

# Cruise ship evacuated off Antarctica

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SANTIAGO, Chile --

A small Canadian cruise ship carrying passengers who shelled out thousands of dollars to retrace the route of a 20th century explorer struck an iceberg and sank hours later in icy waters off Antarctica. All 154 aboard, Americans among them, escaped safely.

The passengers were waiting out bad weather Saturday at a remote Chilean military base before they can be airlifted to the South American mainland.

Its reinforced hull gashed and taking on water, the MS Explorer slipped beneath the waves Friday evening, about 20 hours after its pre-dawn accident near the South Shetland Islands, the Chilean navy said.

Initial reports suggested only a small hole was punched into the hull, but the Argentine navy later said in a statement it observed "significant" damage. Photos released by the Chilean navy throughout the day showed the ship lying nearly on its side, surrounded by floating blocks of ice.

Passengers did not panic when the ship struck ice, said Andrea Salas, an Argentine crew member aboard the Explorer.

"The captain told us there was water coming in through a hole. We grabbed our main things and our coats and we got into the boats almost immediately," she told The Associated Press. "There wasn't any panic at all and luckily, everything went well. Now, after all the anxiety has passed, we can just say, 'Hey we're still alive.'"

After bobbing for hours in subfreezing temperatures aboard lifeboats and inflatable rafts, the passengers and crew members were rescued by a Norwegian cruise liner, the Nordnorge, that answered the Explorer's distress call.

"They were cold after being six hours in the lifeboats. We got them hot drinks and food and the right clothes," the Nordnorge's Capt. Arnvid Hansen told the AP.

Wearing bright orange suits to fend off the bitter temperatures, their faces reddened by a blustery storm that delayed their landing, the rescued finally disembarked Friday night on King George Island in Antarctica where they were housed on Chilean and Uruguayan military bases.

Authorities reported no injuries other than some complaints of mild hypothermia, none serious.

The 91 passengers came from more than a dozen nations, including 24 Britons, 17 Dutch, 14 Americans, 12 Canadians and 10 Australians, said Susan Hayes of G.A.P. Adventures of Toronto, which runs environmentally oriented excursions and owns the stricken MS Explorer. The ship also carried nine expedition staff members and a crew of 54.

Hansen said his ship ferried the survivors to King George Island without incident. "The rescue operation ran very smoothly," the 54-year-old captain told The Associated Press by shipboard telephone.

An Argentine rescue and command center received the first distress call at 12:30 a.m. EST Friday from the Explorer amid reports it was taking on water despite efforts to use onboard pumps, said Capt. Juan Pablo Panichini, an Argentine navy spokesman.

Throughout the day the ship listed heavily, its white superstructure and red hull starkly visible against the gray, choppy waters and overcast skies. The Chilean navy eventually lost sight of the ship and wreckage indicated it had gone under completely, according to a navy press officer who declined to be identified in accordance with department policy.

A U.S. woman said in an e-mail to family members that she witnessed the high-seas drama from aboard the Nordnorge.

"It is really scary to see a ship sinking out your porthole," said Jennifer Enders of Covina, California, who was traveling with her husband Robert. "The people were in the water in lifeboats for 4 hours and it is cold outside. We were asked to donate clothes to those coming in from the lifeboats."

The accident also left a stain of oil covering some 3,900 square yards of sea, according to the Chilean navy.

The Explorer was on a 19-day circuit of Antarctica and the Falkland Islands, letting passengers observe penguins, whales and other wildlife while getting briefings from experts on the region, according to G.A.P. The tour operator said the voyage was inspired by the Antarctic expeditions of Ernest Shackleton, an adventurer who made repeated forays there in the early 1900s. Shackleton died of a heart attack aboard his ship while trying to circumnavigate the icy continent by sea in 1922.

Operators had boasted that the Explorer - a ship only 82 yards in length with a shallow bottom and ice-hardened hull - could go places other vessels could not.

Nicknamed "The Little Red Ship," it alternated seasons between Antarctic and Arctic waters and was the first cruiser to take passengers to Antarctica and through the Northwest Passage, which connects the Pacific and Atlantic below the North Pole, according to G.A.P. Adventure's Web site.

The polar cruiser boasted a shipboard library, lecture hall, gym and sauna, as well as a crew of veteran sailors, bird experts, biologists and naturalists who would brief passengers on adventures along the way.

Hayes called media reports that the ship had an imperfect safety record exaggerated, and said it was fully certified for sailing in October.

An Argentine navy statement said the Explorer was about 475 nautical miles southeast of Ushuaia, the southernmost Argentine city and a jumping-off point for cruise ships and supply vessels for Antarctica. Seas were calm and winds light at the time of the accident, officials said.

