

TRAVEL

Shipping out:

Cargo carriers offer travelers low prices on the high seas

By Dave Houser
Special writer

I recently heard a feisty, sun-tanned gent of considerable years exclaim to a travel agent, "I wouldn't go on a cruise ship if they paid me!"

There are many such adventurers who aren't swayed by love boats, lavish reviews, and ports-of-call bristling with fancy boutiques. They go off-beat instead. There are a surprising number of ships out there that break the cruise-ship mold and enough exotic itineraries to satisfy your Magellan urge.

Passengers have been bunking down on cargo-carrying ships since Phoenician times, but the sentimental vision of stowing away on a rusty old tramp steamer bound for banana land is outdated.

Today's cargo vessels are modern container ships with a few comfortable, roomy cabins. Some of the newest ships boast swimming pools, lounges, libraries and other amenities.

Freighter travel has also become more expensive. "Gone is the era of the \$10- or \$20-per-day fare on freighters," said Mary LeBlanc, president of Freighter World Cruises Inc., a Pasadena, Calif. travel company that serves as a passenger agent for 15 steamship lines.

LeBlanc points out that the current per diem range of \$75 to \$150 for most freighters is "about half of what you'd pay for space on a typical cruise ship and still represents one of the best values in today's travel market."

Three major elements distinguish freighter travel from cargo liners and cruise ships.

- Typical freighter itineraries are 30-70 days, with extended stretches on the open sea. Shorter segments can be booked on some ships, a few in the 10-20-day range.

- Freighters usually call at fewer and much different ports than their cruise ship cousins. They stay a day or two while cargo is transferred, not at fancy cruise terminals, but at dingy loading docks in commercial harbors not noted for their scenic splendor.

- Most freighters accommodate 12 or fewer guests. More passengers would force the line to carry a medical doctor and additional stewards. It also means more amenities, such as those found in the Americana and the Aranui, listed below.

- The Americana is the world's most luxurious passenger freighter. Purists may not go for the pampering or the price but it's a romantic introduction to the world of freighter travel.

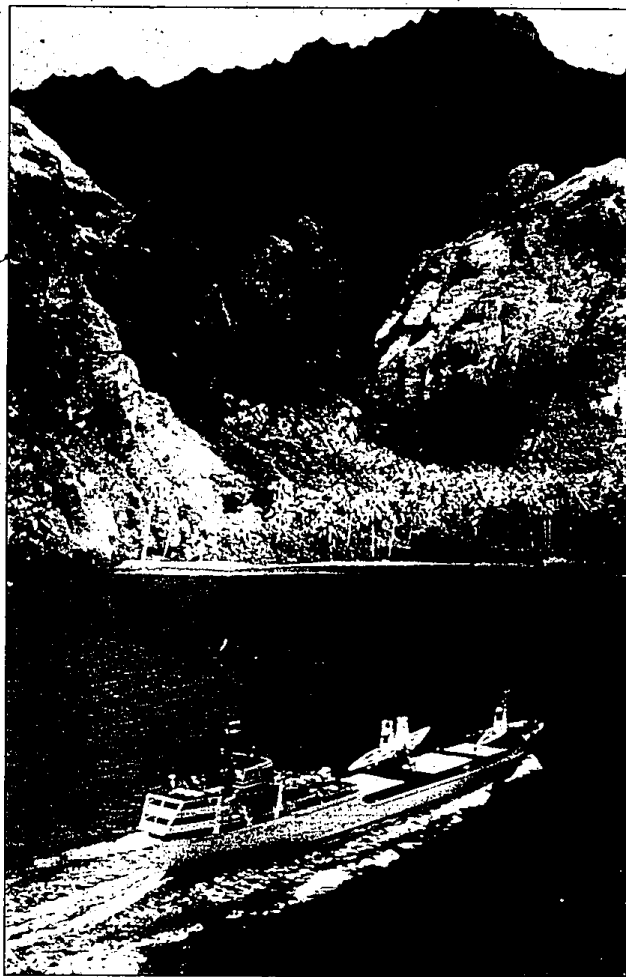
This 578-foot beauty totes 1,100 cargo containers on her foredeck and 88 passengers in a four-story aft-deck hotel complex, with swimming pool, bar and lounge, gymnasium, library and beauty salon.

Designed by the same firm responsible for the ultra-luxurious Sea Goddess and Seabourn cruises, and introduced in 1988, Americana sails a 46-day round-trip schedule between New York and Buenos Aires.

Calling at more than a dozen ports — including Miami, Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo and lesser known Brazilian ports such as Fortaleza, Bahia and Itajai — Americana explores South America's eastern seaboard in style.

Fares range from \$150 to \$250 per day depending upon cabin choice and season. Shorter segments are available, as are optional, escorted excursions from most ports. For more information, write to Ivaran Agencies Inc., One Exchange Plaza, New York, NY 10006, or call (800) 451-1639.

- The Aranui may be the freighter for you if exotic destinations are your dream. This burly 343-foot German-built island trader sails 15 times a year from Tahiti to the Marquesas Islands, hauling out building supplies and baby food and returning home with copra, the dried meat derived from coconuts.



The Aranui, a burly 343-foot German-built island trader, approaches Fatu Hiva in the Marquesas Islands, the island chain farthest from any continent.



Passengers relax on the sundeck during Narvik's Norwegian coastal cruise.

DAVE G. HOUSER

Smaller ships find their way to adventure in exotic ports of call

By Dave Houser
Special writer

Running counter to the cruise industry's mega-ship trend has been the steady introduction of compact, highly maneuverable, shallow-draft vessels. Many are specially designed for exploring remote regions of the globe where larger cruise ships can't go.

Limited to fewer than 150 passengers in most cases, this new breed of mini-cruiser seems just the answer for travelers with a special interest in natural science, the environment or foreign cultures. Some outstanding examples:

- No ocean, sea or navigable river is too remote or too challenging for Society Explorer and World Discoverer. This gritty pair of expedition passenger ships is employed by Seattle-based Society Expeditions in its globe-spanning programs of enlightenment and adventure.

Reviewing the accomplishments amassed by these venturesome vessels is akin to reading from the pages of a Thor Heyerdahl account. Society Explorer (the world's first expedition passenger ship, introduced in

1969 as Lindblad Explorer) has sailed the farthest north and south of any ship, save icebreakers.

It was the first cruise vessel to call in the Amazon region of Indonesian New Guinea and the first ever to complete a crossing of the Northeast passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific. World Discoverer, incidentally, was the first to thread the ice-choked passage the other way around.

This dynamic duo will be joined in 1991 by a state-of-the-art expedition ship, the 160-passenger Society Adventurer. Collectively Society's ships will continue to skirt the bounds of ordinary travel to explore places mass tourism may never reach.

You can visit Antarctica or the Amazon, Borneo or the Baffin Islands aboard ships so sophisticated you can call home via satellite and, with comforts and conveniences you may not even have at home, including a swimming pool, sauna, beauty salon, gift shop, clinic and multi-media lecture room.

Every Society Expedition cruise is staffed by naturalist-guides who zip you ashore in versatile Zodiacs and

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IRIS SANDERSON JONES

Choice abounds in freighter market

Should you consider freighter travel and if so, which ship? I asked Ed Kirk, president of the Travelers Cruise and Freighter Travel Association in New York.

"A traditional freighter carries 12 passengers or less. If they carry more they must have a doctor aboard. They include good-sized outside cabins with private facilities and a ship's lounge with a television set, VCR, small library and games.

"Most have a pantry and an honor system bar. Passengers dine in the officer's dining room. Each line has its own protocol. Officers either eat with the passengers or at separate tables in the same dining room. They eat the same food, which is plentiful and varied but not gourmet.

"Activities are unorganized. You are on your own; no cruise director. One officer may assist with sightseeing in a port, but there are no cruise-type shore excursions. The ships have deck chairs, maybe some ping pong or shuffleboard.

"You can travel to South America, the Far East, the Mediterranean, Africa, Europe. Short trips across the Atlantic are two weeks one way. Others are four weeks and up. Sailing around the world takes 150 days.

"Americans sail from the east or west coasts or the Gulf. This is not a way to go from point A to point B. Passengers are either retired or have very flexible time schedules."

Examples?

"A popular route is on Cast Line from Montreal to Antwerp, Belgium. It takes 12 days one way, 32 days round trip, and it stops at a St. Lawrence River port and in Antwerp. Cost is \$1,995 per person double or single one way. The return costs \$1,695, then round trip \$3,690. You can use the hotel for the four to seven days (the boat) is in Antwerp.

"A 10-week round trip to Australia/New Zealand on the Columbus Line leaves Charleston, S.C., stops in New Orleans, goes through the Panama Canal, spends two weeks crossing the Pacific Ocean and stops in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, Australia, as well as Auckland, Wellington and Port Chalmers, New Zealand.

"That trip costs \$5,900 per person double-occupancy, \$7,370 single, one way for the 25-30 days from Charleston to Melbourne; \$3,825 double and \$4,350 single for the 70 day round trip."

The best bargain?

"The least expensive is on the Lykes Line which goes from New Orleans through the Panama Canal to the west coast of South America: Ecuador, Chile, Peru, Columbia. That's 30-40 days for \$3,500 per person double-occupancy.

"That's the least luxurious, very basic, good-sized rooms but they have metal cabinets and linoleum floors and chairs that don't match. Clean but basic."

Your recommendation?

"The Ivaran Lines have two ships, the Salvador and the Santa Fe, who leave out of Houston for the east coast of South America: Rio de Janeiro and Santos, Brazil; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Montevideo, Uruguay. They go north to Paranaque, Brazil and into the Caribbean to Barbados, Puerto Rico and San to Domingo.

"That trip costs \$6,000 double or \$6,450 single for 30 days. It's the best 12-passenger service to South America and includes a plunge pool and a lounge.

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Local woman enjoys riding the freighters

Kathy Wentz doesn't fit the demographics. A typical 1990s traveler takes weekend or weeklong trips, a few days to get away from it all. That's all the job allows for most of us.

Kathy Wentz understands that the job gets in the way of a good travel adventure, so when the going gets tough she quits her job so that she can do justice to her travel dreams. It's the only way she can do it right.

Doing it right means traveling to Easter Island or up the Yangtze River, but most of all it means traveling by freighter. No three-day weekends here. Three-month grand tours of Europe. Forty-two days down the coast of southeast Asia to Australia. Doing it right.

"My sister took a passenger freighter to Norway when I was young and lived with my family in Philadelphia," Kathy said. "Our whole family flew over to meet her and my dad took a freighter home. It was inevitable that I would take a freighter someday too."

Kathy had done "a little traveling" — three months in Europe with her mother and a major cruise on a ship called the Nieuw Amsterdam — when she decided to quit her job and take a freighter across the Pacific Ocean to Australia in 1989.

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DAVE G. HOUSER

Versatile Zodiac rafts transfer Society Expeditions Explorer passengers ashore on the remote Chilean island of Isla Pajares

No ocean, sea or navigable river is too remote or too challenging.