

Returning to exploration

Niels-Erik Lund tells Alex Smith how SunStone Ships is continuing to drive innovation in the expedition cruise sector despite the challenges of the past two years



SunStone Ships is the largest tonnage provider to the expedition market in the world, with its fleet of cruise vessels on charter to tour operators and travel companies worldwide. Managed by experienced crew, its ships take guests to some of the most remote destinations, including seasonal Arctic and Antarctic cruises.

Like the rest of the cruise industry, SunStone has endured extreme difficulties over the past two years with the Covid-19 pandemic placing severe financial pressure on the shipowner. The recovery from this disruption has been a slow process, explains Niels-Erik Lund, CEO of the company.

Despite these challenges, SunStone has continued with the construction and introduction of its new Infinity-class

ships. The Infinity class has capacity for between 130 and 200 passengers and 85 to 115 crew. Three of the vessels are already in operation for travel companies and have received glowing reviews after their debuts, according to Lund.

“Currently, we have four of our vessels in operation in Antarctica,” he says. “This is not yet enough to make us profitable. However, we do expect to have 12 of our vessels in operation by June, getting us back to normal.”

Despite these challenges, SunStone has continued with the construction and introduction of its new Infinity-class ships. The Infinity class was designed by SunStone Ships with the naval architects Ulstein Design & Solutions and each ship has capacity for between 130 and 200 passengers and 85 to 115 crew. Three

of the vessels are already in operation for travel companies and have received glowing reviews after their debuts, according to Lund.

“Greg Mortimer is on year-round charter to Aurora Expeditions in Australia, while Ocean Explorer is on year-round charter to Vantage Travel in the USA, and Ocean Victory is on charter to Albatros Expeditions during winter seasons and to American Queen Voyages during summer seasons,” he says. “All three vessels have performed fantastically. Charterers, technical managers, hotel managers, and we at SunStone are all very pleased with the vessels’ performances, both from a passenger point of view and a technical point of view.”

SunStone isn’t stopping at three, however. The shipowner is continuing



SunStone Ships has four ships in operation in Antarctica this season

with its plan for the Infinity-class ships, with the construction of the remaining vessels currently being completed at China Merchants Heavy Industry's shipyard in Haiman, China.

"The construction is proceeding according to plan, though with some delays due to Covid-19," says Lund. "We will be taking delivery of Sylvia Earle in March of this year and Ocean Odyssey in April of this year. This month, we also celebrated the keel laying of the sixth Infinity-class ship, Ocean Albatros, which will be delivered in March 2023."

SunStone is also planning for the future beyond the completion of the Infinity-class. Rather than pausing development, it is already in the process of arranging for the construction of an entirely new design, the Boundless class.

Lund outlines the features that charterers and guests can expect from the new series of ships, the first of which is currently expected to join the SunStone fleet in 2025.

"The Boundless class will be slightly larger," he says. "It will have the same technical features as the Infinity class, such as Safe Return to Port, dynamic positioning, at rest stabilisers, Polar Code 6, and an inverted bow. However, in addition to this, it will have a Zodiac garage at water level, a pool deck midship with a retractable glass dome, more public spaces, and it will be an all-balcony vessel."

With the completed Infinity class and the upcoming Boundless class, SunStone Ships is looking to build back from a difficult period and continue to drive forward the expedition sector. **CFR**



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