

Infinity and beyond

Sunstone Ships offers expedition vessels to tour operators and travel companies worldwide. Now, building on decades of industry experience, the tonnage provider is preparing to launch the first of its new Infinity class of expedition ships, the *Greg Mortimer*. CEO Niels-Erik Lund explains how his company is taking charge of the changing market.

What does Sunstone provide to its customers?

Niels-Erik Lund: Sunstone is a tonnage provider concentrating on expedition and small luxury cruise ships, typically vessels with a capacity of 100–250 passengers. Covering all operational and on-board aspects, we make it possible for clients to focus exclusively on marketing and sales.

Our existing fleet of eight vessels are all chartered and operating in cold and warm waters with full fleets of zodiacs. Each ship is built and refurbished to operate in difficult environments, typically in areas where there are no ports to visit, for cruises of seven to over 20 days. Sunstone has signed new-build contracts for five expedition vessels to be built in China, with an option for five more.

How do Sunstone's Infinity-class ships meet the needs of the expedition market, and what makes them unique?

With our Infinity-class vessels we have done everything to create the world's safest and most comfortable expedition cruise ships. More than fulfilling safety requirements, each build has numerous additional features not required by class or flag state. One such feature is compliance with the Safe Return to Port rules, which is not required for vessels of this size, but means that there is a redundancy of equipment and systems in all

significant areas of the ship. In the event of an incident in any fire zone, the vessels can still operate, feed passengers, and provide hot water, working toilets and navigation equipment, ensuring a safe return to port.

Another important feature is dynamic positioning, which automatically keeps vessels in a specific position, creating the best possible embarkation and disembarkation conditions for passengers getting on and off zodiacs. Again, this isn't a requirement, but it improves safety without harming marine environments where the ship cannot or should not drop anchor.

Furthermore, unlike all existing cruise ships, our Infinity-class vessels have zero-speed stabilisers, which eliminate most of the rolling when stationary and therefore greatly increase passenger comfort.

Our patented X-Bow also makes Infinity-class ships more comfortable in the bad weather of areas such as the Drake Passage, where the high waves make ships with conventional bows uncomfortable for passengers.

This combination of safety and performance features does not currently exist on any expedition ships. At the same time, Infinity vessels are small enough to access bays and areas in Antarctica, Greenland, Iceland and Arctic Canada, where larger ships cannot operate.

Therefore, from a size, safety and comfort

point of view, our unique new builds are the best possible expedition ships.

Why is the expedition market suitable for such a rapid expansion?

If we look at the demographics, nationalities that we have not seen before are boarding our expedition ships in large numbers. Five years back, there were no Chinese passengers on our ships; now, they are the second-largest national group.

The ages we cater to have also changed. There are now more couples in their 30s and 40s on our expedition ships, while the older generation of passengers – over 70s – are much more active than before. They are able to participate in most of the activities on expedition ships, jumping into a zodiac three or four times a day without problems.

Also, according to our definition, there are roughly 40 expedition vessels in the world, with an average age of roughly 28 years. Over the next 5–15 years, most of these vessels will have to be scrapped. So, as the demand for expedition cruises increases, the supply will be seriously reduced. This is why we believe the expedition market can handle the launches of the 30 or so ships that will be on order in 2019.

Are you concerned the market segment may be over capacity?

There could be some pressure in the marketplace in 2021–22, when a number of new vessels will enter the market before enough of the existing ships have been scrapped. Smaller operators who are not financially strong may feel the pressure of having to lower prices for a period of time.

But in our opinion, this is a short-term situation and our charterers will have the advantage of extremely efficient ships built and financed at the right price. So the total cost per passenger of our ships will be quite attractive compared with our competitors. ●

For further information

www.sunstoneships.com



The *Greg Mortimer*, Sunstone Ships first Infinity-class vessel.