

Small-Ship Cruising

Leave the crowds behind on voyages that emphasize intriguing destinations

By Michelle White

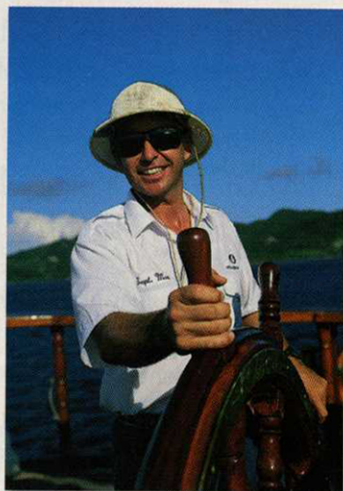
For anyone feeling a bit overwhelmed by the ever-increasing size of today's traditional megaliners, there is a different kind of cruising that offers a more intimate experience. Small-ship cruising — sometimes called niche cruising — offers up-close and personal encounters in captivating locales. By virtue of their size, these vessels can pull into small ports, narrow channels and hidden coves that larger ships can't access. The focus is on the destinations, and itineraries often explore a region in-depth. Some cruise lines bring experts in history, culture, geography or wildlife on board to provide greater

insight into the locations visited.

Among the choices are the masted sailing ships of Star Clipper and Windjammer, which combine nautical traditions with

contemporary amenities. The ships of Clipper, Cruise West and Celebrity Expeditions offer a soft-adventure experience as they travel to off-the-beaten-path destinations, frequently using Zodiac landing crafts to reach shal-

low waterways, deserted beaches and secluded wilderness areas. At the larger end of the spectrum are the 650-passenger MV Discovery from Discovery World Cruises and Orient's 826-passenger Marco Polo. ➤



WINDJAMMER BAREFOOT CRUISES PHOTOS



The Yankee Clipper, built in 1923 for financier E.F. Hutton, is among Windjammer Barefoot Cruises' four sailing ships. Left: The captain steers the vessel to its next destination.

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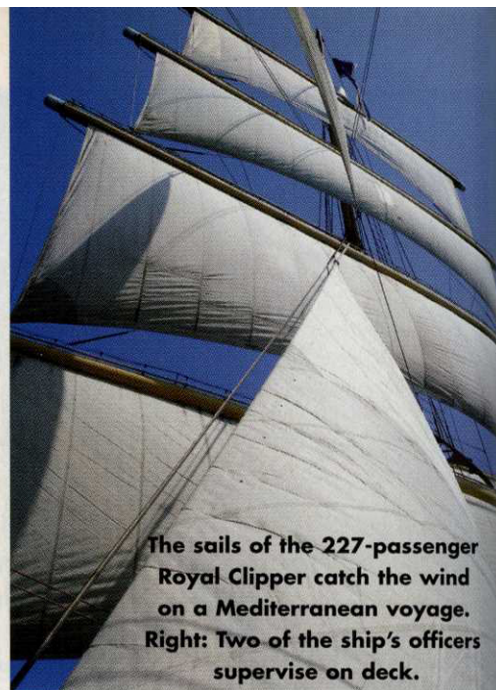


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The sails of the 227-passenger Royal Clipper catch the wind on a Mediterranean voyage. Right: Two of the ship's officers supervise on deck.

These ships are endowed with a greater variety of leisure-time facilities, but they can still take advantage of smaller, out-of-the-way ports.

Because these ships carry fewer passengers, guests and crew get to know each other well. The setting is intimate and casual.

"Small-ship cruisers are generally well-educated and well-traveled to begin with," says Cheryl Cunningham, manager at Houston-based travel agency Vacations To Go, which has specialized in discounted cruises since 1984. "They care about the destination, and they really want to see and experience the region. They want to know about the history, meet the people and see the land — truly immerse themselves." Baby boomers or those in early retirement are among those attracted to these types of cruises, she adds.

Niche cruisers tend to be somewhat active and adventurous. Passengers should have a moderate level of physical fitness in order to enjoy the broadest scope of available shore excursions.

When budgeting a niche cruise, consider the cost of airfare, which can be expensive if the cruise embarks from a distant and less-appointed port. Also, small-ship cruises can fill up quickly due to their limited passenger capacities, especially during peak travel seasons, says Cunningham.

Yet because this style of cruising appeals to a smaller market than the traditional cruise lines, select cabins



LINDSAY ARMSTRONG PHOTOS

can remain unsold, Cunningham says, and travelers may find discounts as sailing time approaches. Cruise lines may also offer money-saving incentives for booking early, a safe bet for finding discounted rates on highly popular itineraries.

The following are our favorite small-ship cruise lines. For information and

rates, call Vacations To Go at (800) 338-4962, or visit the Web sites listed below.

Fueled by the Wind

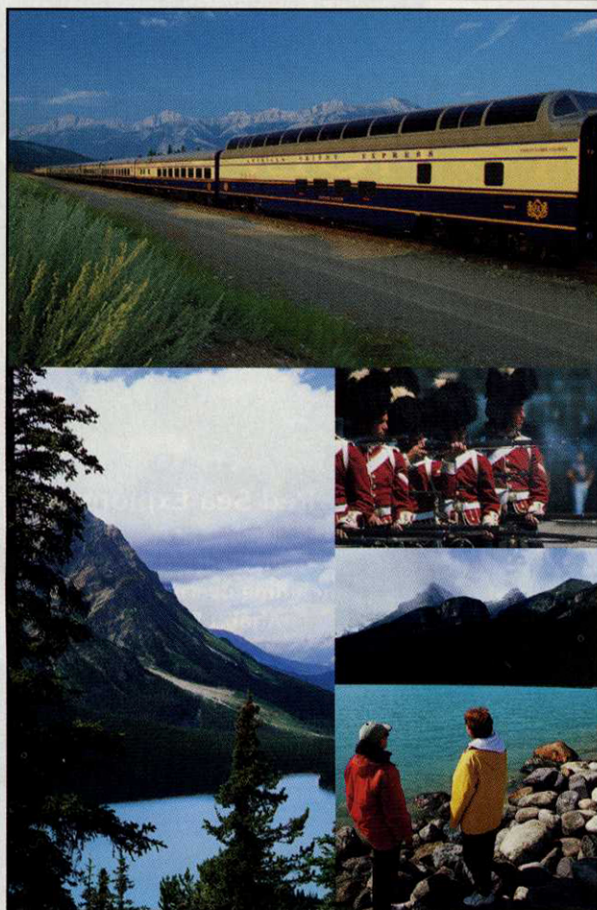
The masted tall ships of Star Clippers blend the romance of sailing with the comfort of modern yachting. Engines are used to propel the ship

when wind conditions do not support itinerary requirements, but whenever possible, the motors are turned off and the ship glides over the waves, its canvas sails billowing in the wind.

Star Clippers' flagship, the 227-passenger Royal Clipper, is the largest fully rigged sailing ship in the world, measuring 439 feet long and boasting 42 sails and five masts. Crewmembers can show passengers how to reef a sail, splice a line or tie a square knot. Guests can also climb the mast to enjoy the view from the crow's nest. Three swimming pools and a spa and health club provide blissful retreats, while a marina platform lends easy access to water sports from the ship's stern.

"The atmosphere on board is really intimate, and there's so much personal service," says Lindsay Armstrong, who sailed on the Royal Clipper for 10 days in the Mediterranean last August. She says the bridge was always open, so the captain was easily accessible.

The environment is relaxed — no jackets or ties required — and there



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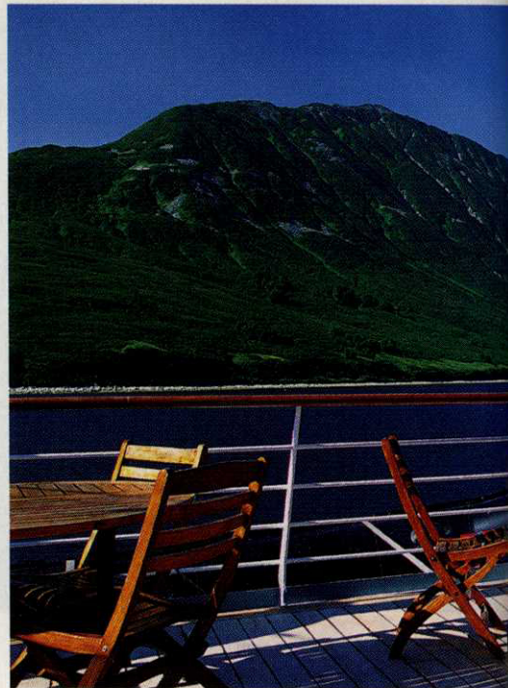
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A masted sailing ship offers a laid-back cruising experience.

WINDHAMMER BAREFOOT CRUISES



are no fixed meal times. "We ate with the same people every night, and not because we had to. You really get to know people on board," says Armstrong.

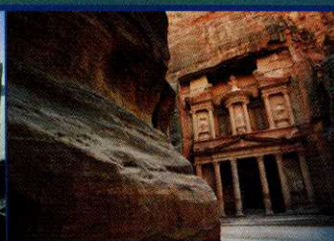
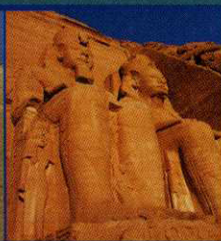
Sister ships the Star Clipper and the

Star Flyer each have a capacity of 170 guests. Ample teak decks, cozy bars and a library are among their amenities. Star Clippers' cruises are marked by an easygoing informality, where local entertainers often share their cul-

ture through shipboard performances.

"We saw folk dancers come on board in Corfu," Armstrong says. "It was great because Corfu is a Greek island, but with a heavy Italian influence. The dancing brought us a gen-

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For more information call Vacations To Go at (800) 338-4962 or visit www.VacationsToGo.com/Discovery.

Fares are cruise only based on double occupancy for minimum category O and include port charges (NCFs). For complete terms and conditions contact Vacations To Go or Discovery World Cruises. © 2006. Ship's registry: Bermuda.

A passenger takes in up-close views of breathtaking landscapes from the Clipper Odyssey. Right: Some small-ship cruises highlight a destination's exotic flora and fauna.



CLIPPER CRUISE LINE PHOTOS

uine flavor of the island."

Star Clippers sails in the Caribbean, Mediterranean, Far East and Indian Ocean, and the line also does trans-Atlantic cruises.

To learn more about Star Clippers, visit www.VacationsToGo.com/starclippers.

Windjammer Barefoot Cruises provides a more laid-back experience aboard its four sailing ships, which accommodate 64 to 122 passengers. They include the 1927 Yankee Clipper, once owned by the Vanderbilt family, and the Mandalay, built in 1923 for financier E.F. Hutton. The masted ships receive monthly supplies from a fifth member of the fleet, the Amazing Grace, a freighter vessel that also takes on passengers.

Windjammer encourages camaraderie and a very casual atmosphere on board. Passengers mingle barefoot on the teak decks, arrive at dinner in T-shirts and bathing suits, and help hoist the sails or man the helm if they wish. Each morning, the ship's captain delivers an entertaining introduction to the day's destination, offering historical background and local lore. As the day winds down, passengers savor complimentary rum "swizzles" and Caribbean appetizers, play deck games or simply take in a breathtaking sunset. After dinner, socialize on board



er cruise ships. Ports include the off-beat Jost Van Dyke in the British Virgin Islands; the verdant, hilly island of Nevis in the British West Indies; and the volcanic island of St. Vincent, with black sands, waterfalls and the oldest botanical gardens in the Northern Hemisphere.

To see Windjammer cruises, visit www.VacationsToGo.com/windjammer.

Adventure Cruising

Clipper Cruise Line embodies an easygoing approach to traveling, with itineraries that cater to guests' curiosity about the world. The 128-passenger Clipper Odyssey embarks on Pacific cruises from Alaska and the Russian Far East to Japan and Australia, while the 122-passenger Clipper Adventurer sails in Antarctica, Iceland and Greenland, Europe and South America. All staterooms feature ocean views.

Clipper's ships are equipped with Zodiac landing craft, which allow passengers to access remote areas in

or go ashore for some local nightlife. You can even bring your bedding to the top deck and sleep under the stars.

Windjammer sails in the Bahamas and the Caribbean, calling at islands that are not frequently visited by large-

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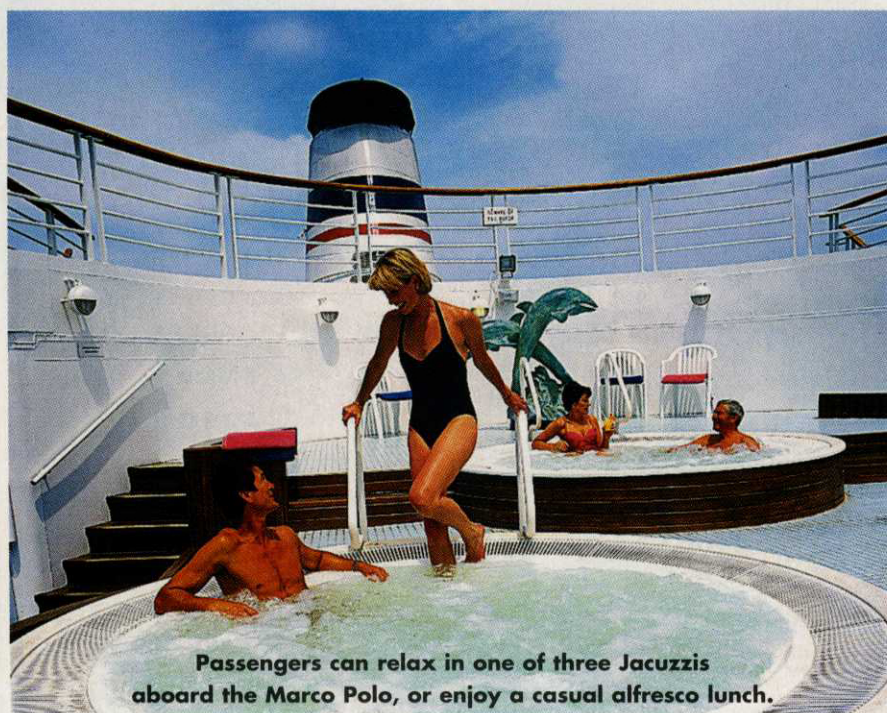
The Celebrity Xpedition, which sails year-round to the Galapagos Islands, features ocean-view accommodations and a sundeck.

ports that lack waterfront facilities. On the journey to Antarctica, for example, travelers can view stunning expanses of blue glacial ice, snowcapped peaks, ancient volcanic craters and deserted beaches. Better yet are the up-close views of the breathtaking landscapes and wildlife such as penguins and seals.

Naturalists, historians and other experts are on hand to inform, entertain and bring the surroundings to life. They can spot and identify wildlife on shore excursions, explain natural phenomena and impart local history. At many ports, local musicians and artisans come aboard to provide entertainment and share their culture with visitors.

Each day at 4 p.m., passengers indulge in "Clipper Chippers" — fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies served warm. The cruise director previews the next day's activities during cocktail hour, which sometimes takes place on the top deck along with a twilight barbecue. There are no fixed seating arrangements during meals and no formal nights, though the captain's

CELEBRITY XPEDITIONS PHOTOS



Passengers can relax in one of three Jacuzzis aboard the Marco Polo, or enjoy a casual alfresco lunch.

welcome and farewell dinners are casually elegant and a sports jacket for men is appropriate.

For Clipper Cruise Line itineraries and rates, visit www.VacationsToGo.com/clipper.

The 94-passenger Celebrity Xpedition sails year-round from Quito, Ecuador, to the Galapagos Islands. Travelers encounter a broad array of wildlife while enjoying the outstanding service and casually elegant ambiance

for which Celebrity Cruises is known.

Budding naturalists will be delighted to explore these remote isles, which inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Situated more than 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, the Galapagos are home to many endemic species. The giant tortoises of the Galapagos can live up to 150 years, while pelicans, flamingos and flightless cormorants are frequent sights as well.

On the flat, low-lying island of North Seymour, passengers can spot

nesting blue-footed boobies, sea lions at play and a massive colony of frigate birds. Red marine iguanas inhabit Espanola, the oldest island in the volcanic archipelago.

Dramatic landscapes also contribute to the timeless allure of the Galapagos, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978. On Isabela, visitors can view a salt-lake crater and the lava fields of Darwin Volcano. Red-sand beaches, formed from oxidized lava, fringe Rabida. Elsewhere, rocky outcroppings, white-sand beaches and rich vegetation provide beautiful back-grounds for the rare fauna.

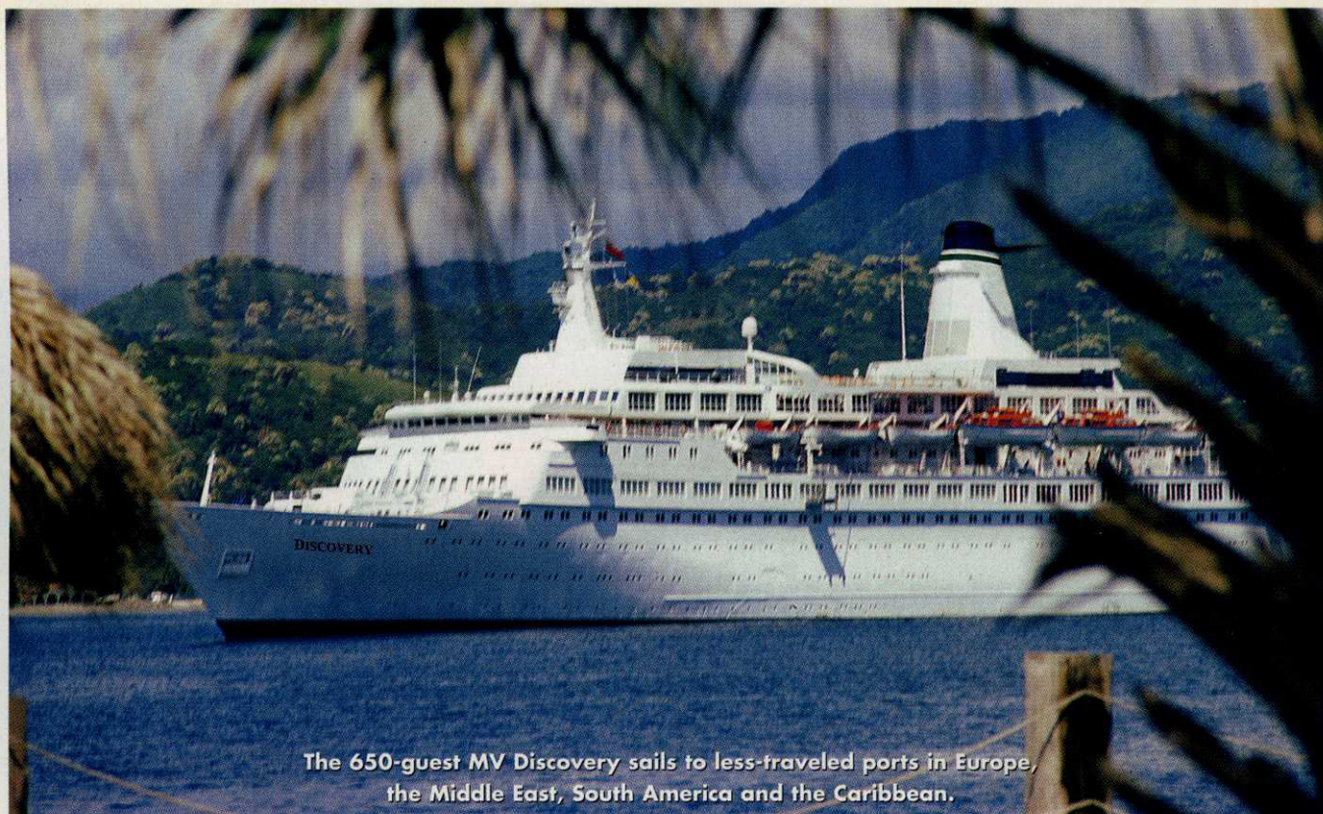
The Xpedition's small passenger capacity allows for a more personal, intimate cruising experience. Guests can enjoy cocktails in the Discovery Lounge, massages in the salon and stunning Pacific sunsets from the Blue Finch Bar. Cruise fare on the Xpedition includes alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks, as well as gratuities for the shipboard staff. All accommodations have ocean views.

For more on Celebrity Xpedition in the Galapagos, go to www.VacationsToGo.com/xpedition.

Cruise West's nine ships carry from 78 to 138 guests, their small sizes enabling them to maneuver close to shore to observe the subtle details of nature. Inflatable excursion crafts bring guests close to natural spectacles, whether a thundering waterfall in Alaska or bottle-nosed dolphins frolicking off Mexico's Pacific coast.

Cruise West has developed relationships with port directors, local storytellers and innkeepers who are eager to share the best of their towns with inquisitive travelers. At least one shore excursion or highlight is included at each port of call on Cruise West itineraries, such as hiking, kayaking or snorkeling. Cruise West captains allow the destination to shape the schedule, perhaps lingering in port to view wildlife or a glorious sunset.

An exploration leader on board every cruise provides insight into the natural history, culture, scenery and wildlife of Cruise West destinations. Naturalists are typically available to answer guests' questions. ➤



The 650-guest MV Discovery sails to less-traveled ports in Europe, the Middle East, South America and the Caribbean.

Cruise West's enticing destinations include Alaska, eastern Canada, California's wine country, Mexico's Sea of Cortes, Panama and Costa Rica, Japan and the South Pacific.

See Cruise West itineraries at www.VacationsToGo.com/cruisewest.

More Amenities, Still Maneuverable

Orient Lines operates the 826-passenger Marco Polo, which contains enough amenities to please a mid-sized passenger capacity, but is still small enough to access less-traveled ports. Zodiac landing craft are deployed to reach remote destinations.

The 22,080-ton ship features a library, Internet cafe, casino and several lounges, including a piano bar and showroom with dance floor. There are fitness facilities, three Jacuzzis, a pool and salon. The ship-board ambiance is laid-back during the day, while dressy attire may be appropriate on some evenings. Renowned speakers lead Orient's Discovery Lecture Series, sharing their perspectives on history, journalism, science and politics. Orient often brings local performers on board to entertain passengers and

provide an authentic sense of a port's culture.

Among vacation options are cruises of Scandinavia and Russia, with overnights in glittering St. Petersburg. Itineraries in the Mediterranean showcase the region's rich history. South America cruises highlight Amazonian rainforests, the Panama Canal and fabled Machu Picchu, the Incan fortress city high in the mountains of Peru. Expeditions to Antarctica depart from Buenos Aires or Ushuaia, Argentina, or Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In addition, Orient operates trans-Atlantic voyages. Some itineraries, such as in Antarctica, include a pre-cruise hotel stay.

Find more information on Orient at www.VacationsToGo.com/orient.

Discovery World Cruises merges unique, off-the-beaten-path itineraries with the ample amenities and comfort of the MV Discovery, a 650-passenger ocean liner. Guests can work out at the fully equipped gym, be pampered at the salon, play games in the card room and let cares melt away in the hot tubs and pools. A theater, nightclub and casino offer nighttime diversion, and a library, Internet center and shops round out the facilities.

Passengers can join talks led by experts in natural history, anthropology, science and geology, or take part in classes on such subjects as art and photography. Many lectures are tailored toward landscapes and cultures relevant to the cruise itinerary.

Learn more about Discovery World Cruises at www.VacationsToGo.com/discovery.

On board, the cuisine often reflects regional influences, and room service is available around the clock. The dress code is casual during the day, and some evenings may call for semi-formal or formal attire, such as the captain's welcome dinner.

Discovery's cruises venture to the remote, glacial beauty of Antarctica; to popular landmarks as well as less-traveled ports in Europe; and to the ancient monuments, vast deserts and dramatic architecture of the Middle East. Lush landscapes beckon throughout South America and the Panama Canal, while other voyages take in the tropics of the Caribbean and the South Pacific. Other itineraries cross the Atlantic Ocean. Several cruise itineraries include a night or two on land before or after the cruise.

DISCOVERY WORLD CRUISES