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As Small-Ship Adventure Cruises Continue to Increase in Popularity, Here's What's New in 2026

From brand new ships to immersive travel experiences in far flung locales, AdventureSmith Explorations curates the best trips for expedition-minded travelers

TRUCKEE, Calif. (Sept. 15, 2025) - As interest in small-ship expedition cruise travel continues to grow—particularly in polar and warmer weather destinations—AdventureSmith Explorations, the leader in [small-ship adventure cruises](#) reports there are new ships, trips, and experiences for travelers in 2026. From new ships with modern amenities to longer-duration itineraries and a greater focus on wellness and sustainability, there are a myriad of trip options for travelers seeking intimate, personalized, and immersive experiences around the globe.

“There certainly are some exciting developments for small ships in 2026,” said Todd Smith, AdventureSmith Explorations founder and president. “Following a favorite theme that smaller is better, a couple of new ship launches—including the 120-guest Connect in Europe and the 76-guest Magellan Discoverer in Antarctica—are among the smallest options in their regions. In the Galapagos Islands, small ships are going bigger on sustainability with the launch of the hybrid electric 18-guest yacht Conservation and other new builds adding solar panels and battery systems. If small and sustainable sounds good to you, there is a lot to like in 2026.”

Six new [small cruise ship](#) builds plus an extensive superyacht renovation mean travelers will have access to modern comforts, and in some cases, luxurious accommodations, when traveling aboard small-ship expeditions in 2026 and beyond. Plus, new routes in popular cruise destinations are offering unique experiences for adventurous travelers. Here are the highlights:

Antarctica

Antarctic expeditions are more in-depth and farther afield in 2026 than ever thanks to three epic itineraries at the start of the year: The 34-day [Antarctic Odyssey](#) and 24- to 25-day [East Antarctica & Ross Sea routes](#) aboard the brand new, 154-guest [Douglas Mawson](#). And the 31-day [Unexplored Antarctica](#) expedition aboard the 200-guest hybrid-electric [Le Commandant Charcot](#), which returns to the Antarctic after a full season away.

EXPEDITION CRUISES & WILDERNESS ADVENTURES

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Demand continues to increase for shorter routes via [air cruise](#) operations in Antarctica. The new [Magellan Discoverer](#) launching in December 2026 will help accommodate this fast-growing travel trend while also being in a league of its own. Hosting just 76 guests per air cruise (96 for other expeditions) and built in Chile, it will be South America's first hybrid-electric polar cruise ship and among the smallest ships sailing in Antarctica.

In [2026, Antarctica cruises](#) will also welcome more routes to Snow Hill and the Weddell Sea region, new [Antarctica by helicopter](#) itineraries, and an air cruise route that travels to [South Georgia](#) after a season without that option.

The Mediterranean

After the [Douglas Mawson](#) expedition ship launches in Antarctica and Australia, it spends time in Costa Rica and the British Isles, before positioning for 11 new [Mediterranean cruises](#) in 2026. These are some of the most interesting multi-country routes from a small ship in the region, and include guided days in Marrakech, the Canary Islands, Malta, Marseille, and other unique ports. For one of many examples, see the ship's 14-day [Canary Islands to Lisbon Cruise](#).

The Arctic

Explorers seeking [Arctic cruises](#) will have access to a variety of new routes and exposure to the far reaches of the polar region in 2026. Find multiple new Iceland cruises, including some with long hikes and shore cleanings, and an [Iceland Circumnavigation cruise](#) that incorporates helicopters to see glaciers and volcanoes. But the biggest news here for the year is all the new [solar eclipse cruise](#) routes that have been designed to position expedition ships (10 of them) in the path of the August 12th total solar eclipse.

Galapagos Islands

For [2026 Galapagos cruises](#), three new-build ships will debut including the only hybrid-electric ship there, the 18-guest [Conservation](#), which will join a long-trusted operator's fleet of historic, luxury ships. And, from one of the region's top women-owned operators come two new ships: the 16-guest [Monique](#), designed to incorporate both elegance and sustainably-minded features like solar panels and lithium batteries, and the 16-guest [Grand Ocean Spray](#), a carbon-neutral yacht that blends modern luxury (each suite with a private balcony) with environmental responsibility.

Seychelles & Tanzania

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The extensively renovated 30-guest superyacht [Aqua Lares](#) is among the year's most exciting ship launches. Setting sail February 2026, the ship is East Africa's first superyacht to offer both private charters and individual cabin bookings. Aqua Lares will take travelers to exotic locales in East Africa including the Seychelles' Inner and Outer Islands and Tanzania's Zanzibar archipelago on 6- to 15-day routes.

Small-ship River Cruising in Holland & Belgium

Ushering in a new era of river cruising on a smaller, purpose-built ship for guided, immersive expedition-style travel, the 120-guest [Connect](#) will set sail in March 2026 for Holland and Belgium along the Rhine River. The ship's staterooms feature smart glass and stunning floor-to-ceiling views, with a flexible design so that every room can be converted into a two-room suite. Unique experiences will include a Jewish history tour guided by Holocaust survivors and after-hours museum tours.

Alaska

Travelers interested in a [2026 Alaska small-ship cruise](#) have a new option with a new 8-day trip through [Southeast Alaska's ABC Islands](#) aboard the 62-guest National Geographic Sea Lion. For those who want to explore farther afield, a new remote [Gulf of Alaska cruise](#) goes where few small ships sail. Plus, a handful of popular itineraries have also been reimagined for 2026, including new 8-day [Sea Wolf Southeast Alaska Adventure](#) routes and 14-day trips on the [Great Bear Rainforest Cruise](#), now featuring four days in Alaska as compared to the previous single day.

Travel Booking Tips

- **Book early for 2027.** Expedition cruise routes are already being set, and some key routes to unique destinations are already sold out for 2026, so book early for coveted sailings—especially those occurring in the first half of the year. An example is the 138-guest [National Geographic Resolution](#) sailing to Tahiti and the Pacific Islands for the first time in March of 2027.
- **Early-booking deals.** Many early-booking deals for 2026 expire soon, so don't wait to book. An example is the return of the 66-guest Safari Voyager to Costa Rica in October 2026, bringing a newly designed 8-day [Pure Life Adventure Cruise](#) route. This popular option has special inaugural pricing that expires on September 30, 2025.
- **Consider charter cruises.** AdventureSmith's partnerships include the ability to book [charter cruises](#) in sought-after destinations, some for as few as four guests.



Learn about AdventureSmith's cruises and overland tours online at adventuresmithexplorations.com or by calling their travel specialists at 866-575-2875.

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About AdventureSmith Explorations

Founded in 2003, AdventureSmith Explorations is the global leader in small ship, adventure cruise vacations. Pioneering sustainable travel practices, AdventureSmith founder Todd Smith has been recognized among Condé Nast Traveler's prestigious Top Travel Specialists for 12 consecutive years. The company has also been awarded a Condé Nast Traveler World Savers Award, recognized as one of the "Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth" by National Geographic Adventure, named among Outside's Best Places to Work in 2024, and is Sunset Magazine's "How to Get There" and "Best Cruises" 2025 Travel Award winner. AdventureSmith was also named on the 2025 Inc. 5000 List of Fastest Growing Companies. Learn more and book an expedition at adventuresmithexplorations.com or by calling 866-575-2875.

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