

Stricken Antarctic ship evacuated

...from BBC News (23 Nov 2007)

More than 150 passengers and crew have been rescued from a stricken tourist ship after it hit ice off Antarctica.

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Gap Adventures, which owns the ship, said 91 passengers, 9 guides and 4 crew members were safely evacuated to lifeboats and then to another ship. After staying the night at a base on a Chilean island, they are expected to fly to Chile's mainland on Saturday. Gap Adventures said 23 Britons, 17 Dutch, 10 Australians, 13 Americans and 10 Canadians were among the 154 on board. The remaining nationalities of the rescued tourists are Irish, Danish, Swiss, Belgian, Japanese, French, German and Chinese, said the Toronto-based tour company.

Following the news of the incident, the specialist Lloyds List maritime publication said the 2,400-tonne Explorer had five faults at its last inspection. However, the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), whose inspectors found the faults, said that they had all been rectified by the time the ship set sail again. However, the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), whose inspectors found the faults, said that they had all been rectified by the time the ship set sail again.

"These were not huge problems and were all rectified before the vessel sailed. It would not have been allowed to depart if everything had not been sorted out," MCA spokesman Mark Clarke told PA news. All passengers and crew were transferred to a Norwegian cruise ship, the Nordnorge.

'In good spirits'

The passengers would be transferred to Chile before being flown home on Saturday, said Gap Adventures. "They are all in good spirits," company spokeswoman Marie Anne MacRae told the BBC News website. Paola Palavecino, an ornithologist onboard the rescue ship, the Nordnorge, told the BBC that four of those rescued had suffered moderate hypothermia, but that they had later recovered, having eaten and been given additional warm clothes.

The group had embarked from Ushuaia, on Argentina's southern tip, on 11 November for a 19-day "Spirit of Shackleton" cruise through the Drake Passage.

The captain and the first officer abandoned the Liberian-registered Explorer after initially remaining on board to pump water. First officer Peter Svensson told Reuters: "We were passing through ice as usual. But this time something hit the hold and we got a little leakage downstairs. "No one was hysterical, they were just sitting there nice and quiet, because we knew there were ships coming."

'Deficiencies'

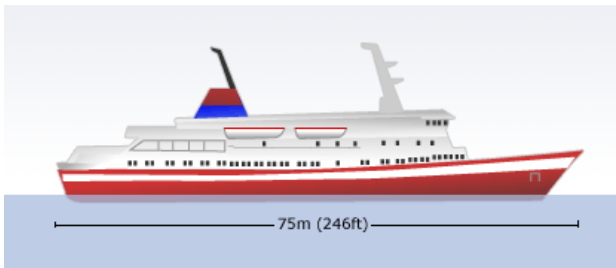
According to a report on Lloyds List's website, the Explorer was found to have five "deficiencies" at an inspection in May at Greenock, Scotland, by the UK's Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). Watertight doors were described as "not as required", while lifeboat maintenance problems and missing search and rescue plans were also noted.

Chilean port inspectors also found six deficiencies during an inspection in Puerto Natales in March, including two related to navigation matters, said Lloyds List. Gap Adventures said the Explorer was passed as fit for sea by inspectors in October this year at a dry dock before their tourist season began.

The MCA said it became aware at 0524 GMT on Friday that the expedition ship was in distress near King George Island. It ran into trouble approximately 120km (75 miles) north of the Antarctic Peninsula. Susan Hayes, vice-president of marketing for Gap Adventures, said: "The hull has a hole the size of a fist and the outlook is not so positive for the ship at the moment."

The company said the pumps had been used in an effort to stop the ship sinking. But the vessel is now lying on one side, with its hull exposed. The rescue operation was co-ordinated by the Ushuaia coastguard. Coastguards said the weather conditions were good for this time of year, though the average temperature is still -5C.

M/S Explorer Specs



Built: 1969, Finland

Capacity: 100 passengers

Tonnage: 2,400 — Cruising speed: 11 knots

Engines: 3,800 hp diesels

Crew: 54

First custom-built expedition ship

Known as the 'Little Red Ship' to aficionados

Became the first passenger vessel to navigate the North West passage in 1984

Involved in rescue of crew from Argentine cargo vessel off Anvers Island, Antarctica, in 1989