

Hanseatic Review

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<http://www.cruisecritic.com/reviews/review.cfm?ShipID=622>

Think you have to give up creature comforts to commune with nature on an expedition cruise? Think again. Hapag-Lloyd Cruises, a German line, combines adventure in some of the most far-flung regions of the world with luxury aboard its MS Hanseatic, the only Berlitz-rated five-star expedition vessel afloat.

Hanseatic's small size and sturdy hull, with the highest passenger-ship ice-class rating (E4), allow it to poke into remote corners of the Arctic and Antarctic in season. At other times of the year, it roams the globe, cruising the Amazon River, the South Seas, Indian Ocean and coasts of Europe, Asia and the Americas. Ports of call range from popular stops to the little-known, including some that have never been visited by a cruise ship.

In larger ports, the ship docks at piers or transports passengers by tender. To access wilderness areas, a fleet of 14 Zodiacs is deployed. These motorized, rubber rafts take 8 to 10 passengers to view animals and scenery, making dry landings at docks and wet landings on shore, where passengers climb out into shallow surf. Rubber boots, as well as parkas in cold climates, are provided. You might bundle up to walk among the penguins on the Antarctic Peninsula before returning to the ship to sip Champagne. This is roughing it?

Unlike many other expedition vessels -- notably the Russian research ships chartered by some expedition operators in the Antarctic -- Hanseatic provides the comforts and luxuries of a top-notch luxury liner. You are pampered with fine cuisine, exceptional service and roomy staterooms. It's the little things -- like live orchid plants that bloom in cabins and public areas, servers who offer hot towels and cool drinks to passengers returning from excursions and overnight shoe-polishing service -- that push this ship into the top category.

And yet, the atmosphere is surprisingly laid-back. The crew manages to provide an experience that is elegant and sophisticated, without being stiff or formal.

As on any expedition cruise, the emphasis is on learning about the animal life, the people and the geography of the cruise destination. Hanseatic employs a team of experts and insiders to give lectures onboard and to guide shore landings.

One of four vessels of the cruise division of Hapag-Lloyd, the German cargo shipping company, Hanseatic's official language is German, though the entire crew speaks English. About a dozen bilingual cruises are offered a year, offering documentation, daily programs, menus, shore excursions, announcements and lectures in English. While the overwhelming number of passengers onboard these cruises speak German, the camaraderie of a small ship cuts through any language barrier. Nods, smiles and wishes of *guten morgen* (good morning) abound. Those who count English among their other languages are happy to converse. And, because passengers who sign on for expedition cruises tend to have adventurous spirits and a keen intellectual curiosity, they soon find common ground.

Hanseatic Fellow Passengers

My cruise through eastern Canada carried 141 passengers, including four from the U.S., 10 from Canada, two from England, 97 from Germany and the remainder from a smattering of other European countries. The nationality breakdown varies per cruise, but on average, about 10 percent of the passengers on bilingual itineraries speak English (Americans, Canadians, British, Australians). The average age on my cruise was about 70. On more active expeditions, such as those in Antarctica, the average is around 60.

Hanseatic Dress Code

Clothing is more casual on this expedition vessel than on Hapag-Lloyd's other five-star ship, Europa. Jeans, hiking pants, collared shirts and sweaters are the daytime norm. Most evenings are designated "casual/elegant," which women on my cruise interpreted as slacks, skirts or dresses. Several men wore sport coats, and a few opted for ties. On the two formal nights, there were no ballgowns and only a handful of tuxedos.

Hanseatic Gratuity

Tips are included in the cruise cost. However, nearly all passengers give something to their dining room servers and cabin stewards. Currency onboard is the euro.

Hanseatic Cabins

Staterooms come in two configurations: standard cabins (237 square feet) and suites (474 square feet). Cabins 321 and 322 are modified for disabled passengers. Though all are outside cabins, none have balconies. Cabins 401 to 424 have portholes, while the remainder have panoramic windows.

The neutral color scheme of beige and brown is set off nicely by honey-colored wood cabinets and closets. I had ample space for the range of items needed on an expedition cruise, from hiking boots to formal wear. Bathrobes and slippers are provided. Beds can be configured in twin or queen size. The sitting area has a sofa, desk, chair and table (large enough for dinner for two) with flowers and fresh fruit. On arrival, you receive a small bottle of Champagne, backpack and an additional gift, which varies according to the expedition. Mine was a pair of binoculars.

The TV, with programming in German and English, doubles as an Internet access point with a wireless keyboard to log on to your personal e-mail account onboard, which is complimentary. When within satellite range, you can also connect to the Internet or access Wi-Fi (additional charge) on your own laptop, or borrow one of the ship's three laptops from reception. You can access menus, the daily program, your shipboard account and information on services and shore excursions through your TV. A small selection of classic and nature movies is available on demand. Sadly, there is no news channel.

Bathrooms have pearl and gray marble walls, pink granite countertops and floors, and ample cabinet space. Bowing to passenger demand, bathtubs have been removed, leaving roomy granite showers with drop-down seats and handheld showerheads. Toiletries are Crabtree & Evelyn and include soap, lotion, body wash, shampoo, conditioner, a loofah mit, a nail file, a utility kit and a shower cap.

Standard cabins come with mini-bars stocked with complimentary soft drinks and juices. Beer is added in Category 5 Explorer Deck cabins; Bridge Deck cabins also get cognac, grappa, Pear William brandy, whiskey and port, and suites get gin and vodka in addition to all the aforementioned liquors.

The four suites have bathtubs, separate showers and double sinks. Both suites and Bridge Deck cabins contain a wider variety of toiletries. Suites have about twice the closet space of standard cabins, as well as safes. The sitting rooms each have two windows and a sectional sofa that wraps around a large table. In one configuration, the bedroom is separate from the sitting room. Suites and Bridge Deck cabins come with personal butlers who will unpack bags, iron clothes and provide cut fruit, cocktail snacks, petit fours and -- upon boarding -- Champagne and caviar.

Hanseatic Dining

White tablecloths and Rosenthal china appear at every meal in the ship's two dining rooms, the Marco Polo Restaurant and Columbus Lounge, where five-star service shines. Servers are attentive and amiable but not overbearing.

Breakfast, which begins with coffee and pastries at 6:30 a.m. for early risers, transitions into a buffet and plated meals served until 10 a.m. Sparkling wine is complimentary if you wish to start the day with a mimosa. In addition to the usual eggs, breakfast meats, cereal, fruit and yogurt, there is a German-style array of ham and cold-cuts, salmon and cheese. Fresh-baked waffles, French toast and pancakes are made to order, as are steak and lamb chops.

At lunch, with open seating in both venues, you can stroll in pretty much any time between 12 and 2 p.m. There's a buffet and menu of plated dishes with starters and salads, soups, three or four main courses, desserts and coffee. I particularly remember the crispy honey-chili duck from the carving station during an Asian-themed buffet lunch.

Dinner in Marco Polo is always a lavish affair with one seating at assigned tables, usually beginning at 7 p.m. No two menus are the same during a cruise, but they always include a selection of starters, soup, an "in between" dish, sherbet, at least two main dishes, a cheese cart, at least two desserts and tea or coffee served with a plate of chocolates and cookies. On a whim, the chef might also whip up an amuse-bouche to begin the meal.

The ship is small enough and the chef versatile enough to incorporate fresh local ingredients -- such as lobster, salmon and crab bought directly from fishing boats -- into the menu. Some memorable dishes on my cruise were beef tenderloin with grilled foie gras, fresh lobster tail, rack of lamb, smoked eel with caviar dill sauce and a poppy seed souffle with blueberry sauce. If none of the evening's offerings appeals, you can choose from the a la carte menu, which features standards like shrimp cocktail, Caesar salad and beef, fish and pasta main courses.

While there are no separate low-calorie or low-fat meals, a vegetarian dish appears on every menu.

On about half of the evenings, an alternative dinner is offered -- at no additional charge -- in the Columbus Lounge, and it's based on an ethnic theme. My maritime Canada cruise offered an inventive "Trail of the Vikings" theme, featuring wild game. Another offered the "Best of Newfoundland." Hours are the same as in the main restaurant, but space is limited. Reservations are necessary.

The extensive wine list has vintages from nearly every wine-growing region of the world. Prices range from about 14 to 160 euros (Champagne). By the glass, prices are usually less than three euros.

Dinner service is practiced and professional. Most of the staff has graduated from hotel school and has worked at five-star properties. With the precision of a Swiss watch, they appear at tables to serve and clear courses in unison. They often remember diners' names and preferences. Passengers celebrating birthdays are serenaded and served complimentary chocolate tortes. As guests leave the dining room, the maitre d' bids them a good evening and offers cubes of ginger.

Cabin service is available 24 hours a day, and it arrives promptly. Order from the restaurant menu during regular meal hours, or choose from a cabin service menu that includes smoked salmon, burgers and sandwiches, salad, pasta, cheese and fruit plates, ice cream and cookies. Caviar is an additional charge. A hang tag for full or continental breakfast can be placed on your door each night before retiring.

An elegant tea is laid out every afternoon, and a Late Night Snack is available at 10:30 p.m. in either the Explorer Lounge or Observation Lounge.

Hanseatic Entertainment

Hanseatic distinguishes itself by its Zodiac offerings, which are included in the cruise cost. In addition to scheduled excursions, the rafts are sometimes lowered for afternoon cruises. On one such occasion in Newfoundland, we cruised along dramatic rock cliffs before approaching a lobster boat for what we assumed was a quick look-see. Surprise! The ship's hotel manager and maitre d' were aboard to hand out glasses of Champagne. (Sadly, we didn't get to eat any fresh lobster that day.) It was a five-star experience, indeed.

Not only does the crew commandeer lobster boats to amuse its passengers, it often sets up special events on shore. Local entertainers might be on hand to greet passengers as they step on the pier, or the ship's own musicians might give a concert in an unusual venue. In Newfoundland, arrangements were made to have one of the province's oldest wooden churches opened for a midday performance of classical music. In small ports, the ship makes arrangements with local attractions, such as museums or aquariums, to admit passengers at no charge.

Onboard, daytime activities emphasize learning, featuring lectures by scientists, historians or other experts on the destination. Lectures are given in Darwin Hall, an 85-seat auditorium, or the Explorer Lounge, a multipurpose lounge with a bar and a dance floor. Other options include sailaway parties, tours of the engine room and visits to the bridge. Unlike many vessels where the bridge is strictly off limits, the captain has an open-door policy, except when navigation gets tricky.

Evening entertainment is low-key -- no big theatrical productions here and no casino. A classical pianist plays during cocktail hour in the Observation Lounge. Musical groups give concerts, and a band plays dance music after dinner in the Explorer Lounge. Passengers retire early. By midnight, there usually aren't enough folks milling about to fill even a single Zodiac.

Organized shore excursions are a mix of walking, bus and boat tours; guided hikes; kayaking and catamaran excursions, all for additional charge. Cruise literature discloses which tours are offered in English. Shore excursions range in price from about 25 to 140 euros, and those offered in English are generally a good value. In wilderness areas, they cover territory that would be difficult to access on your own.

Editor's note: *On more than one occasion, a tour sold as English-speaking morphed into German if the guide spoke German and the majority of participants were German speakers. In these cases, the English speakers were pulled aside and given a summary of the guide's presentation.*

Hanseatic Public Rooms

A collection of stunning black-and-white photographs of animals and landscapes hangs in the public spaces, as well as the cabins. These images of penguins, polar bears, icebergs and isolated coves -- taken in the destinations the ship visits -- draw oohs and ahhs and fuel the sense of adventure onboard.

The Observation Lounge, perched above the bridge, has wraparound views, a library with a small selection of books in English and two computer stations with Internet access when within satellite range (0.19 cents a minute). The room also has wireless access at the same rate for personal laptops, as does the Explorer Lounge. An additional computer station is located in a cubicle off the reception area.

Editor's note: *While many cruise ships serving the U.S. market now forbid smoking indoors, Hanseatic allows it on deck and in designated areas of two lounges. It is not allowed in dining areas. One wonders how strictly the restriction against smoking in cabins is enforced, given the mild tone of signage in staterooms: "We'd like to ask you not to smoke in the cabin."*

A small boutique sells clothing, jewelry and perfume.

Hanseatic Family

While children are allowed onboard, there are no facilities specifically for children. The ship does carry children's life jackets, however. As an expedition vessel, the focus is on academics on the adult level, and many destinations are not appropriate for children. For example, a 21-day expedition in the Arctic might not work with a 4-year-old. If the booking team sees a child booked on a cruise, it will check with the client to ensure that the child is able to sit in a Zodiac on his own and hold tight to the Zodiac ropes.

Hanseatic Spa & Fitness

While there is no spa, massages can be arranged by appointment, and a sauna has posted hours for men, women and mixed groups. There is a tanning bed and fitness room equipped with a treadmill, stationary bike, elliptical, step and rowing equipment, free weights and yoga mats. Gymnastics classes occasionally are offered in the Explorer Lounge; there's no outdoor walking/jogging track. A separate beauty salon offers hair and nail care.

The heated pool isn't large enough for laps, but there's room for a dip, followed by sunning in a deck chair. A whirlpool is enclosed in a glass bubble nearby.

Bicycles can be borrowed for explorations on shore. Snorkeling gear, walking sticks and fishing tackle are provided where appropriate.