

# Icy Rescue as Seas Claim a Cruise Ship

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They were modern adventure travelers, following the doomed route of Sir [Ernest Shackleton](#) to the frozen ends of the earth. They paid \$7,000 to \$16,000 to cruise on a ship that had proudly plowed the [Antarctic](#) for 40 years.

The cruise ship Explorer seen from the National Geographic Endeavour, a small research vessel that was nearby.

The Explorer sent out a distress signal after it began to take in water, a spokesman for the ship's owner said.

But sometime early yesterday, the Explorer, fondly known in the maritime world as “the little red ship,” quietly struck ice.

There were the alarms, then the captain’s voice on the public address system calling the 100 passengers and the crew of about 50 to the lecture hall, according to passengers’ accounts on the radio and others relayed from rescuers and the tour operator.

In the lecture hall, they were told that water was creeping in through a fist-size hole punched into the ship’s starboard. As it flooded the grinding engine room, the power failed. The ship ceased responding.

“We all got a little nervous when the ship began to list sharply, and the lifeboats still hadn’t been lowered,” John Cartwright, a Canadian, told CBC radio.

About 1:30 a.m., the passengers climbed down ladders on the ship’s side into open lifeboats and inflatable craft. They bobbed for some four hours in the rough seas and biting winds as the sun rose and the day broadened, sandwiched between the 20-degree air and the nearly freezing waters, huddled under thin foil blankets, marking time. Their ship traced loose circles in the steely ocean.

And then a research ship and a Norwegian cruise liner that had heard the distress call approached.

“There was a long line of black rubber Zodiac boats and a handful of orange lifeboats strung out, and it was very surreal because it was a very beautiful morning with the sun glistening off the relatively calm sea,” said Jon Bowermaster, a travel writer and filmmaker who was aboard the ship, the National Geographic Endeavour, and was reached by satellite phone. “And all you could think was how relieved these people must have been when they saw these two big ships coming.”

A section of the Endeavour was dedicated to medical emergencies. But none were reported, and the Norwegian liner, the Nordnorge, ended up taking all the Explorer’s evacuees.

It was not immediately possible yesterday to reach the passengers, among them 14 Americans, 24 Britons, 12 Canadians and a smattering of other nationalities. But they were in good spirits, said Capt. Arnvid Hansen of the Nordnorge, who was reached by telephone about 10 hours after the rescue.

The weather had turned worse, he said, but despite snow and wind, the passengers had begun to leave the ship for the solid ground of King George Island. "They are healthy, no problem," he said. The authorities said they would head to Chile on Saturday, weather permitting, and from there return home.

And so the 154 people who survived a modern Titanic have fallen into that strange category of luck — the kind that would not be necessary had not horrendous bad fortune preceded it.

The accident occurred well north of the Antarctic Circle in an island chain that is part of the Antarctic peninsula, which juts close to South America and where a sharp warming of temperatures has occurred in recent years. It is prime territory for a new travel industry catering to an often young clientele enthusiastic about the wild in an age of environmental uncertainty.

The tour operator, G.A.P. Adventures, is based in Toronto, and offers cruises to the Antarctic, Greenland, Scotland and the Amazon. It normally sends a dozen cruises a year into the Antarctic, all on the Explorer.

On the "Spirit of Shackleton" tour, the passengers stopped at the Falkland Islands and South Georgia Island before heading for the tip of Antarctica. Scientists on board give lectures on wildlife, geology and [climate change](#). Their stops were to include the grave where Shackleton was buried after his fatal heart attack in 1922.

G.A.P. said it had never had an accident with one of its ships before. But in March, two Canadian women and an Australian man died after a safari van chartered by the company collided with a truck in Kenya.

The Antarctic adventure niche has its own trade group, the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators. Its members make up a growing chunk of the \$21 billion cruise industry. But regulatory authority over its members can be as confusing as in the rest of the cruise world, with a network of nations, flags and maritime rules colliding.

The Explorer is registered in Liberia. Built in Finland in 1969, it was designed to operate in Antarctic and Arctic waters, according to a spokesman for G.A.P., Dan Brown. It was small, to move swiftly through dangerous waters, and had a double bottom, a second layer of steel.

But the vessel did not have a double hull, a complete second steel sheath, the kind developed after the Titanic sank.

There appeared to be questions about its safety record. Mr. Brown said "some deficiencies" were found in tests in March in Chile and in May in Scotland. On its Web site, Lloyd's List said the British authorities had reported deficiencies, including

missing rescue plans, and lifeboat maintenance problems, while watertight doors were deemed “not as required,” and fire safety measures were also criticized.

The ship later passed a safety test with “flying colors,” the company said, and Mr. Brown said the earlier problems “were not serious enough for the boat to be taken out of use.”

The Explorer had been in trouble before, struggling in heavy Antarctic seas in the same region in February 1972 when it took on water. The passengers, mostly Americans, were rescued by the Chilean Navy. The ship was refurbished and went on to become the first passenger vessel to navigate the Northwest Passage at the other end of the globe.

On this trip, it left from Ushuaia, on the southern tip of Argentina, on Nov. 11, and was to return Thursday.

But the Explorer’s fate was sealed by yesterday afternoon, after hours of listing, awash in ice floes. Even its captain and chief officer, who had stayed to operate the bilge pumps in the hope of salvation, had long before evacuated when the Chilean Navy said the little red ship had gone down.

A few hours before, Stefan Lundgren, a member of the Endeavour staff who had also worked on the Explorer, described watching the ship fade. “For me she was a beautiful lady — boats are ladies,” he said to a reporter aboard the Endeavour. “For every new owner, she gets a new face-lift. As an old woman, she’s a tough lady. She doesn’t want to give up, I can tell you.”