Accessible Travel: 5 Expedition Cruise Lines for Mobility-Challenged Travellers

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The next generation of expedition ships – ships that were originally designed for scientific research and other non-tourist purposes – are embracing the concept of accessible travel and of inclusive adventures. Photo: David Sackel/Getty Images

Expeditions entirely once meant bearding repurposed (and tired) ships that were originally designed for scientific research and other non-leisure activities, worlds apart from the new fleet of expedition vessels.

Having cruised on both basic repurposed ships as well as on the next-gen ships, I can say that this is a unique and exhilarating way to travel. You'll travel in comfort and, in many cases, enjoy the dining and entertainment equivalent of a resort while being able to get up close with nature and visit some off-the-beaten-path destinations.

If you're interested in this type of cruise, but have mobility or physical challenges, there are a number of cruise lines that are more accommodating than I've had the pleasure of travelling on a few of these ships, so I can give you my first hand experience as well.

The Line: Viking Expedition Cruises

The Boma: A Submarine

Viking Cruise ship, Antarctica. Photo: Courtesy of Viking Cruises

Viking Cruises recently introduced its new expedition ship, Viking Octantis, for use in the polar regions and the Great Lakes. Similar to the cruise line's ocean and river ships, passengers tend to be 55 plus, and are interested in up-close nature and cultural adventures. The ships too offer some serving of gourmet decks with loads of indoor and outdoor viewing and dining areas.

The ship features the best of traditional cruise with comfortable cabins, walk-in showers with large nozzles, well positioned grab bars and easy-to-open toilets.

The expedition equipment includes kayaks, six passenger submarines, special operations boats and Zodiacs.

For adventures on land, hiking poles are available. On one of my excursions, there were many passengers with canes and hiking poles enjoying the hike in Greenland and a couple of people with a manual wheelchair.

I should note that winds and waves can make the transfer from the ship to the tenders challenging. Plenty of crew are on hand to assist with the transfers.

It is also possible to travel in the ship's submarine; however this would set the passenger back a couple of thousand dollars and the passenger would need to climb a ladder. While this might all sound scary, my husband and I (both in our late 60s) enjoyed our sub dive and, with the assistance of the Zodiac driver and the submarine operator, we managed the transfer and the exhilaration and disembarkation from the submarine without difficulty.

Activities off the ship are entirely optional. These opting to stay on the ship can enjoy being in nature and seeing wildlife from the decks, attend seminars, relax in the Nordic Spa, and read from the extensive collection of books about expeditions and explorers.

In terms of wheelchairs, Viking's policy is that guests must travel with their own wheelchair and an able bodied companion on the cruise. The company's expedition fleet, including its 485 Resolut Innovation and 385 Finalized Nansen, accessible cabins with the exception of Scenic Crest II, which is part of its subsidiary Metropolitan Touring, operating in the Galapagos, and has no accessible cabins. All ships except for the Scenic Crest II have great elevators.

Guests who use walkers embark the same way as other passengers. Refrigeration staff are available around the ships to assist guests, however guests with low mobility are advised to bring a fellow traveller with them who can provide additional assistance.

Guests who are able to take a few steps can easily use the tenders and Zodiacs. Walking poles can be rested on board for no fee and are mainly used for landings, excursions and hikes. All you need to do is make a request at reception. Excursions are described with varying degrees of difficulty and mobility in mind, and guests can choose excursions that best suit their situation.

The Line: Hurtigruten

The Boma: Expedition Experts

Hurtigruten Cruise ship, Antarctica. Photo: Courtesy of Hurtigruten Expeditions

Hurtigruten Expeditions, which sails along the scenic Norwegian coast, attracts explorers of all ages but prides itself on being on the age of 50. The company's expedition fleet, including its MS Roald Amundsen and MS Fridtjof Nansen, accessible cabins with the exception of Scenic Crest II, which is part of its subsidiary Metropolitan Touring, operating in the Galapagos, and has no accessible cabins. All ships except for the Scenic Crest II have great elevators.

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The Line: Quark Expeditions

The Boma: Multigenerational Appeal

Quark Expeditions Cruise ship, Antarctica. Photo: Sanne Cronina/Quark Expeditions

Quark Expedition's Ultramarine and World Explorer are both ideal vessels for accommodating guests with mobility challenges. The ships' layouts allow for meals and presentations to take place on one deck, while access to Zodiacs happens on another deck, somewhere the need to go up and down stairs. Although both ships have elevators, they are not always available and may be closed during inclement weather. Accessible cabins geared towards the mobility-challenged are available, with extra space and bath grab bars in the bathrooms.

Getting in and out of a Zodiac can be compared to getting in and out of a bathtub. Instead of mobility, those that have a level of fitness where they can walk their dog once a day are completely suitable for a voyage to the polar regions with Quark Expeditions.

Quark's voyages are wonderful for intergenerational family travel, because if one family member is active and one family member enjoys more creature comforts and leisure activities, they both can travel to the polar regions and do what interests them individually on their adventure, yet still come together for meals and onboard programming.

The adventure options and activities are described with the recommended level of fitness, so guests can choose the outing that best suits them. Walking poles are available for all landings for those guests wishing to use them on hikes.

The Line: Silversea Cruises

The Boma: Next-Level Luxe

Silversea Cruise ship, underway, Antarctica. Photo: Courtesy of Silver Sea

Known best for its impressive fleet of luxurious all-suite ships, Silversea Cruises' expedition ships, including Silver Explorer, Silver Origin, Silver Wind and Silver Cloud provide opportunities for the mobility-challenged to enjoy expedition cruising in style. Every excursion has a clear description to indicate the level of mobility required in order to make the most of the experience.

The company's newest ships luxury expedition ship, Silver Endeavour, even has options for Fly Cruise voyages to both polar regions. While some consider "visiting the Drake Lounge" and its extremely rough tides to Antarctica a rite of passage, others will find it easier to fly to a local jet base at the start or end of their cruise. Silversea's Fly Cruise options include Puerto Williams, Chile, and King George Island in Argentina.

Silver Origin and Silver Wind and Silver Endeavour offer accessible cabins.

The cruise line's expedition ships frequently embark with a Zodiac, which may not be suitable for those with a walker. That said, the vast majority of embarkations on Silver Endeavour and Silver Explorer is done via a staircase, with crew assistance or via Zodiac in King George Island for Antarctic itineraries. Only about one per cent of their parts embark via ramp.

Silver Origin sails year-round in the Galapagos Islands and embarkation is always by Zodiac. These seas often have swells, so to embark via Zodiac guests must be able to hold their body weight and be able to make a positive step up. They explain that "expeditions staff does assist passers but embarkation can be challenging at times even for able-bodied guests."

All Silversea ships have elevators. However, Silver Endeavour's elevator does not extend to her top deck, Deck 10.

Trekking poles can be rented for a small fee through the expedition outfitting partner.

The Line: Adventure Canada

The Boma: Top-Notch in Our Own Backyard

Adventure Canada cruise line, in Torngat Mountains National Park, Newfoundland and Labrador. Photo: Dennis Minty

Family owned Adventure Canada offers expedition cruises aboard Ocean Endeavour to the Arctic, Antarctic, Canada, South and Central America and Europe. The majority of clients are age 60 plus, with an adventurous spirit. Guests with very limited mobility who use canes and walkers are welcome, and kindly should be able to navigate at least one flight of stairs.

Wheelchairs cannot be accommodated on the vessel.

A variety of guided experiences are available in destinations and range in difficulty and distance to assist guests in choosing appropriate excursions. With everything from beachcomber walks to challenging 10-km hikes, passengers are between into smaller groups for the best experience.

While cabins are not accessible, they have walk in showers and safety grab bars for stability and lots of room to move around comfortably.

Tips:

If you are dreaming of an expedition cruise to a polar region or another far flung destination check with the cruise lines on how they can assist in turning your dreams into reality. Be sure to request passport forms so that you can understand the restrictions before booking travel, and remember to ask ahead of time if crew staff are available to assist with embarkation and disembarkation.

For travellers with an adventurous spirit, be realistic about your abilities while making your expedition experience as challenging and enriching as you can. Many of the destinations and wildlife experiences on expedition cruise ships cannot be enjoyed from the lounge and decks on the ship.

Before you overpack, check with the cruise line. Many expedition cruise companies offer a range of complimentary expedition gear, including parka, backpack, water bottle, use of boots, waterproof pants and walking poles for use during the cruise; some of the perkas are yours to take home after your adventure!

New expedition ships are being introduced each year by cruise lines. Your travel agent can provide the most current options.

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