

Achieving onboard excellence in expedition cruising

Jon Ingleton discusses the benefits of expedition cruise operators outsourcing crewing, food and hotel management with CMI Leisure's Dietmar Wertanzl



Guests on Albatros Expeditions' ships can enjoy dining outside, giving them the chance to spot wildlife and admire the passing scenery



By [Jon Ingleton](#)
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CMI Leisure, which provides hotel management services to cruise operators, faced a common industry challenge at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Getting passengers and crew home and repositioning our ships to the Canary Islands and France was a significant undertaking when the virus hit,” says Dietmar Wertanzl, the company’s president and CEO. “At the time, no one was predicting that the world would be shut down for so long, therefore we were continuously readying ourselves for a return that never came.”

This uncertainty prompted CMI Leisure to take difficult steps to protect its business and the livelihoods of its employees. “Cash is king now and, like everyone else, we’ve had to scale down operations to make sure we survive,” says Wertanzl. “We’re also very conscious of the financial hardships that our crews are facing and we’re proud that our shipowners have stepped up and created an interest-free crew loan programme which has already helped hundreds of seafarers look after their families during this crisis.”

Now, the cruise industry is reliant on an effective global vaccination effort to prompt the restart of operations. “While the vaccine roll-out might be progressing well in many source market countries, we need it to be similarly successful in the countries that we visit and the countries that provide our crew,” explains Wertanzl. “We also need some assurances that all of the vaccinations being used will be accepted around the world. If, for example, crew members are given a vaccine that hasn’t been approved by the World Health Organization, will that ship be blocked from making international port calls?”

Restarting operations will be a lengthy process and it requires extensive planning. “Right now, we’re gearing up for a summer restart and that’s already a challenge,” says Wertanzl. “Planning the itinerary, crewing, stores and preparing the fleet is a complex series of tasks and, at the same time, you have to sell the cruise to guests. If it transpires that a summer restart isn’t possible then we may have to think about going into hibernation again.

“It’s easy to be a sunny weather captain. When storms hit us in the past we have sailed on to calmer waters, but there’s no respite from this storm anywhere in the world. Restarting operations is going to rely on the recovery of so many different nations – for our crew, passengers and ports of call.”

The continually changing travel restrictions and the lockdowns in cruise destinations around the world are making it particularly difficult for CMI Leisure to plan ahead. The

news that Canada will remain closed to cruise ships for the rest of 2021, for example, has been a significant blow. “We had planned for two ships to cruise the Great Lakes, and one to sail from Vancouver to Alaska,” says Wertanzl. “But we’re now having to rethink without answers to many of the questions we’re facing. However, we have always operated at a level way beyond compliance and we’ll continue to follow protocols that more than satisfy everyone. It’s especially important now that we eliminate the fear of travelling.”

While the Covid-19 pandemic has been challenging to navigate, it has also provided CMI Leisure with a unique opportunity to identify areas for improvement. The company has enhanced its training programmes and reviewed all of its operating processes and manuals. “Our onboarding programme for new crew members is a critical process for setting out the standards that we expect them to achieve and the way we want them to engage with passengers,” says Wertanzl. “They must live up to the brand values set by our shipowners and/or charterers to make sure that passengers get the vacation experience they’ve been promised, and we must ensure they have all the skills and knowledge they need to do this.”

In addition, the pause in operations has enabled CMI Leisure’s team to reflect on what it has achieved to date and what goals it aspires to attain in the future. “The strength of the human spirit and our natural problem-solving instincts are getting us through this crisis, in our business, in the cruise industry and in the wider world,” says Wertanzl. “And our natural penchant for travel has created a pent-up demand that will revive the industry when restrictions are lifted.”

Forging strong client relationships has always been a fundamental tenet of CMI Leisure’s business approach, and Wertanzl aims to continue building on this in the future. The benefits of this strategy are exemplified by the company’s strong partnership with Albatros Expeditions.

“Søren Rasmussen, the owner of Albatros Expeditions, is a pioneer of small-ship expedition cruising,” says Wertanzl. “He has an unrivalled depth of knowledge and an irresistible passion for this business. We are very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with him and Hans Lagerweij, the company’s president, and we treasure this special bond.”

Throughout the pandemic, CMI Leisure has been collaborating with the cruise line to design the galleys and develop the food, beverage and hotel concept for its two new expedition cruise vessels, Ocean Victory and Ocean Albatros. “We’re excited

that Albatros Expeditions is getting its first new ship this November and a second in November 2022 – both vessels will delight guests and support the company’s growth plans,” says Wertanzl. “We’ve got a special connection with these ships because we designed the galley. It’s a first for us and using all of our experience in food preparation and service to create the optimal galley arrangement has been a great privilege.”

Already well established in Scandinavia and parts of Europe, Albatros Expeditions has more recently built a strong distribution network in China to meet the nation’s appetite for Antarctica adventures. “Readying the ship to implement a new food and hotel concept can take three months, so our close relationship gives us the time and support that we need to guarantee we’re able to delight a different passenger demographic,” says Wertanzl.

“Albatros Expeditions has a team of serial innovators and we have to keep pace with the brand’s desire to refresh the food, entertainment and service concepts. If anyone in the team sees something they like and think might work on the ships, they give us a call and we analyse whether we can make it work onboard.”

Achieving and sustaining excellence in hotel management is an onerous task, but CMI Leisure relishes the daily challenge and is renowned for its expertise and attention to detail.

“Excellence is achieved by people, and recruiting and training great people is our core strength,” explains Wertanzl. “We take charge of the entire hotel management operation, planning every detail, but we rely on our onboard teams to achieve the highest standards of work and service every day.”

Noting that a high-performing expedition cruise crew will turn happy passengers into brand ambassadors, he adds: “This is a competitive environment and every edge counts – if our competitors are offering a mushroom risotto, we add truffle to the risotto! That’s why we take extra care in recruitment and training so we can guarantee that our crew are prepared and willing to deliver amazing vacations.”

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