

Travel advisors say the Ocean Victory is a winner

By [Jeri Clausing](#)



The Ocean Victory is American Queen Voyages' first expedition ship. Photo Credit: Jeri Clausing

ONBOARD OCEAN VICTORY -- American Queen Voyages' new expedition ship set sail on its inaugural Alaska cruise Saturday. And if the reaction of guests and advisors on a three-day shakedown sailing from Seattle to Vancouver is any indication, it's going to be a big hit.



American Queen Voyages founder John Waggoner suits up for a Zodiac expedition. Photo Credit: Jeri Clausing

As anyone in the travel business knows, advisors and other insiders are the industry's own worst critics. So it was unusual to hear nothing but praise for the 186-passenger Ocean Voyager, which is a first-of-its-kind entrant to the popular Alaska market dominated by big ships.

There are, of course, also a number of smaller luxury and adventure brands in Alaska. But nothing quite like Ocean Victory, which just finished its first season in Antarctica, where it will sail winters under the Albatros brand.

"This is a hybrid of everything else out there," said advisor Patty Crichton, a small-ship and river cruise specialist with Alaska and Beyond. "It's a combination of expedition and the ultra-high end. This is the best of both worlds. Although it's not for people who want to get dressed up and bring out the jewels."

And that's exactly what Janet Anderson, director of cruise partnerships for the Signature consortium, said she loves.

"This is my kind of ship," she said. "It's casual luxury that really appeals to all demographics -- 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s. I'd bring my whole family."

The ship's cabins and extensive public spaces -- decorated in blue, white and gray with photos and paintings of polar wildlife and expeditions -- have the feel and amenities of a contemporary boutique hotel. There's also a small spa, fitness center, infinity pool and two outdoor hot tubs.



A stateroom on the Ocean Victory. Photo Credit: Jeri Clausing

But the real game-changer is the adventure offerings, science programs and staff.

The company has teamed up with California Polytechnic State University, the Sound Science Research Collective and Sitka Sound Science to bring experts and students aboard for daily educational lectures, hands-on science lessons and evening fireside chats. There are also "Native Voices" presentations about the region's indigenous cultures.

The ship is equipped with a fleet of Zodiacs and kayaks so guests can explore Alaska and its wildlife in places big ships can't go. And each Zodiac launch carries a pilot and naturalist to help spot wildlife and provide expertise.

"I've never seen a more passionate and knowledgeable staff," said one travel industry guest, who asked that her name not be used for fear of alienating other companies she works with.



Spotting scopes and binoculars are situated around the Ocean Victory. Photo Credit: Jeri Clausing

Indeed, while this a new market for American Queen Voyages -- best known for its paddlewheel ships that ply U.S. rivers -- the expedition team on the new ship is anything but green.

Leading the team is Peter Szyszka, who has sailed more than 130 expeditions in Antarctica and the Arctic. And most team members have at least a decade of experience in Alaska and/or Antarctica.

Besides leading the outdoor adventures, the team mingles with guests throughout the day and evening, even joining guests for meals.



The Ocean Victory in the San Juan Islands in Washington State. Photo Credit: Jeri Clausing

"They are friendly and knowledgeable," said Julie Kean, a small-ship specialist with USA River Cruises. And they're interested in making sure you experience the expedition side of it in a safe but relaxed manner -- to give confidence to people that might not have otherwise gotten on a Zodiac."

Her final verdict: "It's fantastically put together," said Kean. "I think it's going to be a huge hit -- a super huge hit!"