



GO WITH THE FLOE

*A private charter provides the ultimate seaborne experience, but not all vessels are equal. **Nick Walton** discovers freedom in the icy waters of Antarctica aboard one of the few superyachts equipped for such adventurous expeditions*

The horizon, a silver line that seems to drift in and out of existence as if in a dream, is gradually broken. The effect is subtle at first, almost like a trick of the eye, but soon it's clear icebergs are rising out of the sea like the vanguard of an approaching horde, eventually towering in icy blue majesty as we approach. 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 on the bridge of a state-of-the-art expedition vessel as she silently slices her way through near-frozen seas into the depths of the Antarctic Sound.

Being able to go where others are rarely able to venture has become a central theme for well-heeled world wanderers. With today's trend for 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 game in the Serengeti 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 like they do in the air: they go private, with a luxury charter yacht opening up a world of exotic possibilities.

That's where EYOS Expeditions comes in, a ground-breaking charter business founded and led by a clutch of hardy-yet-passionate travellers with exhaustive Rolodexes. EYOS will take you, your friends and your superyacht to

PRISTINE TOWERS Spectacular ice formations that soar up to 70 metres above sea level greet travellers on an Antarctic expedition



WILD WONDERS Largely untouched by humanity, few territories offer such an abundance of wildlife as the White Continent. Gentoo penguins and storm petrels resting on snow-dusted slabs, Antarctic fur seals peeking up from the inky waters and humpback whales leaping with calves in their wake are just a few of the natural wonders found in Antarctica's wilderness

almost anywhere on the planet you desire. Don't have a superyacht? The company also has access to a myriad of world-class charter yachts, priced at up to US\$1 million a week and complete with hand-selected expeditionary crews, offering affluent travellers the unique combination of luxury and logistics. All you have to choose is the locale, from the atolls of the South Pacific, to the superyacht hubs of the Caribbean, to the Arctic hunting grounds of polar bears. Or, in our case, the jagged peaks and frozen landscapes of the Antarctic Peninsula.

One of the most popular EYOS charter yachts is the Hanse Explorer. Part superyacht, part rugged expedition vessel, it's one of the few vessels in the world that can rightly claim to be an "expedition yacht," with lines that wouldn't look out of place in a Monaco marina. Beneath the Ferrari-like aesthetics lie cutting-edge environmental systems, a strengthened hull, powerful engines, and the types of redundancies that come in handy when you're charting courses within a 9,000 nautical mile cruising range.

I'm on the second day of a week-long Antarctic cruise aboard the Hanse and I'm already appreciating the advantage a private charter yacht offers over my previous voyages to the White Continent. This comes courtesy of the dreaded Drake Passage, the temperamental body of water dividing South America and Antarctica where huge currents and shifts in water temperature whip up storms from nowhere. A vicious squall blew up when we were due to cross the Drake, so instead we flew from the Chilean town of Punta Arenas to an airstrip on King George Island on the other side, escaping what would have been nauseating misery for cruisers.

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 Zodiac inflatables and put the champagne on ice. Even our shy Portuguese chef, Luis Galego Pião, follows the EYOS mantra: the destination comes first.

Our captain and the team, led by intrepid adventurer and EYOS expedition leader Richard White, mix things up; instead of heading southwest, following large commercial vessels down the west coast of the Antarctic Peninsula, we duck and weave east and south, across the tip of the continent and into the calm waters of the infamously ice-choked Antarctic Sound, where mountains of glacial ice the size of suburban shopping malls dominate the seascape.

CHARTING A COURSE

Many factors influence the charter fee, including seasonality, especially for remote destinations like Antarctica. There are high and low seasons, and notable events, such as large regattas and international film festivals, might also inflate rates within a season or in a region. Other factors include the size of the yacht, its reputation, the experience of its crew and captain, and its amenities. Also, yachts have their own sets of rules and inclusions decided by their owners. Hirers will be charged an "advance provisioning allowance," which allows the vessel to take on supplies before the charter. Any unused funds will be returned at the end of the trip—but if you've hit the champagne harder than anticipated, additional funds may be required, and bonds are often held by charter brokers for such eventualities. In addition to the charter fee, other costs include fuel, harbour fees and dockage, communications, including internet access, and, if you are boarding from more remote areas, a delivery fee. Typically, these costs are combined in a 35 per cent add-on to the charter fee, which in the case of the Hanse Explorer is 135,000 a week.



IMAGES: REEVES/EYOS EXPEDITION (OPENING PAGE); NICK WALTON (THIS PAGE)





ICE FORWARD
A view of Antarctica's majestic snow-capped mountains against blue cloudy skies from aboard the Hanse Explorer

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 reflection 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 the continent'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 morph into curious crabeater seals, basking on the sea ice and eyeing us.

In the shadow of Brown Bluff, a rocky peak wreathed in ice, we launch the Zodiacs and cruise a bay packed with beached icebergs. Gentoo penguins and storm petrels rest on the snow-dusted slabs, unperturbed by our presence, and Antarctic fur seals peek up from the inky waters before diving beneath us in silvery shimmering streaks. 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 echoes off the peaks ringing the bay.

Another great thing about a private charter is the company you keep—you share these remarkable experiences with a hand-picked clutch of friends and family. The Hanse Explorer accommodates 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 and bar, and covered and uncovered rear decks. The decks provide great vantage

points as we cruise through Orléans Strait and into Gerlache Strait, acclaimed as the "whale superhighway," with time for stops at Spert Island and Mikkelsen Harbour, home to roaring fur seals and the weathered wrecks of timber longboats that bear witness to the region's bloody whaling history.

The Hanse Explorer is deft compared to larger commercial cruise ships, and German captain Jens Köthen isn't afraid to show us how she handles. In the Grandidier Channel, far further south than commercial ships venture, he carves through great swaths of sea ice before ploughing into one tennis court-sized piece so we can step onto it for the perfect Antarctic photo op. As the light begins to fade, the shimmering grey landscape of sea ice and ranks of bergs stretching to the horizon turns a breathtaking golden hue.

It's the final day of our private, very personal foray into Antarctica. As we cruise back towards King George Island, we're escorted by pods of humpback whales, calves in their wake. We take to the Zodiacs one final time and, under indigo skies, experience these majestic beasts up close and personal as they breach and wave their tails just metres away. On returning to the Hanse Explorer, we sip champagne at the bow, toasting 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. 🍷

Nick Walton was a guest of EYOS Expeditions, which arranges bespoke superyacht journeys around the world. eyos-expeditions.com

ANTARCTIC ESSENTIALS

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

Lightweight fleece or down inner jacket, **Patagonia**



Waterproof boots that can cover trousers and reach the upper calf, **Arc'Teryx**



Polarising sunglasses, **Oakley**



Trekking socks, **Falke**



Durable, waterproof outer jacket with hood, **Moncler**