed to act as an icebreaker.

**Right and above:** The *Paul Gauguin* and its pool deck. The *Paul Gauguin* Cruises' ship has been built to negotiate Polynesia's shallow lagoons as well as the open ocean



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a heart-warming tot of the local moonshine — we arrive at a highland farm, pull on some rubber boots and stride off into orchards full of wild tortoises that flatten bushes and bulldoze saplings as they move from one juicy cluster of leaves to the next.

As the huge, hulking carapaces move slowly through the bushes, I can't help but imagine Darwin's tortoise-riding antics, as described in his journal: "I frequently got on their backs, and then giving a few raps on the hinder part of their shells, they would rise up and walk away; — but I found it very difficult to keep my balance".

Of course, I would never consider retracing Darwin's footsteps like this. Seeing these antediluvian creatures thriving once again in their natural habitat is thrilling enough. [www.expeditons.com](http://www.expeditons.com)

### Peruvian Amazon: marine marvels

"Ok, we're here — in you get!" says the guide, stopping the skiff engine. Ever since we'd set off from the remote colonial city of Iquitos and begun our journey along the Ucayali river on **Aqua Expeditions'** Peruvian Amazon cruise, jumping in the water to escape the midday heat and shirt-drenching humidity has been a deliciously tantalising prospect. At this part of the Amazon, somewhat incongruously called Black Water, the river runs crystal clear and is perfect for taking a dip. I flip my legs over the side and plunge in. Just a few minutes later, the guide halloos and points upstream — a pod of pink Amazon dolphins are gambolling about the group, the sun sparkling off their dorsal fins as they roll above the surface of the water.

It is one magical moment in a series of many. The day before, I fished for piranhas (one of 3,000 species of tropical fish in the Amazon basin) with a rudimentary fishing pole and a chunk of red meat hooked on the line. Every passenger caught one of the red-bellied, wicked-jawed fish, most of which were released back into the water, with the exception of one unlucky creature thrown up into the air by a guide and caught in the talons of a swooping hawk.

On daily excursions into the steamy tangle of tree trunks, creepers and neon-pink flowers, I see howlers, dusky titi, tamarins and fluffy monk saki monkeys springing from one leafy bough to the next. I spot a three-toed sloth, clinging motionless as it snoozes above the swirling eddies. On one skiff excursion, our guide breaks off from a talk about the Amazon's natural pharmacy of medicinal plants to peer into the ink-black water and plunge his arms in, turning back towards his captive audience with a 3ft spectacled caiman grasped firmly in both hands.

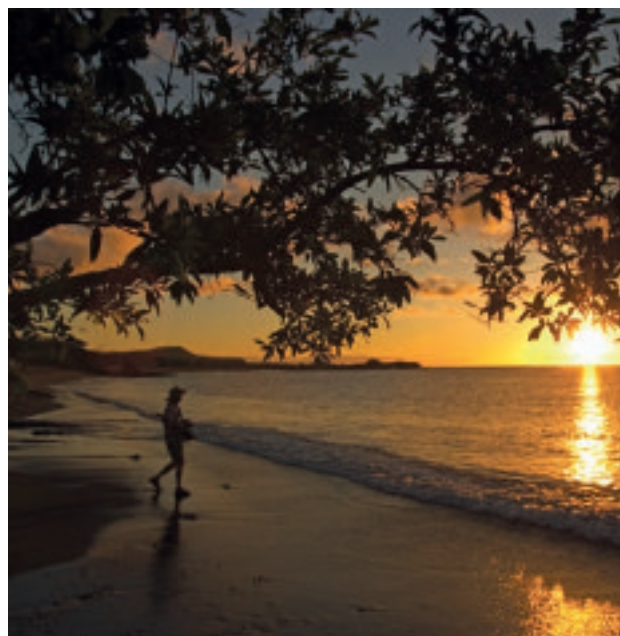
Peruvian architect Jordi Puig designed the *Aria Amazon*, a 45m, matte-black-hulled wooden river cruiser, to bring the outdoors in and our journey along the Amazon river, which flows 4,000 miles through Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana, to life.

My 23sq m Design Suite, one of 16 on board, has a natural wood bathroom with organic amenities, separate sitting area that doesn't see much use for the entire journey, and my own personal reality TV show: every morning I tug aside the blackouts to reveal floor-to-ceiling windows framing strangler vines wrapped around ancient ficus trees and vibrantly hued bromeliads, with an occasional cameo from a squirrel monkey or two.

And the best way to end a day on the river? A dinner of Peruvian ceviche and sábalo fish with ají dulce sauce — executive chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino sources 70 per cent of his ingredients from the surrounding waters and rainforest — followed by a pisco punch in the Observation Deck's outdoor jacuzzi. [www.aquaexpeditions.com](http://www.aquaexpeditions.com)



**Top:** the Peruvian Amazon, explored by Aqua Expeditions, includes such colourful species as the Amazonian woodcreeper. **Above and right:** encounters with Orca whales and evocative sunsets add to the sense of being in another world on a nature-led excursion to the Galápagos Islands by Lindbald Expeditions



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