

Creating a memorable hospitality experience in adventure cruising's remote reaches



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Imagine provisioning cruise ships that operate in such far-flung areas as the Northwest Passage, Greenland and Antarctica, while providing an upscale and memorable experience with regional dishes and customizing the hospitality offering for brands that carry a wide range of nationalities, from Germans and Danes to Americans, Australians and Chinese.

That's the tall task of cruise hospitality experts CMI Leisure, the Miami-based company that provides turnkey management and concessions services to expedition and boutique cruise operators.

'It's highly complicated. You need to plan. You need to react to the weather,' CMI Leisure president Dietmar Wertanzl said. He added that 'all our actions are tied in with the local community. Think globally, act locally—"glocal"—is something we practice.'

Serving expedition ships is extra-demanding because of their remote and complex operations. In Greenland, should unexpected ice alter the course or bad weather delay the ferry carrying provisions

from Denmark, the only option is costly—air freight from Copenhagen. When a vessel leaves Ushuaia for South Georgia and Antarctica, every item that's needed for a 21-day round-trip must be on board.

Plus, the expedition cruise business is changing, placing new demands on the food and service delivery.

'Before, it was all about the destinations, People now want a different standard. They're more demanding,' according to Wertanzl. Even on an expedition, dinner becomes a main event.

Customer demand for small ships is growing, and the price point is high. Until recently, mostly older, repurposed ships made do. [The industry's appetite for building small ships is currently strong](#). China's emergence as a market for expedition travel is another factor. And people don't just want to explore the poles; there is appeal in warm-weather expeditions to places like the Amazon.

'The product is getting better with the newer ships. There is more room for growth,' Wertanzl said. He also cited increasing differentiation driven by the boom in luxury adventure, comparing that to the safari business. Many hotels currently rated 'world's best' are African safari lodges.

Like a safari, an expedition cruise is 'a once-in-a-lifetime experience,' Wertanzl said. 'It's a life-changing experience.'

The hotel product is crucial to making a memorable experience overall, and each brand has specific needs. CMI Leisure clients span the globe—Adventure Canada, Denmark's Albatros Expeditions, Australia's Aurora Expeditions, Iceland Pro Cruises, Sweden's Polar Quest, Europe's Poseidon Expeditions, the UK's Quark Expeditions and US-based Victory Cruise Lines.

Eight ships are currently under management, with more in the pipeline. [Aurora Expeditions recently selected CMI Leisure to handle hotel operations for its newbuild Greg Mortimer](#), to be delivered in 2019.

'The key is to understand each brand,' Wertanzl explained, elaborating that his company works with the operator's ideas and budget to develop and customize the branding and amenities, carrying that through in aspects like the china.

When launching Victory Cruise Lines with an older ship, founding president (now chairman) Bruce Nierenberg wanted to elevate the product through food and service. The vessel was built in 2001 with two-seating dining.

CMI Leisure created an alfresco buffet breakfast and lunch venue that transforms into a 'hot rocks' cooking experience for dinner, seating about 50 people.

'Guests love it. It's different,' Wertanzl said.

The venue will be upgraded on the new Victory II, which enters service in late July.

Victory Cruise Lines also presents themed evenings such as a lobster cookout on deck, and regional food is highlighted overall, especially fresh seafood. Wine pairings are included at lunch and dinner. Wertanzl called it 'definitely a high standard.'

Since last November Albatros Expeditions has dedicated one ship largely to Chinese travelers, and CMI Leisure supplies Chinese service personnel, reception and galley staff.

Wertanzl said Chinese are the fastest growing market segment for expedition cruising. Concerning dining, 'They like a mix. They like Western-style food but there are certain must-haves' like congee for breakfast and side dishes like sticky rice at dinner. Almost every ship CMI Leisure manages has at least one Asian chef now.

When it comes to Iceland Pro Cruises, the operator 'wants to bring Iceland on board,' so CMI Leisure developed a farm-to-table experience where a menu might feature Icelandic lamb soup, salmon marinated in Icelandic aquavit and Icelandic yogurt for dessert (as presented in the [first case study for Seatrade Cruise Global's new Cruising Innovations Theater earlier this month](#)).

Small expedition ships now provide vegetarian and even vegan options, low-calorie and gluten-free selections. Vegetarian dishes are in huge demand, in part to satisfy the expedition staff who work on board and dine with the passengers.

More variety, more specialization and more special orders are also trends. 'You have to be flexible,' Wertanzl said.

CMI Leisure employs 700 crew, most from the Philippines and Asia. Head chefs typically have European culinary education.

'Our turnover is very low. We have a very stable crew, with us for many years,' Wertanzl noted, adding they enjoy the intimacy and camaraderie of working on smaller ships—'not being a number.'

Fifteen people staff the Miami office. All department heads in operational areas, and Wertanzl himself, have seagoing cruise experience—'a must,' in his view.

CMI Leisure is part of a group led by Niels-Erik Lund, whose [SunStone Ships together with China Merchants Industry Holdings is building a fleet of expedition vessels in Shanghai](#) that will be chartered to new and existing clients. One of those is going to Aurora Expeditions, and Wertanzl expects opportunities for new contracts in the near future.

The recent years have been 'the best time we've ever seen in this segment,' he said.

Meanwhile, CMI Leisure also has several opportunities in the works to manage a mid-sized ship. As Wertanzl put it: 'With us you are not just one of many. We are a great choice for a start-up with a mid-size ship. We could be a great partner.'

He extolled CMI Leisure's 'speed to market. We are agile.' For an operator aiming to start in a six-month timeframe, 'We can do it.'

Wertanzl's background includes running Cruise West as CEO, SVP fleet operations for Celebrity Cruises, managing director of Celebrity Xpeditions, SVP hotel operations at Crystal Cruises and earlier roles with Royal Viking Line and Norwegian America Line.

'It's a lot of fun to be in the cruise industry, a very rewarding journey,' he said. 'I'm lucky, I've seen it from the small ship and large ship, publicly traded company [perspective].

'It's still a fantastic industry, and more to come.'

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