

ICE CLAIMS ANTARCTIC CRUISE SHIP

BY MARK BARRATT-BOYES



Passengers were transferred onto a large ice floe



The Explorer foundering off the southern Shetland Island



The adventure cruise ship Explorer sinks after hitting ice in Antarctica. (Photo credits: AP/Chilean Navy)

A flag-state investigation has begun on the sinking of the adventure cruise ship *Explorer* in Antarctica after she hit ice on November 23 and sank. She was about 880km southeast of Ushuaia, Argentina's southernmost city.

Gap Adventures, which owns the ship and organised the voyage, said 91 passengers, nine guides and 54 crew members were evacuated to lifeboats. They spent several hours bobbing on the sea amid sheets of ice before crew from the Norwegian cruise ship *Nordnorge* plucked them to safety and transferred them to a military barracks on King George Island.

A military plane later transported them to Punta Arenas, Chile, from where they were flown home. The captain and the chief officer were understood to have initially remained on board the ship.

The *MS Explorer* had been registered with Liberia since 1989. "The organisation is seeking to determine the relevant facts and root cause of the incident prior to issuing a report," said the chief operating officer of the Liberian International Ship and Corporate Registry, Scott Bergeron.

He confirmed that the United Kingdom's Marine Accident Investigation Branch had expressed an interest in taking part in the investigation because several British passengers had been on board.

As well as 23 Britons, there were 17 Dutch, 13 Americans, 10 Australians, 10 Canadians and about eight other nationalities on board, said Gap Adventures.

The group had embarked from Ushuaia on November 11 for the 19-day Spirit of Shackleton cruise through Drake Passage, costing from around £3900 per cabin.

The *Explorer* ran into trouble approximately 120km north of the Antarctic Peninsula while ploughing through an ice floe some time around midnight. Just as they were about to exit the ice floe she ploughed into the very last growler, which punctured a fist-sized hole in the starboard side of the hull.

"We were passing through ice as usual, but this time something hit the hold and we got a little leakage downstairs," said the *Explorer's* 1st officer, Peter Swenson. "No-one was hysterical,

they were just sitting there nice and quiet, because we knew there were ships coming."

Most of the passengers were asleep in their cabins on deck three, and one was reported to have woken up at the sound of the ice hitting, and heard trickling like a tap was running.

Soon there was water on his floor. The passenger went to find a crewmember, who came down, tasted salt water and knew immediately that they had a problem. Water was soon flooding the third deck and the passengers started clearing the floor of their belongings.

The ship listed 30 degrees and pumps had been used unsuccessfully in an effort to stop the ship from sinking.

Although the weather was good for the time of year, the average temperature was still -5 degrees Celsius.

The captain, who is believed to be Swedish, ordered everyone to their muster stations and gave the order, "Abandon ship!" some time around 0100.

Passengers said the ship was listing badly and the crew had trouble lowering the four lifeboats and expedition dinghies, as the electricity had gone out, and they had to start the diesel that ran the lifeboat system by hand cranking it.

Dawn broke at around 0300 and when the *Nordnorge* arrived the lifeboats were scattered around the sea. The rescue was made in Antarctic Sound, about a two to three-hour sail southeast of the South Shetland Islands, in ideal conditions, with winds of five knots and calm seas.

The *MS Nordnorge's* rescue crew was said to be highly trained, and the entire rescue was completed by about 0730. The ship waited for a Brazilian Navy patrol boat to arrive at the scene before departing.

The wind began picking up shortly after the *Nordnorge* began steaming to the South Shetland Islands, where there were both Chilean and Russian scientific stations on King George Island, plus an airstrip and facilities for offloading the passengers.

"When we arrived at Maxwell Bay at 1330, the weather had really deteriorated. We had 40 knot winds and driving snow," said a passenger on the *Nordnorge*.

An English passenger on the *Explorer*, Gillian Plant, aged 40, praised her ship's captain for the way the evacuation was handled. "There was no panic at all and no injuries. Everybody is perfect, no bruises, no scratches."

She said the evacuees, who were all wearing protective suits, passed the four-and-a-half-hour wait to be rescued by watching for whales. However, Paola Palavecino, an ornithologist on board the *Nordnorge*, said four of those rescued had suffered from moderate hypothermia but recovered after being given additional warm clothes and eating a hot meal.

According to Lloyds List, the *Explorer* had five "deficiencies" following an inspection in May at Greenock, Scotland, by the United Kingdom's Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

Watertight doors were described as "not as required", while lifeboat maintenance problems and missing search and rescue plans were also noted. All the faults had been rectified by the time the ship set sail again. The MCA said it was informed at 0524 GMT on Friday of the incident involving the 2400-tonne vessel.

The vice-president of marketing for Gap Adventures, Susan Hayes, said Chilean port inspectors had also found six deficiencies during an inspection in Puerto Natales in March, including two related to navigation matters. The ship was passed as fit for sea by inspectors in October before the season began.

The classification society Det Norske Veritas had issued a passenger safety certificate for the vessel on October 21, the MCA said.

According to Lloyds List, the Falkland Islands is expecting its busiest cruise season during this southern hemisphere summer, with 113 cruise ships calling into the capital city of Stanley. All the ships are on cruises to Antarctica, taking in South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. Over 81,000 passengers are expected to visit the islands, up nearly 60 percent on last year.

Earlier this year, the Royal Navy's Antarctic Patrol Ship *HMS Endurance* completed a major hydrographic survey of the area to update Admiralty Charts.

The ship's crew surveyed 15,500km of seabed, mostly uncharted waters in the Antarctic Peninsula, and forwarded the data to the UK Hydrographic Office in Taunton to incorporate into new navigation charts.

The *Endurance's* commanding officer, Captain Bob Tarrant, told Lloyd's List that, "the survey work just completed by my ship will be a major factor in increasing cruise ship safety in Antarctica."

The *Endurance* sailed from Portsmouth on November 28 for a further 18-month deployment in Antarctica to carry out more surveys.

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