



Photo: Antoine Le Guen/ PONANT.

Le Commandant Charcot completes historic journey across the three Arctic poles

In September 2024, the luxurious icebreaking exploration cruise ship, *Le Commandant Charcot*, made history by becoming the first vessel to reach the legendary North Pole of inaccessibility, as well as the magnetic and geographic North Poles, during a transpolar traverse from Alaska to Svalbard.

Captain Étienne Garcia and Director for Newbuilding and R&D Mathieu Petiteau, from the cruise company PONANT EXPLORATIONS, shared their experiences and the meticulous preparations required for such a special voyage during a recent visit to Helsinki, Finland.

“Since beginning operations with the remarkable *Le Commandant Charcot* three years ago, we have sailed an average of 200 days per year in ice, exploring the highest latitudes in both the Northern and the Southern Hemispheres,” Captain Garcia says.

“Each voyage enhances our understanding of the vessel and our ability to navigate polar ice conditions.”

Two years of planning

Two years ago, Captain Garcia proposed the ambitious transpolar traverse, aiming not merely to set a record but to conduct a journey with a scientific purpose. Preparations included expeditions to the North Pole in 2021, 2022, and 2023, and transits through the Northwest Passage aboard *Le Commandant Charcot* to study the region’s complex and challenging ice conditions.

The planning process involved a multidisciplinary team of 20 specialists at PONANT EXPLORATIONS, responsible for route planning, navigation, logistics, cruise planning, as well as coordinating scientists selected through an application process managed by the external scientific organisation ARICE.

Historical ice charts from the past decade at the time of the planned voyage were utilised to plan the route, identifying paths with minimal ice pressure and multiyear ice. During the journey, satellite imagery was utilised daily to adjust the route in response to shifting ice conditions and weather changes.

“Although *Le Commandant Charcot* is an exceptionally capable vessel, we always proceed with humility and caution,” Captain Garcia emphasises. “We never take the shortest route, opting instead for paths with the least ice to optimise fuel consumption, passenger comfort, and environmental protection. The drifting ice is always in movement, and after we pass through, it closes behind us. We only break ice when it is necessary.”

A successful traverse

In September 2024, *Le Commandant Charcot* completed its 20-day transpolar traverse from Nome in

Alaska to Longyearbyen in Svalbard, with a near-full complement of 150 guests, 22 scientists, and 200 crew members.

"It was an extraordinary and highly successful expedition, with favourable conditions for a vessel of this strength," Captain Garcia remarks.

The voyage was conducted at a deliberately slow pace, allowing daily stops of four to five hours. Guests engaged in unique Arctic activities such as snowshoeing, polar hikes, skiing, and even plunging into icy waters. Meanwhile, scientists from around the globe gathered critical data in previously unexplored regions, contributing to significant advancements in climate and environmental research.

"When we planned this trip, I intentionally calculated a slow pace to let everyone enjoy the experience," Captain Garcia explains. "Taking time is part of the luxury of the cruise, to savour the breathtaking Arctic scenery and fully immerse oneself in the sense of being at the edge of the world.



The planning of *Le Commandant Charcot* began with a meeting at Aker Arctic on October 15, 2015. Five years, eleven months and five days later, the vessel reached the North Pole for the first time.

Three poles and three suns

During the expedition, *Le Commandant Charcot* became the first ship to reach the northernmost point of inaccessibility, an isolated location farthest from any landmass and subject to extreme Arctic conditions. One day later, the vessel reached the Magnetic North Pole, followed two days later by the Geographic North Pole.

"Upon arriving at the Geographic North Pole, we were treated to an extraordinary surprise, a rare atmospheric phenomenon known as a sundog," Captain Garcia recounts. "This creates the illusion of three suns connected by a luminous halo."

The phenomenon, caused by light reflecting off ice crystals in frigid air, typically lasts only briefly. However, the passengers and the crew enjoyed the spectacle for an incredible five hours, a rarity that made the experience even more striking.

"Three poles and three suns – it is an unforgettable memory for everyone on board," Captain Garcia reflects.



During the transpolar traverse, the passengers, the scientists and the crew were rewarded with the rare atmospheric phenomenon called sundog. Photo: Étienne Garcia.

Safety measures

Safety was a top priority when *Le Commandant Charcot* was being planned and constructed. Petiteau, who led the project and supervised the construction, was instrumental in developing an innovative safety model, including a specialised container deployable on ice, water, or land. The container is equipped with rescue shelters, food, water production tools, medical supplies, and other essential gear to sustain 160 passengers for up to five days in extreme conditions. Each passenger is also provided with a polar immersion survival suit.

"In addition to the equipment, we have established clear safety protocols and created a dedicated on-board role responsible for deploying the survival container and setting up the shelters," Petiteau explains.

During cruises, the Polar camp is regularly partially assembled on ice, allowing the crew to practice and giving passengers an opportunity to observe the safety systems in action. Search-and-rescue drills are also conducted in collaboration with the United States and Canadian Coast Guards.

"These safety measures were finalised already before *Le Commandant Charcot's* maiden voyage three years ago and is part of our standard procedures. Therefore, no special amendments were required for the transpolar traverse," Petiteau notes.

Remote Arctic beauty

For Captain Garcia, serving as one of *Le Commandant Charcot's* lead captains, is a career highlight.

"*Le Commandant Charcot* is the only cruise ship in the world with a PC 2 ice class, enabling her to access places no other vessel can," he emphasises. "She is uniquely designed for observation, with panoramic windows allowing passengers to enjoy the breathtaking scenery from the warmth of the interior if it is too cold outside. No other ship compares."

Of all the remote destinations Captain Garcia has travelled, his favourite is East Greenland with its pristine winter landscape, drifting sea ice, sunny spring days and encounters of polar bears.

"Antarctica is also extraordinarily beautiful with its towering tabular icebergs and abundant wildlife, including whales and penguins," he adds. ■