

# A Seatrade Cruise

E-report



## Africa Cruising: A Market Transformation Report

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By Holly Payne, Editor  
Seatrade Cruise  
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**Holly Payne**  
Editor, Seatrade Cruise

### Report Scope and Focus

This report examines cruise tourism potential across North, East, South, and West Africa, focusing specifically on ocean cruise operations and coastal destinations. The report does not cover river cruising as a primary focus, though river cruise operations are briefly mentioned where relevant – such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo – to provide a more comprehensive picture of cruise activity in these underdeveloped markets. This approach ensures the analysis captures the full spectrum of maritime tourism potential while maintaining focus on ocean cruise development opportunities across the continent’s diverse coastal regions.

### Methodology

This report was compiled through comprehensive research combining primary and secondary sources to provide accurate and current insights into the African cruise market. Primary research included interviews and commentary from key industry stakeholders, including cruise lines, port authorities, and tourism boards across the region. Secondary research drew from credible online sources and

## Process & approach

industry publications, with particular reference to Seatrade Cruise News for current market developments and industry trends. This multi-source approach ensures the report reflects both operational realities and strategic perspectives from across the cruise industry ecosystem.

### About the Author

Holly Payne is an accomplished editor, author, and video journalist specialising in the cruise industry. At Informa, Holly reports on cruise industry developments, produces video content, and moderates events globally, bringing specialised knowledge of maritime tourism markets and emerging destinations.

Holly holds an MA in Multimedia Journalism with NCTJ accreditation, with specialised training in conflict reporting and international communication. Her extensive cross-

continental experience includes work as a Country Reviewer for Global Integrity, collaborating with the Mo Ibrahim Foundation to evaluate social, economic and political mechanisms in Sudan.

Holly is coauthor of ‘Sudanese Nubia: Portrait of a Vanishing Culture’ (DAL Publishing, 2016), for which she received an award from the Mahas people in Nubia for her contribution to preserving Nubian culture. This work demonstrates her expertise in cultural tourism and heritage markets that inform cruise destination development strategies.

With intermediate-advanced Arabic language skills and extensive international experience, Holly brings unique perspectives to cruise industry analysis, particularly in emerging African markets where cultural understanding and regional expertise are critical for successful maritime tourism development.



## Market observations



**The continent of Africa has long been celebrated for the richness of its peoples and landscapes, its unique wildlife and fauna, and cultural features that know no bounds.**

Africa is home to approximately 3,000 distinct cultures and ethnic subgroups, creating an unparalleled tapestry of human diversity. The Council on Foreign Relations reported earlier this year that Sub-Saharan Africa is ‘the world’s most diverse region’ – a designation supported by remarkable statistics: Tanzania alone has more than 100 ethnic groups, while the Democratic Republic of Congo encompasses more than 200 ethnic groups.

This ethnic diversity is matched by extraordinary linguistic richness. Of the 7,000 languages spoken worldwide, 2,000 are found in Sub-Saharan

Africa – nearly one-third of global linguistic diversity concentrated in a single region. South Africa recognizes 11 official languages, while Nigeria is home to more than 500 languages, illustrating the continent’s incredible cultural complexity.

From the Mediterranean coastlines of North Africa extending through the Sahel region, further south through sub-Saharan territories, and towards the temperate southern regions whose climate differs dramatically from the northern desert landscapes, the continent offers extraordinary geographical and cultural contrasts. Its documented history spans millennia, with archaeological evidence revealing some of humanity’s earliest civilizations and trade routes.

Adding to this remarkable diversity, Africa is home to the world’s second-

largest tropical rainforest, the Congo Basin, which spans six countries and represents a critical global ecosystem after the Amazon.

### Tourism Growth Momentum

With such extraordinary natural and cultural assets, it comes as no surprise that the continent continues to attract increasing numbers of international visitors. According to UN Tourism’s World Tourism Barometer, Africa is leading global tourism recovery and growth.

Performance data for January–June 2025 reveals Africa achieved a 12% increase compared to the same period in 2024, with both North Africa (+14%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (+11%) recording impressive double-digit growth. This performance significantly outpaced other regions: Asia & the Pacific (+11%), Europe (+4%), the Americas (+3%), while the Middle East declined (–4%).

In 2024, Africa welcomed 74 million international visitors – representing 7% more arrivals than pre-pandemic 2019 levels and 12% more than 2023, demonstrating sustained recovery and growth momentum.

### Economic Projections and Cruise Potential

The World Economic Forum’s 2025 ‘Travel and Tourism at a Turning Point’ report projects robust growth in tourism’s direct GDP contribution for 2023–2033, with Sub-Saharan Africa forecast at 4.9% annually and North Africa at 4.7% – both exceeding global averages.

This growth trajectory signals significant potential for Africa’s cruise sector development. Earlier in 2025, ESI (a VUKA Group brand) reported that coastal tourism represents a cornerstone of Africa’s economic growth, with projections showing its value surpassing \$100 billion by 2030 and creating 28 million jobs. Critically, ESI data indicates that 80% of tourism



Kenya

activity is concentrated in coastal towns and areas – precisely where cruise tourism operates and can maximize economic impact.

These fundamentals position Africa as an emerging powerhouse in the global cruise industry, combining authentic cultural experiences, diverse landscapes, and rapidly developing coastal infrastructure to meet growing international demand.

### Geopolitical Impacts

Geopolitical tensions in the Red Sea have reshaped global cruise routing, creating both challenges and opportunities for African destinations. Since late 2023, escalating security concerns around the Suez Canal forced many cruise lines to alter repositioning itineraries, adding prolonged sailing time to avoid the region.

These disruptions opened the door

for Africa to serve as an alternative hub for cruise operations. East Africa, particularly Kenya and Tanzania, gained prominence as cruise lines diversified their itineraries. In February 2025, Kenya welcomed Norwegian Dawn – the largest cruise ship to ever dock in Mombasa and the first cruise vessel to arrive that year – highlighting growing international confidence in the region.

Southern Africa has also experienced significant success. Cape Town posted record-breaking performance during the 2024/25 season, receiving 79 cruise ship arrivals – an 18% increase over the previous year. Cruise tourism injected R1.79 billion into the Western Cape economy, up from R1.32 billion the year before. The 2025/26 season is already off to a strong start, with more than 70 vessel calls planned.

Across the East African Community, cruise tourism has contributed

notable economic gains. Kenya's tourism earnings rose from Kes377.49 billion in 2023 to Kes452.20 billion in 2024, a 19.79% increase. Uganda recorded a 9.4% rise in cruise-related revenue, while Tanzania saw an 8.4% increase. At the continental level, Africa's cruise market is expected to reach \$300.86 million in revenue by 2025, with a projected annual growth rate of 6.85%. This aligns with global expectations of 37.7 million cruise passengers in 2025.

The forced shift away from Red Sea routes has underscored Africa's potential as a compelling cruise destination, offering heritage attractions, diverse landscapes, national parks, and distinctive shore excursions.

This moment marks not just a temporary rerouting but a meaningful step toward Africa's emergence as a major player in international cruise tourism.



Cape Town

## First to the Unique

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK



**In a sector defined by expansion into emerging destinations and the demand for authentic guest experiences, Swan Hellenic has established itself as a market leader in expedition cruising throughout Africa. Under the stewardship of CEO Andrea Zito, the cruise line's operational ethos combines flexibility, cultural engagement and adventurous spirit, opening up previously inaccessible regions while delivering market differentiation and competitive advantage.**

### Opening New Destinations

Swan Hellenic's commitment to pioneering new cruise markets is evident in its response to both opportunity and operational challenge. When Tanzania's national elections precipitated the abrupt closure of its ports in 2025, the cruise line's operational team demonstrated exceptional agility by rerouting to Kenya's Port of Mombasa, subsequently arranging for the first-ever cruise call at Kisite Island, a National Marine Park. As CEO Andrea Zito remarks, 'Our passengers were thrilled. The local community took us in with open arms, and it was a

fantastic experience.' Such flexibility is foundational to Swan Hellenic's reputation for delivering on the promise of authentic expedition travel.

Swan Hellenic's call at the Port of Monrovia in 2024 made it the first cruise line to call in Liberia in 12 years. Significantly, Swan Hellenic's visit to Liberia was in response to a unique guest request: 'Who asked us to go to Liberia? Several prestigious American universities that specifically asked to go there.' This agile response to guest demand not only underlines Swan Hellenic's flexibility but demonstrates an industry-leading philosophy of

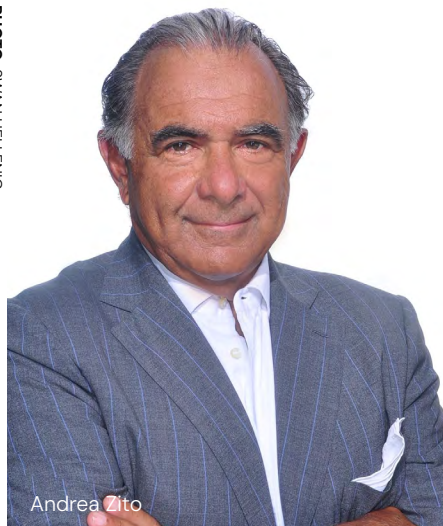
customer-centric, bespoke itinerary development.

The cruise line's deployment has included a breadth of African destinations unparalleled in the sector. The company is recognised for its return to Socotra – the first cruise line to do so in 30 years – reintroducing a fabled location to the cruise market.

Socotra is a strategically positioned island in the Indian Ocean, situated between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. As part of the larger Socotra Archipelago – which encompasses the neighboring islands of Abd Al-Kuri, Samha and Darsa – this remote island group represents one of the world's most botanically diverse archipelagos. The extraordinary biodiversity found here, featuring iconic dragon's blood trees alongside numerous endemic species found nowhere else on Earth, has earned the entire archipelago prestigious UNESCO World Heritage status, recognising its exceptional natural value and ecological significance. 'It's a paradise,' Zito notes.

In West Africa, Swan Hellenic has been a first-mover in Gabon, accessing

PHOTO: SWAN HELLENIC



Andrea Zito

unspoiled coastlines and facilitating landings by Zodiac, as well as in Equatorial Guinea and Angola's Ilha dos Tigres ghost town.

## Market Impact and Community Engagement

Critical to the long-term sustainability of Swan Hellenic's operations is the emphasis on meaningful engagement with local authorities and communities. The line's vessels have welcomed aboard heads of state and senior officials – including Guinea's president and Gabon's minister of tourism – ensuring high-level support and operational security. In locales such as Benin's Ganvié, passengers engage directly with residents of the stilt village, while in Ghana, landings at Elmina and Cape Coast Castle provide historically resonant experiences within active fishing communities. The UNESCO-listed Cape Coast Castle stands as one of the most significant slave castles along West Africa's coast, serving as a powerful testament to the enduring legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and offering visitors a deeply moving connection to this pivotal chapter in human history.

Swan Hellenic's social responsibility initiatives demonstrate meaningful community impact beyond traditional cruise operations. Following the pandemic hiatus, the line delivered essential supplies – including five tons of rice – to the remote Bijagós archipelago off Guinea-Bissau's coast. This humanitarian effort proved particularly crucial for the 80-plus island chain, 'the Maldives of Africa'.

## Cultural Immersion

Swan Hellenic's West African programs position it well within the destination-centered, experience-driven paradigm that increasingly defines the expedition cruise segment. In Togo, passengers observe traditional animist rituals and voodoo ceremonies, accessing authentic cultural traditions well beyond standard port experiences. 'Sometimes the ceremonies are



The stilt village of Ganvié, Benin, founded in the 17th century

PHOTO: SWAN HELLENIC

startling – these rituals aren't for tourists, but for the local people, and our guests are privileged witnesses,' Zito comments.

Even operational unpredictability – whether delayed immigration, last-minute changes, or local logistical hurdles – becomes part of the narrative: 'Africa's rhythm is not the same as ours – but that's part of the adventure,' Zito emphasises, underscoring the need for adaptable guest communications and robust shore operations.

## Continuous Product Evolution and Forward Planning

Aldabra in the Seychelles remains another high-value call, with access to the world's largest colony of giant terrestrial turtles, while ambitious routing allows for calls at Madagascar

and Mafia Island, with a careful approach to geopolitical risk and operational safety.

Swan Hellenic's itineraries extend to Kilwa Kiziwani in Tanzania, home to significant archaeological treasures, and to northern Kenya's Lamu, which boasts centuries of cross-cultural heritage and is now recognised as a unique point of engagement with both Arabic and Chinese-descended communities.

Swan Hellenic's forward-looking strategy includes twice-yearly northbound and southbound African deployments, with Mauritania's coastal Parc National du Banc d'Arguin and its migratory flamingos on the upcoming roster. The line's itinerary planning reflects both tactical responsiveness and strategic ambition, targeting locations with little or no direct cruise competition.

Onboard product also distinguishes the brand, with a focus on expert-led enrichment and destination specialists in lieu of traditional cruise entertainment. 'We want guests to understand not just the landscape, but the people – their present, their history, and their challenges. Our experience is meant to be transformative.'

PHOTO: SWAN HELLENIC



Passengers encounter a voodoo ceremony in Togo

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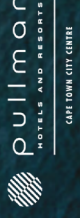
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Citadel of Qaitbay

**A**cross North Africa, countries are positioning themselves as key players in the Mediterranean and broader cruise circuits, with each destination offering unique value propositions to cruise operators and passengers alike.

### A Strategic Gateway to Ancient Wonders

Alexandria Port has firmly established itself as a premier Eastern Mediterranean cruise destination, leveraging Egypt's legendary heritage and strategic positioning to capture significant market share in the rapidly evolving cruise landscape. The port's success demonstrates how historical authenticity combined with modern infrastructure creates compelling value propositions for both cruise operators and passengers.

Alexandria's primary competitive advantage lies in its proximity to world-class attractions, eliminating the lengthy transfers that complicate operations at many archaeological destinations. The Citadel of Qaitbay overlooks the harbour directly, while the Roman Catacombs of Kom El Shoqafa and the modern Bibliotheca Alexandrina are accessible within minutes of disembarkation. This geographic efficiency allows cruise operators to maximise shore time while minimising logistical complexity, a critical factor in itinerary planning and passenger satisfaction. The port's seaside Corniche provides additional programming opportunities, offering authentic Mediterranean dining experiences and cultural immersion

Adelte has been making significant strides in Africa, with completed projects in countries like Algeria and Morocco. Most notably, the company installed two Seaport Passenger Boarding Bridges in 2022 at the new cruise terminal in Casablanca, Morocco. While the installation was completed some time ago, the terminal itself was only recently inaugurated, marking a new chapter for cruise infrastructure in the region. Adding to this momentum, Global Ports Holding has secured a 15-year concession to operate the terminal, further solidifying its role as a key player in the region's cruise industry.



that complement historical excursions. This combination of ancient wonders and contemporary coastal charm creates diverse shore experience options that appeal to varied passenger demographics.

Alexandria's cruise statistics demonstrate exceptional growth momentum, with 43 cruise calls in 2025 disembarking nearly 100,000 passengers. This performance reflects increasing confidence from major international operators who

recognise Alexandria's dual role as both a destination in its own right and a strategic gateway to Cairo and the Pyramids. The port's operator mix spans the full cruise market spectrum, from contemporary lines including MSC Cruises and Costa Cruises to premium and luxury brands such as Viking, Silversea, and Oceania. This diverse portfolio indicates Alexandria's broad appeal across passenger segments and price points, suggesting sustainable demand rather than niche market dependence.

PHOTO: ALEXANDRIA PORT AUTHORITY



Norwegian Viva at the Port of Alexandria



Looking toward 2026, projections indicate continued significant growth, with larger vessels scheduled and expanded seasonal itineraries already confirmed by major players. Karim Mohamed Mahmoud Youssef, Head of the Cruise Department at Alexandria Port Authority, states, “The primary challenge now is managing this rapid escalation in demand, ensuring operational excellence keeps pace with rising visitor volumes.” Recent port infrastructure upgrades directly address the operational requirements of modern cruise tourism. Expanded berths now accommodate the newest generation of mega-ships, while increased terminal capacity and modernised passenger handling areas ensure efficient operations during peak periods. These investments reflect recognition that infrastructure quality directly impacts operator satisfaction and repeat business.

The economic impact extends beyond port operations, with passenger spending stimulating local employment for guides, drivers, and service providers. This multiplier effect creates stakeholder alignment between cruise tourism success and broader community economic development. Alexandria’s emergence coincides with broader Mediterranean cruise market dynamics, including capacity constraints at traditional ports and increasing passenger demand for authentic cultural experiences. Egypt’s rich archaeological heritage provides differentiation opportunities that resonate with expedition and cultural

cruise segments experiencing above-average growth rates.

Egypt’s cruise tourism sector demonstrates the complex interplay between exceptional destination assets and geopolitical realities, with dramatic passenger fluctuations reflecting broader regional tensions. Passenger numbers started at 72,505 visitors in 2022 before doubling to 195,500 in 2023. The Gaza War’s impact became evident in 2024, with passenger numbers declining sharply to 29,253. However, recovery appears underway, with 2025 already surpassing double the previous year’s performance. The first half of 2025 alone recorded more than 35,000 passengers, with forecasts projecting double the number in 2026. Amany Mahmoud, Head of Ships’ Affairs Department at Ports of Egypt, explains, “The key highlights of Egyptian ports that would appeal to cruise visitors include many factors, the most important of which are the warm weather most of the year and the great heritage touristic destinations that came from many old civilisations representing pharaonic, Greek, Roman, Coptic, Islamic eras and ending with the modern history.” Despite this positive trajectory, Mahmoud identifies the geopolitical situation within the region as the main ongoing challenge facing Egyptian cruise tourism development.

### Rebuilding for a Return to the Mediterranean Circuit

Libya is positioning itself for a return to the Mediterranean cruise circuit

after more than a decade of absence. In 2025, the country saw a 60% increase in international tourist arrivals compared to the same period in 2024. Khalid Elekab, German Market Coordinator for Robban Tourism, indicates that planning for cruise ship visits is actively underway, with the destination hoping to receive initial deployments in 2026. “It is safe now,” Elekab states, emphasising that security has been restored and necessary repairs completed across key port facilities.

Libya’s rich Roman archaeological heritage, particularly the UNESCO World Heritage site of Leptis Magna, provides compelling attractions for cultural and expedition cruise operators seeking authentic Mediterranean experiences. Al Khoms port, strategically located just three kilometres from the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna, can accommodate the largest cruise vessels while providing immediate access to one of the Mediterranean’s most significant archaeological sites. The proximity eliminates lengthy transfers that often complicate shore excursion logistics. Benghazi and Tripoli ports also possess the infrastructure to handle large cruise ships, providing operators with multiple deployment options along Libya’s extensive Mediterranean coastline. However, Derna port presents ongoing challenges, with plans for dredging operations to address its exposed position and susceptibility to rough seas and severe weather conditions.

Robban Tourism is implementing

comprehensive training programmes to prepare the local tourism sector for cruise operations. The company conducts seminars focused on tourism and cruise tourism education, specifically targeting tour guides who will interface directly with cruise passengers. Elekab observes, “For 10 years we’ve had nothing, the people need optimism and hope,” highlighting how cruise tourism represents more than economic opportunity – it symbolises Libya’s reintegration into the global tourism community and provides tangible evidence of the country’s stability and recovery. The United Nations Development Programme reported in 2025 that with the launch of Libya’s e-visa system, the country is taking steps to open its doors to international visitors. The UNDP has been working with the country’s Ministry of Economy to explore sectors with growth potential, with tourism among them, and adventure tourism set to be a big hit. Libya successfully held the Libya Travel and Tourism Exhibition 2025 in Tripoli in November 2025.

### A New Frontier for Nature Enthusiasts

Swan Hellenic is preparing to open Mauritania as a brand-new destination for its African itineraries. CEO Andrea Zito confirms, “We’re adding Mauritania to our programme next year. The country features a vast coastal national park that is truly remote. It is a world-renowned paradise for birdwatching, which makes it a particularly exciting place for nature enthusiasts.” Planning for this itinerary is already underway, with Zito noting, “This is an entirely new region for us, and I look forward to experiencing it firsthand and sharing those discoveries with our guests.”

### A Gateway Between Continents

The Port of Tangier has established itself as a rapidly growing cruise destination, leveraging its unique geographical position and cultural heritage to attract significant cruise line

Tangier City Port



PHOTO: PORT OF TANGIER

investment. Tangier’s positioning at the gateway between the Mediterranean and Atlantic provides cruise visitors with a unique blend of European, Arab, and African cultures. The destination’s historic core, highly accessible from the port, serves as the primary attraction for cruise passengers seeking authentic cultural experiences. The Medina and Kasbah offer immediate immersion opportunities just a short walk from the cruise terminal, featuring vibrant souks, traditional tea houses, and historic museums with panoramic views. These sites provide insights into both Moroccan heritage and foreign influences that have shaped the city’s distinctive character.

Tangier’s natural highlights provide compelling shore excursion opportunities that differentiate the destination from traditional Mediterranean ports. Cape Spartel marks the precise geographic point where the Mediterranean Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean, offering spectacular natural scenery and unique positioning appeal. The Caves of Hercules combine Greek mythology with distinctive geological features, including a sea-carved opening resembling the map of Africa. These attractions are often combined with camel ride experiences on nearby beaches, creating memorable cultural immersion opportunities. Tangier

also serves as a gateway to regional destinations including Chefchaouen, known as the iconic blue city, and Tétouan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. These cultural day trips expand programming possibilities and appeal to passengers seeking deeper Moroccan cultural exploration.

The Tangier City Port’s extensive redevelopment project has received international recognition, notably winning the AIVP Antoine Rufenacht Prize for excellence in port-city integration. This award validates the vision to transform the historic port into a leading destination for cruise and yachting tourism while aligning modern maritime facilities with sustainable urban development. The port’s proximity to the historic Medina maximises exploration time, a critical factor for itinerary directors planning short or mid-length calls. This logistical efficiency enhances passenger satisfaction while reducing operational complexity for cruise operators. Tangier’s cruise statistics demonstrate remarkable growth momentum across recent years. Jamil Ouazzani, Director of Marketing and Strategic Intelligence at the Port of Tangier, outlines how strategic port development and authentic cultural offerings are driving exceptional growth in the Western Mediterranean market. “We project sustained growth through 2026 and

beyond, with the substantial increase in calls (from 72 in 2023, 104 calls in 2024, 150 calls confirmed in 2025 to 199 in 2026) solidifying Tangier's position as a Western Mediterranean destination," Ouazzani states.

Casablanca is also emerging as a key hub for cruise tourism. Global Ports Holding signed a 15-year concession agreement with Agence Nationale des Ports to operate the cruise terminal in Casablanca. The concession was awarded to a majority-owned consortium comprising GPH (51%) and local shareholders, following a public tender process. The consortium is set to assume operations starting January 2026. "Casablanca Cruise Port is an important addition to our expanding regional network, strengthening our presence across the Atlantic and Mediterranean," said Mehmet Kutman, Chairman and CEO of Global Ports Holding. "Its modern facilities and strategic location make it an ideal link between established and emerging cruise destinations." The agreement follows the inauguration of Casablanca's new cruise terminal by King Mohammed VI on September 18, 2025. ANP invested approximately €72 million in the development. The terminal features a 650-metre quay, three boarding bridges, parking for 44 buses, and a maritime station built to international standards. It is capable of accommodating vessels up to 350 metres in length and handling over 450,000 passengers annually. The facility aims to reinforce Casablanca's role as a growing hub for cruise itineraries in the West Mediterranean and transatlantic markets. Casablanca Cruise Port handled around 150,000 transit passengers in 2024 and is projected to reach 180,000 passengers in 2025. It will join GPH's existing network of ports including La Goulette, Las Palmas, and Mindelo, creating a connected corridor spanning the Canary Islands, West Africa, and the Western Mediterranean.

### A Resilient Tourism Revival

Casablanca



PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

Tunisia's tourism industry experienced a remarkable revival in 2025, with visitor numbers surging as European tourists led the recovery charge. By July 20, Tunisia welcomed 5.297 million tourists, reflecting a 9.8% increase compared to the same period in 2024. The momentum continued throughout the year, with the country crossing the 10 million mark in international tourist arrivals between January 1 and November 20, 2025 – a 10.3% increase compared to the same period in 2024. This growth trajectory brings Tunisia closer to its ambitious target of 11 million visitors in 2025, a milestone that could position the country among Africa's three largest tourism destinations alongside Morocco and Egypt. Tourism revenues for the first half of 2025 reached TND 3.998 billion (\$1.28 billion), representing 8.2% year-on-year growth.

400,000 cruise passengers were

expected to visit Tunisia's ports in 2025 – a record figure representing a substantial increase from previous years. This surge reflects strategic government investments in port infrastructure, Tunisia's prime location along major Mediterranean shipping routes, and focused promotion of its unique cultural heritage spanning multiple civilisations. Tourism continues as one of Tunisia's most vital economic sectors, contributing approximately 9% to the country's GDP and providing around 400,000 jobs. The cruise tourism boom creates direct investment opportunities, pumps significant money into local economies, creates work opportunities, and encourages local industries.

Tunisia's cruise infrastructure has undergone significant modernisation to accommodate the growing passenger volumes. La Goulette Cruise Port, located just 10 kilometres from the



La Goulette port

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

Oran Port on the Coastline of Mediterranean Sea, Algeria



PHOTO: SWAN HELLENIC

capital Tunis, has emerged as the primary gateway for cruise visitors. For the first time in its history, La Goulette launched its cruise season in January 2025, welcoming ships even during winter months. The port features berths totalling 657 metres, enabling it to receive mega ships including Oasis, Excellence, and Meraviglia-plus class cruise vessels. With two terminal buildings and ISPS compliance, La Goulette can efficiently handle cruise ship operations while offering enhanced security services to passengers. Strategic infrastructure investments extend beyond port facilities. The government has implemented projects linking roads between ports and touristic destinations, while establishing new cities with spectacular marinas including developments at Marasi, Ras El Hekma, and Southmed. The World Bank projects Tunisia's economy to grow by 1.9% in 2025, up from 1.4% in 2024, with tourism resilience contributing to the recovery.

### Ambitious Growth Targets

Algeria is setting ambitious targets to expand its tourism industry, aiming to welcome four million visitors in 2025, up from 3.5 million in 2024. Tourism Minister Houria Meddahi announced these plans at the Algiers International Tourism Fair, underscoring the sector's critical role in economic diversification away from hydrocarbon dependence. The government's longer-term vision is even more ambitious, targeting 12 million foreign arrivals by 2030 and 14 million by 2035. These projections

represent a fivefold increase from current levels, positioning Algeria among the most aggressive tourism growth strategies in Africa. Current visitor patterns show 2.5 million foreign visitors and one million members of the Algerian diaspora in 2024. The government is banking on streamlined visa procedures, digital services, and stronger emphasis on Saharan tourism to reach its growth objectives.

Algeria is making substantial infrastructure investments to support tourism growth. The government was planning to add nearly 16,000 new hotel rooms by the end of 2025, appealing for pre- and post-cruise packages. Passengers arriving via cruise ships and participating in organised shore excursions do not require advance visas. Passengers wishing to visit certain southern cities may qualify for visa-on-arrival if organised by approved travel agencies, though all other travellers must obtain visas from Algerian embassies or consulates before travel. The country features 1,200 kilometres of spectacular Mediterranean coastline, access to the Sahara desert, and ancient traditions representing various civilisations.

### Postponed Aspirations Amid Conflict

Sudan has been high on Swan Hellenic's list of future destinations. Andrea Zito, CEO of Swan Hellenic, explains, "Sudan was one of our targets when we started planning our African itineraries." The prospect was especially compelling given the unique attractions of the region. "Near

Port Sudan, we intended to arrange an overnight excursion to visit the historic pyramids," he notes, referring to the enchanting Pyramids of Meroe. Another highlight of the plan was the island of Suakin, rich in coral architecture and history, which Swan Hellenic identified as a point of embarkation for further inland exploration. Zito reflects, "We were considering Suakin as a base for excursions – an island with a coral city, from where guests could then fly to witness the pyramids along the Upper Nile."

Despite this enthusiasm, ongoing conflict in the region forced an indefinite pause to these ambitions. The country faces one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises as civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) continues to devastate the country. The conflict, which erupted on April 15, 2023, has transformed Sudan into the epicentre of the world's largest displacement crisis while pushing millions toward famine conditions. "Unfortunately, the war came, so we had to postpone our plans," Zito says, acknowledging the challenges with characteristic optimism. "I hope the pyramids are still intact, and sooner or later, we can continue with our original vision." The cruise line stands ready to explore as soon as conditions allow, with Zito concluding, "We are always attentive to opportunities. When the time is right, we look forward to bringing our guests to discover Sudan's incredible heritage."

Cape Coast Castle in Ghana

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK-199199770



Neale Proctor



Jasem Zaiton

**N**eale Proctor, Group Director of Sales & Commercial at OMA Group and industry consultant Jasem Zaiton of Zaiton Corp are championing a bold repositioning of Africa – particularly West and North Africa – within the global cruise industry. Their vision highlights the continent's untapped potential as a destination for authentic, culturally immersive experiences.

'The infrastructure may be somewhat basic, but perhaps that adds to the authenticity of port calls in our region. You know you're not going to get five star luxury facilities on arrival, and it's perhaps all part of the experience,' Proctor explained.

While the region is still developing its port infrastructure, its authenticity and emotional resonance make it ideal for expedition cruises. Proctor emphasised the need to dispel fears among operators, noting that OMA Group has successfully handled cruise ships in the region for years, even during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The OMA Group's expanding network spans strategic locations across the continent. In North West Africa, the company has a presence in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin. In South West Africa, the company operates in Namibia – the latest addition to the OMA network. 'Walvis Bay and Lüderitz have become extremely popular ports of call for cruise ships,' detailed Proctor.

However, logistical challenges persist. Most African ports serve as transit stops rather than embarkation points, with only Tema in Ghana and Walvis Bay in Namibia offering turnaround capabilities due to their proximity to airports. Safety perceptions are also evolving as the industry gains more experience in the region, with at least one cruise line looking to call in Nigeria.

Africa's cruise market is carving out a niche by offering deeply emotional and culturally immersive experiences that leave lasting impressions. Proctor shared a poignant example from Ghana's Cape Coast, home to historic castles and monuments tied to the transatlantic slave trade.

'The tours are remarkable and tinged with emotion. I've seen tourists moved to tears when hearing the stories told from the cells of these castles. It's not five-star luxury, but it's unique and unforgettable,' Proctor said.

OMA Group's decades-long presence

in West Africa has been instrumental in navigating the region's complex port ecosystems. Proctor emphasized the importance of cultivating strong local relationships and educating port authorities about the cruise sector's needs. This approach has led to cruise ships receiving priority berths and exceptional hospitality.

'OMA has been in West Africa since the mid 1980s, quickly learning the value of good personal relationships locally. We continue that tradition to this day,' Proctor explained.

Zaiton underscored the need for a continent-wide strategy to develop Africa's cruise sector. He highlighted interconnected challenges and opportunities, noting that while infrastructure is important, it is not the sole driver of growth.

He pointed to promising developments, such as major port operators like AD Ports Group expanding into Angola, and emphasised the importance of including North Africa in the conversation. Destinations like Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria are gaining recognition, with Egypt emerging as a year-round cruise hub thanks to significant investments and increasing ship visits.

The message is clear: Africa's time in the cruise spotlight is not just coming – it has already begun.



PHOTO: KENYA PORTS AUTHORITY

Lamu County Governor Issa Timamy (second from right) hosts a welcome ceremony for the arrival of SH Diana which includes a traditional Bajuni jog

Kisite–Mpunguti Marine National Park and positions Kenya within a Shimoni–Pemba–Zanzibar triangle, establishing the country as a key stop in regional expedition cruise networks.

### Marine Excellence and Cultural Immersion

The Kisite–Mpunguti Marine National Park has emerged as a standout destination, with guests reporting that marine life experiences exceeded those previously seen in Seychelles. The park offers snorkeling excursions featuring vibrant coral formations and diverse fish species, dolphin watching during zodiac transfers, Magic Beach visits to tidal sandbanks, and coral garden boardwalks supporting community conservation initiatives.

Kenya’s coastal tourism strategy has evolved from passive sightseeing to active, participatory cultural immersion, focusing on engaging visitors with the living heritage of the Swahili Coast. Traditional excursions include guided tours of UNESCO–listed Fort Jesus and Old Town Mombasa, exploration of Marikiti Spice Market for authentic coastal trade experiences, and visits to iconic landmarks like the Pembe za Ndovu (Mombasa Tusks). Interactive cultural programs feature basic Kiswahili language sessions for meaningful local connections, culinary workshops featuring traditional Swahili dishes with coastal seafood, and Giriama community experiences including palm–wine tapping and evening drum dances.

### Kenya’s Cruise Tourism Transformation

Kenya’s cruise tourism sector has experienced an extraordinary transformation, establishing itself as a standout performer in the African cruise market. The country welcomed 6,561 cruise tourists in 2024, representing a remarkable 163.5% increase from the 2,490 arrivals recorded in 2023. This exceptional growth significantly outpaced Kenya’s overall international tourism sector, which grew by 14.8% to reach 2.4 million visitors.

The transformation extends beyond mere numbers, as Kenya has evolved from a single–port destination to a multi–port cruise hub capable of serving both large vessels and boutique expedition ships. The country now operates three strategic cruise ports, including Mombasa as the established primary port with modern cruise terminal facilities, Lamu as a UNESCO World Heritage site offering authentic Swahili cultural experiences, and Shimoni as the newest addition, specifically designed for expedition cruising.

### Historic Shimoni Port Debut

A pivotal moment for Kenya’s cruise industry occurred with SH Diana’s

inaugural call to Shimoni Port in Kwale on October 26, 2025. The 125–meter vessel welcomed 500 passengers for the landmark visit, representing the first time a cruise ship of this scale had docked at the southern Kenyan port. The arrival was celebrated with significant ceremony, including the presence of the regional governor and extensive media coverage.

Kenya has strategically positioned itself in the luxury expedition market, focusing on smaller, high–yield vessels that align with sustainable and eco–conscious travel trends. The successful deployment of expedition vessels like the SH Diana validates Kenya’s capacity to host specialized niche cruising operations. The new Shimoni facility serves as a gateway to the

PHOTO: KENYA PORTS AUTHORITY

SH Diana at Shimoni Port in Kwale



Kenya offers internationally significant cultural events that serve as excellent anchor points for cruise itinerary planning, including the Lamu Cultural Festival in November, a three-day showcase featuring dhow sailing races, donkey races, poetry readings, and music performances, and the Shela Hat Contest in February of even years, a unique creativity display featuring handcrafted sun hats using local materials.

### Economic Impact and Future Projections

The 6,561 cruise passengers who visited in 2024 generated approximately \$4.9 million in local spending, directly benefiting hotels, transport operators, artisans, and local guides in port communities. Kenya's tourism industry contributed KSh 1.2 trillion to GDP and supported 1.7 million jobs in 2024. The launch of Shimoni Port has created direct employment opportunities and boosted local enterprises including professional guiding services, handicraft production, restaurant and hospitality services, and conservation initiatives like the Wasini Women Group coral garden boardwalk.

With global benchmarks indicating that approximately 60% of cruise passengers return as land-based tourists, Kenya's growing cruise arrivals serve as a high-yield marketing funnel for future safari and cultural tourism. The country's multi-port infrastructure and expedition cruising capabilities position it for continued growth in the premium cruise market segment.

### Mozambique's Steady Growth Trajectory

Mozambique's cruise tourism sector is experiencing steady growth within the broader context of the country's tourism renaissance. According to Club of Mozambique reporting, in 2024 the country welcomed nine cruise ships carrying a total of 4,492 passengers, representing a significant component of Mozambique's expanding tourism

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK



The 6,561 cruise passengers who visited in 2024 generated approximately \$4.9 million in local spending

portfolio. This cruise activity occurs within Mozambique's peak tourism season, which runs from November to May, aligning with favorable weather conditions along the Indian Ocean coastline.

Club of Mozambique's analysis indicates that cruise passengers visiting Mozambique represent diverse international markets, with notable representation from Asian countries alongside traditional European and American cruise demographics. Many passengers on these cruises are Americans, including a substantial base of high-spending tourists who contribute significantly to the local economy through shore excursions and onboard spending.

Maputo serves as Mozambique's primary cruise port, with the facility currently managed by Maputo Port Development Company (MPDC) under a concession operated by DP World. The port's strategic location and ongoing infrastructure improvements position it as a key gateway for cruise operations along Africa's east coast. Crew Center's cruise ship scheduling data shows that Maputo maintains regular cruise calls with vessels scheduled through 2028, indicating sustained industry confidence in the destination.

### Infrastructure Investment and Development

Mozambique's cruise infrastructure is undergoing significant transformation

through substantial international investment. African Business reports that in 2024, MPDC's concession to operate Maputo Port was extended to 2058, contingent upon a \$1.1 billion investment commitment by 2033. This investment program focuses on improving infrastructure and operational efficiency to support expanded cruise operations alongside the port's traditional cargo functions. According to African Business analysis, DP World has outlined plans for infrastructure upgrades that will enable larger vessels to dock, directly supporting cruise tourism expansion.

Club of Mozambique reports that the country's air transport sector carried a record 2.4 million passengers in 2024, representing a 25% increase from 2023's 1.97 million passengers. This growth in air connectivity directly supports cruise tourism by improving accessibility for fly-cruise packages and pre- and post-cruise extensions.

### Untapped Potential: Eritrea and Regional Challenges

Eritrea offers significant untapped cruise potential as a gateway to the Red Sea, featuring over 1,000 kilometers of coastline and the strategically located port city of Massawa, an architecturally rich coastal city with its blend of Ottoman, Egyptian, and Italian colonial influences.

Andrea Zito, CEO, Swan Hellenic highlights Eritrea as another remarkable



Vibrant coral off the coast of Djibouti offers unique diving opportunities

yet currently inaccessible destination for Swan Hellenic's expeditions. "Eritrea, especially its coastal islands, holds extraordinary promise for exploration," he explains. "The coral reefs there are reportedly still pristine and untouched. It's an area rich in both natural beauty and potential for discovery." This is especially true of the Dahlak Archipelago's 200+ islands and coral atolls.

However, Zito acknowledges the realities that keep it out of reach for now. "The main challenge is the ongoing tension between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the region's overall instability near the Red Sea. Once the situation improves and the area becomes safer, I believe these islands and their extraordinary marine environments will be a true highlight for future voyages."

For Swan Hellenic, Eritrea remains on the radar as a destination awaiting more peaceful times – a testament to the company's vision of bringing new, untouched frontiers to the world of expedition cruising.

### Djibouti's Strategic Vision

Djibouti has strategically positioned tourism as a cornerstone of its economic diversification under Vision 2035, targeting 500,000 annual visitors by 2035 – a tenfold increase from current levels. The World Bank's 2014 evaluation indicated only 10% of tourism capacity being utilized, while their 2013 report identified tourism as the most promising sector for job creation.

Currently welcoming approximately 50,000 visitors annually – primarily business travelers drawn by foreign military bases – Djibouti possesses exceptional natural assets largely undiscovered by the cruise industry. The country's position at the confluence of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean creates extraordinarily diverse marine ecosystems, featuring extensive coral reefs hosting approximately 200 coral species.

The annual Whale Shark Festival in the Gulf of Tadjoura provides world-class marine wildlife encounters between October and February. The Seven

Brother Islands in the Bab Al Mandab Strait represent some of the Red Sea's most biodiverse diving locations, while unique geological sites like Ghoubet Al Kharab (Devil's Goblet) and the Djibouti Crack provide extraordinary shore excursion opportunities.

### Indian Ocean Islands: Established Players Adapting to Change

The Indian Ocean islands of Seychelles and Mauritius are significant players in the evolving Africa cruise market. Their combination of environmental diversity, cultural practices, and changing cruise infrastructure places them at the center of tourism industry adjustments, especially in response to geopolitical changes and sustainability issues.

David Germain, BDM of Creole Travel Services, Seychelles, explains, "Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands, made up of 71 coral islands and 42 granitic islands. The destination offers visitors a wide range of cultural and natural experiences." Culture is visible in daily life: "We continue to practice our traditional ways of living,

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK



Mauritius

cooking... Our diversity is reflected in our food, our history, our music, our people, our unique flora and fauna, and our beaches."

Tourism in Seychelles is intentionally limited in scale. As Germain notes, "Seychelles is not a mass tourism destination and never will be. We value our spaciousness and want to keep the environment as tranquil as possible." Environmental protection is central: "Very strict laws are in place, and 58% of our territory is designated as a marine or national park. This helps us protect the destination for tourism, our main industry, and for future generations."

Cruising is also just the right size for the islands: "Seychelles is much more suitable for expedition cruises, which we can manage well given our size and resource limitations. Most cruise ships

over about 2,500 passengers cannot dock directly and must use tenders. We encourage shore excursions to distribute visitors across various islands, so we avoid overcrowding any single location."

### Mauritius: Greater Capacity and Established Operations

Mauritius, represented by Jonathan Lefevre, Associate Director at Coquille Bonheur, has greater capacity for cruise traffic. "We have seven terminals, but one main terminal is used for cruise ships and is fully equipped to European standards. It can accommodate up to 4,000 guests at once, and we have plans to expand further. In Mauritius, we can welcome cruise ships with up to 6,000 people and 2,000 on excursions because the island is large and has plenty of resources."

International cruise brands regularly visit: "We already host all the major cruise lines, including Royal Caribbean International, Costa Cruises, AIDA Cruises, and Norwegian Cruise Line. Our current goal is to encourage them to stay longer in the Indian Ocean region by working together with destinations like Seychelles, Reunion, South Africa, and Madagascar."

Recent visitor patterns have shifted based on global events. Lefevre notes, "This year, during what is usually our low season – from June to July – we had more clients than during the peak season. The situation in the Middle East caused some large cruise lines – like AIDA and Costa – to cancel stops here after they changed their routes away from Dubai to the Caribbean."

Lefevre highlights Mauritius' diverse and welcoming nature: "Mauritius is a multicultural island – we welcome people of all nationalities and religions." He also values the partnership with Seychelles: "It's easy to combine both islands into a single itinerary for visitors, as each destination has something different to offer."

### Comoros: Untapped Marine Paradise

According to the World Bank Group, the Comoros represents one of Africa's most significant untapped opportunities in marine and coastal tourism. Located



Comoros islands

strategically between Madagascar and the East African coast, this volcanic archipelago offers unique attractions that remain largely unexplored by the international cruise industry.

Marine and coastal tourism in Comoros remains severely underdeveloped, contributing only 1.7 percent of GDP in 2024. This minimal contribution contrasts sharply with the country's rich natural endowments, including pristine coral reefs, diverse marine life, and unique cultural heritage spanning African, Arab, and French influences.

While Comoros currently lacks infrastructure for large-scale cruise operations, its strategic location and unique offerings position it well for expedition cruise lines and smaller luxury vessels. Positioning Comoros within the Vanilla Islands network requires focus on premium, sustainable tourism offerings. The alliance with Mauritius, Seychelles, Réunion, Madagascar, and Mayotte provides a framework for regional cruise circuit development.

### Tanzania's Tourism Boom and Cruise Potential

Reports from UN Tourism's World Tourism Barometer indicate that Tanzania experienced a significant

tourism boom in early 2025, surpassing its target of 5 million visitors by April of the same year. The country recorded 5.3 million visitors by April and 794,102 tourist arrivals from January to May 2025, marking a 54.3% increase over pre-pandemic levels and a 3.7% rise from the same period in 2024. It underscores Tanzania's growing appeal as a destination in East Africa's cruise tourism sector.

Tanzania's cruise infrastructure centers around two primary ports:

Dar es Salaam, the commercial hub, and Zanzibar, the island destination that serves as a major draw for luxury travellers. Seabourn Sojourn and Europa visited Dar es Salaam in 2025, representing the premium segment of cruise tourism. Zanzibar complements Dar es Salaam's offerings with its own cruise schedule, hosting vessels such as Norwegian Dawn and Viking Sky in 2025. The island's appeal lies in its UNESCO World Heritage Stone Town, pristine beaches, and rich Swahili culture.



Local dancing,  
Tanzania



PHOTO: LOCA

**T**he Indian Ocean corridor is witnessing a remarkable transformation as Tanzania emerges as a compelling cruise destination, driven by visionary leadership and strategic development initiatives. At the forefront of this evolution is Daisy Edwards, Strategic & Technical Coordination Lead for the Indian Ocean cruise corridor, and Founder of the Indian Ocean Cruise Alliance, the regional platform advancing coordinated cruise development.

“Cruise tourism is emerging as a dynamic growth sector for Tanzania and the wider Indian Ocean corridor, offering visitors a blend of cultural heritage, natural beauty and authentic experiences,” explains Edwards.

Central to Tanzania’s cruise strategy is Zanzibar’s role as the primary entry point for international cruise lines. Edwards notes that “Zanzibar has become Tanzania’s primary gateway for cruise ships, attracting the majority of traffic and positioning itself as a key hub for regional cruise activity.” This strategic positioning leverages the island’s extraordinary cultural and natural assets, creating a compelling proposition for cruise operators seeking authentic African experiences.

The island’s appeal extends far beyond its pristine coastline. “The island offers UNESCO-listed Stone Town, world-class spice tours and rich cultural experiences,” Edwards observes. “Visitors can also explore marine biodiversity through snorkelling and diving, and enjoy pristine beaches.” This diverse offering addresses multiple passenger demographics, from cultural enthusiasts to adventure seekers and leisure travellers.

The destination’s marine credentials are further enhanced by nearby attractions. “Mafia Island adds further appeal with its renowned marine park and diving opportunities,” Edwards adds, demonstrating how Tanzania’s cruise offering extends beyond a single port to encompass a broader regional experience.

### Mainland opportunities and infrastructure development

While Zanzibar leads in cruise arrivals, Edwards recognises the significant potential of Tanzania’s mainland destinations. “The mainland highlights include historic coastal sites such as Bagamoyo and Kilwa, while safaris in the Northern Circuit and views of Mount Kilimanjaro provide compelling pre- and post-cruise extensions.

“Saadani National Park completes the picture as the world’s only beachfront safari, where elephants and giraffes roam within sight of the Indian Ocean, offering cruise visitors an experience unavailable anywhere else in Africa or globally,” Edwards emphasises, highlighting this unique selling proposition that could differentiate Tanzania in an increasingly competitive cruise market.

However, infrastructure challenges remain. Edwards acknowledges that “the mainland receives fewer ships due to the lack of a dedicated cruise terminal.” Yet there are encouraging developments on the horizon. “Tanzania Ports Authority has earmarked a section for a future terminal, which is currently in the planning and feasibility stage, reflecting a clear commitment to developing infrastructure for cruise passengers,” she reveals, indicating government support for sector growth.

### Quantifying success and economic impact

The numbers tell a compelling story of growth and economic contribution. Edwards reports that “ship calls to the island reached 52 in 2023, with passenger arrivals exceeding 40,000 in the same year.” This represents



significant volume for an emerging destination and demonstrates the market's confidence in Tanzania's cruise offering.

More importantly, the economic impact is substantial and measurable. "In Zanzibar alone, direct spending between 2020 and 2023 exceeded USD 15 million, strengthening businesses, expanding livelihoods and reinforcing its role as Tanzania's leading cruise destination," Edwards states. This figure represents genuine economic transformation, particularly significant given the challenging period that included the global pandemic.

The benefits extend beyond pure economics. "Cruise tourism is already benefiting these destinations, supporting local workers while community programs and waterfront initiatives gain momentum," Edwards notes. "Rising demand for local goods and experiences is fuelling small-enterprise growth," she adds, highlighting the sector's role in sustainable development and community empowerment.

### Addressing industry challenges

Edwards maintains a realistic perspective on the challenges facing Tanzania's cruise development. "Cruise tourism in Tanzania faces challenges

of port capacity, regulation, workforce readiness and sustainability," she acknowledges. These are familiar issues for emerging cruise destinations, requiring coordinated responses from government, private sector and international partners.

However, Edwards remains optimistic about the foundation for growth. "Yet strong government commitment, regional collaboration, and diverse excursions provide a solid base for growth," she argues, emphasising the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement in destination development.

### Regional collaboration and future growth

Looking ahead, Edwards sees regional cooperation as crucial for sustainable expansion. "Through 2026, expansion will be driven by IOCA, harmonising ports, routes and standards, positioning Tanzania and Zanzibar to attract luxury, expedition and mainstream lines seeking authentic cultural and ecological experiences," she explains.

This collaborative approach addresses a key challenge in cruise development: the need for multiple compelling ports within reasonable sailing distances. By working regionally, Tanzania can offer cruise lines the itinerary diversity essential for successful deployment.

### Cultural programming and event tourism

"New excursions showcase the region's diverse culture and heritage, offering cruise visitors immersive experiences inland and along the coast," Edwards explains, highlighting the importance of experiential tourism in modern cruise operations.

The cultural calendar provides compelling reasons for cruise lines to include Tanzania in their itineraries. "Highlights include the Sanjo ya Busiya Festival, drawing over 40,000 visitors annually, and the Haydom Cultural Festival, a rare convergence of Africa's four major ethno-linguistic groups."

Zanzibar's established event portfolio adds further appeal. "In Zanzibar, the International Film Festival (ZIFF) and Sauti za Busara remain flagship events, while the Kilimathon in Moshi is emerging as a premier attraction, pairing naturally with Northern Circuit safaris or a Mount Kilimanjaro climb," Edwards observes, showing how events can be integrated with broader tourism offerings.

### Sustainable growth and future outlook

Edwards concludes with a vision that balances growth ambitions with sustainability imperatives. "These developments underscore Tanzania and Zanzibar's rise as leading Indian Ocean cruise destinations. With expanding infrastructure, regional collaboration and diverse cultural experiences, the sector is poised for sustainable growth," she states.

However, she emphasises that success requires continued commitment from all stakeholders. "Sustaining this momentum will depend on stakeholder engagement, stronger partnerships and deeper community involvement," Edwards warns, highlighting the collaborative approach necessary for long-term success.

**C**ystal Cruises is positioning itself strategically in the evolving African cruise market, leveraging destination diversity and sister brand expertise to capture growing demand for immersive travel experiences beyond traditional safari offerings.

The cruise line's approach to East Africa emphasises the unique character of each destination rather than attempting to balance cultural, wildlife, and luxury elements equally across all ports. According to Adria Bono, Director Destination Experiences, 'each destination is unique and offers a completely different experience.'

In Mozambique's capital Maputo, Crystal focuses entirely on cultural immersion since the destination 'does not offer wildlife encounters'. The port experience centers on 'cultural immersion, local food discovery, vibrant local life, and coastal charm,' creating what Bono describes as 'a complementary contrast with the upcoming safari-heavy destinations.'

Crystal's Mozambique programming showcases the destination's Portuguese colonial heritage through guided culinary tours featuring peri-peri prawns and local delicacies that highlight 'the Portuguese influence and coastal seafood.' Shore excursions include visits to the FEIMA craft market, Central market, and National Art Museum, alongside historical tours exploring Maputo's colonial architecture, including the Iron House by Eiffel, Central Railway Station and the Fort.

Tanzania offers Crystal guests a more diversified experience portfolio. In Dar Es Salaam and Zanzibar, 'the experience is diversified ranging from the real highlight Wildlife, to wonderful beach escape and interesting ruins to learn more about the history and the essence of East Africa.' Programming includes day trips to Nyerere National Park for game viewing, cultural education at the National Museum & House of Culture, and beach experiences in Zanzibar.

PHOTO: CRYSTAL CRUISES



Crystal Symphony will cruise out of South Africa in winter 2025-26

Kenya's Mombasa presents Crystal with opportunities to showcase cultural fusion, where guests 'can enjoy a mix of cultures – Indian, Arabic, and African – which is reflected in the local food, music, and traditions.' The port serves as both a wildlife gateway, with day trips to Amboseli National Park available, and 'the starting point to explore some of the most famous national parks, like the Serengeti, Maasai Mara and Kruger.'

Crystal's strategic advantage in the region stems from its connection to sister brand Abercrombie & Kent's established African operations. Mario Parodi, VP itinerary planning and port and fuel operations, notes that 'Crystal has the advantage of our sister brand's Abercrombie & Kent (A&K)

strong experience in this region. Being able to put together Crystal and A&K products, allows us to offer a fantastic experience.'

The broader African cruise market is experiencing fundamental shifts, according to Parodi. 'Tourism in Africa is evolving from more traditional safaris to natural and cultural attractions. Despite some existing gaps, cruise lines have noticed and taken advantage of improved infrastructure as well as easier policies.'

This evolution aligns with changing passenger preferences, as 'travellers seek more immersive experiences beyond traditional activities.' Crystal is responding to these market dynamics with expansion plans, as Parodi confirms: 'As the African market continues to grow, we are definitely embracing the opportunity to offer more exciting and diverse itineraries.'

The cruise line's integrated approach, combining ocean cruising with established land-based expertise through A&K, positions Crystal to capitalise on Africa's infrastructure improvements and evolving tourism landscape while meeting growing demand for authentic, immersive travel experiences in the region.

PHOTO: CRYSTAL CRUISES



Mario Parodi

PHOTO: WESGRO CAPE TOWN



Queen Mary II and Queen Victoria in port – the first time in history that the two Queens were docked simultaneously in an African port.

## Dramatic landscapes, the Big Five

**C**ape Town’s cruise sector is experiencing a remarkable transformation, positioning the Western Cape as a cornerstone destination for international cruise lines seeking authentic African experiences and robust economic returns. Under the strategic leadership of Cruise Cape Town, powered by Wesgro, the region has demonstrated consistent growth across all key performance indicators, establishing itself as an essential hub for both traditional and expedition cruising.

### Sustained growth trajectory

The numbers tell a compelling story of resilience and expansion. Ship calls have grown from 70 vessels in the 2022/23 season to 79 in 2024/25, representing an 18% year-on-year increase despite temporary disruptions from Red Sea re-routing and reduced domestic shipping. More significantly, passenger volumes have surged from approximately 78,000 to 127,000 over the same period, marking a robust 16% annual increase that substantially exceeds the global cruise industry average of 9%.

“Cape Town has firmly re-established itself on global cruise routes,” explains Wrenelle Stander, CEO of Wesgro. “With 42 world-cruise calls in 2024/25 alone and international passenger growth of 39% in that season, we’re seeing strong

momentum that positions us well above global benchmarks.”

The economic impact has been equally impressive, with the sector’s contribution to Western Cape GDP rising from R1.23 billion to R1.79 billion across three seasons. Cumulatively, these seasons have generated approximately R4.34 billion for the Western Cape, R5.32 billion for South Africa, and R3.04 billion in foreign exchange earnings. The sector now represents 0.17% of provincial GDP while supporting 0.09% of provincial jobs, with projections suggesting passenger numbers could reach 140,000–150,000 by 2026/27, contributing R1.9–2.1 billion to regional economic output.

### Regional diversification expands market appeal

A strategic shift toward regional diversification has opened new revenue streams and enhanced the destination’s appeal to cruise planners seeking varied itineraries. The expansion beyond traditional Cape Town and Winelands offerings has proven particularly successful, with new cruise calls to Mossel Bay, Hermanus, and Saldanha Bay bringing 32,000 passengers across 26 ship visits during the 2024/25 season, generating R47.5 million in local expenditure.

These emerging destinations offer

distinct experiences that complement Cape Town’s established attractions. The Whale Coast provides seasonal wildlife encounters, while West Coast destinations showcase maritime heritage and seasonal wildflower displays. Shore excursions have evolved to become more inclusive and culturally immersive, with walking tours in Bo-Kaap highlighting Cape Malay cuisine and heritage, and township tours in Langa and Khayelitsha focusing on local entrepreneurship and food culture.

The expansion strategy has also embraced thematic approaches: ‘Thematic Winelands and regional itineraries now combine wine, art, and heritage, linking Franschhoek, Stellenbosch, the Cape Overberg and the West Coast,’ said Stander. ‘These include cellar visits, cultural stops, sculpture gardens, historic towns and local gastronomy. Overall, shore excursions now emphasise food and wine, culture and heritage, and active experiences.’

### Year-round event calendar supports themed itineraries

Cape Town and the Western Cape’s robust events calendar provides cruise planners with compelling anchor points for themed itineraries throughout the year. The Cape Town Cycle Tour in March 2026 will draw approximately 35,000 riders and numerous

spectators, creating ideal conditions for sports-focused cruise programmes. The Cape Town International Jazz Festival, also in March, represents Africa's premier urban music festival, perfectly suited for culture and music-oriented passengers.

Seasonal highlights extend the appeal across multiple months, with whale watching opportunities from June to November along the Cape Overberg and Garden Route, spring wildflower displays from August to September in the West Coast and Namaqualand, and summer festivals from November to February featuring music, food, wine, and outdoor concerts. The !Khwattu Heritage Festival in September celebrates San heritage and storytelling, while the Hermanus Whale Festival in October marks the return of southern right whales along the coastline.

### Expedition and luxury segments drive premium growth

The expedition and luxury cruise segments have emerged as central pillars of Cape Town's strategy, with expedition calls increasing from five in 2023/24 to 16 in 2024/25. These high-yield passengers typically spend more and book extended land programmes, aligning perfectly with Cruise Cape Town's focus on premium market segments.

"Cape Town is positioned as a soft-adventure and luxury hub, offering access to nature reserves, marine wildlife, nearby winelands, gastronomy and cultural experiences," stated Stander. "Supported by iconic landscapes and a vibrant city offering, it serves as the primary gateway to the Western Cape, anchored by the Port of Cape Town and enabling seamless cruise access and onward exploration of the province..."

Several regions offer significant untapped potential for expedition and luxury operators. The West Coast provides exceptional birding opportunities, seasonal wildflower displays and deep-rooted fisheries

heritage through working harbours and coastal villages. The Garden Route offers diverse natural landscapes, protected forests, coastal reserves, and marine wildlife encounters, accessible through the Port of Mossel Bay.

The Klein Karoo and Central Karoo present distinctive inland experiences with wide-open landscapes, heritage towns, and exceptional astro-tourism opportunities under some of the Southern Hemisphere's darkest skies. The Cape Winelands combine world-class wine estates with culinary excellence and historic towns, while the Cape Overberg offers varied coastal landscapes, protected natural environments, and the southernmost tip of Africa at Cape Agulhas.

### Strategic positioning for global itineraries

Cape Town's location at the junction of the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean creates natural advantages for both trans-Atlantic and round-Africa itineraries. The city serves as a key long-haul stop for world cruises, linking Mediterranean, Canary Islands, and West African ports with Indian Ocean destinations including Mozambique, Madagascar, Réunion, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Gulf ports.

This strategic positioning makes Cape Town ideal as a turnaround port for round-Africa segments connecting

West and East Africa, while pairing effectively with Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Canary Islands, and Iberian ports for trans-Atlantic voyages. The destination further supports sea-and-safari combinations, connecting visitors to Kruger National Park, private reserves, the Garden Route, and Namibia.

Cape Town's strong airlift connectivity, significantly enhanced through the Cape Town Air Access project, powered by Wesgro, expands flight options and destinations, enabling cruise guests to easily reroute or extend their itineraries. "This improved accessibility, combined with reliable port operations and compelling shore excursions, reduces operational complexity for cruise lines and strengthens Cape Town's position as a premier cruise hub for the region," added Stander.

### Infrastructure development supports long-term growth

Cape Town's infrastructure development programme ensures the destination remains competitive through 2027 and beyond. The Cruise Terminal at E-Berth, operated by the V&A Waterfront, is undergoing phased upgrades as part of a broader R20 billion precinct redevelopment, enhancing passenger facilities, retail, and public spaces.

Secondary ports are advancing rapidly, with Mossel Bay's new cruise reception

PHOTO: WESGRO CAPE TOWN



Guests of Queen Victoria are welcomed by a traditional band of Cape Town, the Cape Minstrels

facility opening in 2025 to improve passenger handling, while Saldanha Bay has become a formal Port of Entry and Exit, hosting its first cruise call in 2024. Broader harbour improvements by Transnet enhance operational resilience, supporting larger ships, increased calls, and diversified itineraries.

The economic foundation supporting this growth remains robust, with cruise tourism injecting nearly R2 billion per year into the Western Cape, supporting over 2,300 provincial jobs per season, and generating over R3 billion in foreign exchange for South Africa. Employment has shown steady growth across retail and markets, hotels and restaurants, tours, transport services, and port-related operations, while contributions to the national fiscus increased from R144 million in 2022/23 to R259 million in 2024/25.

### Namibia: The next frontier

European Cruise Service expanded into Namibia in late 2025 by establishing African Cruise Service, marking its entry into the South African market. The new regional head office in Walvis Bay will serve as the operational hub, supported by a dedicated Namibian team and CEO Andreas Storl. African Cruise Service will provide shore excursions and ship agency solutions, showcasing Namibia's stunning landscapes, rich culture and diverse wildlife. This strategic move strengthens ECS's presence in Southern Africa's cruise sector with tailored, immersive excursion experiences.

"Over the past two seasons, we have seen strong indicators pointing toward Namibia as the next major growth destination in Africa," explained Storl. "Passenger demand for immersive, nature-rich experiences has increased significantly, and cruise lines are actively seeking more depth and diversity in their African itineraries. At the same time, improvements in Namibian port infrastructure and tourism readiness have created the right moment for sustainable entry into the market."



Africa Cruise Service is based in Namibia

### Industry-driven expansion strategy

A key factor in the decision to expand was direct requests from cruise partners. "After witnessing the success of NaviAsia in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, cruise lines approached us and encouraged us to bring that same standard of innovation and reliability to Namibia and the wider Southern African region. Their confidence reinforced that the timing was right," Storl added.

ECS brings its operational expertise, systems and decades of experience to form the backbone of African Cruise Service. "Our African team has completed intensive training with ECS in Norway to ensure that we deliver the same level of service and operational excellence that our partners know from Scandinavia," stated Storl.



Andreas Storl, CEO of European Cruise Service

### Future regional expansion plans

When asked about future expansion into other African markets, Storl explained, "African Cruise Service gives us the platform needed for controlled, strategic growth across Southern Africa. Starting in Namibia allows us to refine our operations, strengthen our partnerships, and establish our service standards under regional conditions. This places us in an excellent position for expansion into South Africa, a market where demand and cruise line requests have been steadily increasing.

"Our strength is further enhanced by European Cruise Service, whose operational expertise and long-standing reputation provide a stable foundation for expansion. ECS has supported us with structure, quality systems, and intensive team training in Norway, ensuring that our African operations reflect the same high standards.

"Looking ahead over the next three to five years, we are evaluating opportunities in other African destinations. Our focus is on regions that combine natural diversity, cultural richness, and the capability to support premium-level cruise experiences."

### Unique itinerary development

In Namibia, the concept of unique itineraries centers on creating experiences that capture the essence

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_250827773



of the country's dramatic contrasts, Storl noted. African Cruise Service is developing excursions that combine coastal desert landscapes, towering dunes, wildlife encounters, and meaningful cultural connections in ways that feel personal, authentic and immersive.

"Drawing from our NaviAsia experience in designing high-quality, low-impact shore excursions, we are creating tours that prioritize genuine engagement over volume. This includes small group 4x4 desert experiences, guided coastal walks, lagoon birdwatching, historical storytelling, and carefully developed cultural interactions through strong partnerships with local communities," remarked Storl.

### Strategic gateway to regional development

When asked about Namibia's role in the broader development of the African cruise circuit and whether it serves as a strategic gateway to unlocking the wider regional market, Storl said, "As a standalone destination, it offers once-in-a-lifetime landscapes, remarkable wildlife encounters, and a rich, diverse cultural tapestry that resonates across expedition, luxury, and mainstream cruise markets. At the same time, Namibia holds a strategic position along the southern Atlantic cruising corridor. For cruise lines aiming to create more integrated African itineraries, Namibia forms a natural connection between South Africa, Angola, Saint Helena, and the wider West African coastline. Establishing a strong operation in

Namibia supports the development of a more cohesive regional circuit."

### Regional market dynamics and recovery patterns

The African cruise sector has demonstrated remarkable resilience in its post-pandemic recovery, though the journey has been marked by significant operational challenges. According to Patricia Alexandrou, Cruise GM at Akorn Destination Management, "the restart post Covid was not easy" as the industry grappled with unprecedented passenger volumes driven by pent-up demand while simultaneously facing acute skilled staff shortages after many professionals left the sector during the pandemic.

Despite these initial hurdles, the region has achieved substantial growth metrics. South Africa's Cape Town Cruise Terminal recorded 70 ship calls during the 2022-2023 season, generating an estimated R1.2 billion (\$67 million) in economic impact. The infrastructure development momentum has continued with Durban launching the Nelson Mandela MSC Cruise Terminal to establish itself as a premier destination, while Kenya opened a modern cruise terminal in Mombasa designed to accommodate larger vessels and enhance passenger experiences.

The geopolitical landscape has significantly influenced regional cruise patterns, with ongoing conflict in the Red Sea redirecting substantial traffic to African waters. Alexandrou noted

that "cruise bookings in Africa nearly doubled compared to pre-pandemic level" with much of this increase attributed to Red Sea diversions. This resulted in "a massive surge in cruise ships to our region between October 2023 to June 2024 and continuing in 2025/2026." However, the region has also experienced some cancellations for the 2025/2026 season as ships have been repositioned to the Caribbean and other regions as a direct consequence of the Red Sea conflicts.

### Operational challenges and cost pressures

The operational landscape presents both opportunities and constraints. Infrastructure limitations remain a persistent challenge, with limited deep-water berths and inadequate passenger facilities in smaller ports hindering the consistent accommodation of large vessels. Post-pandemic recovery has also impacted ground transportation, with limited coach infrastructure across South Africa requiring vehicle relocation between multiple ports, thereby increasing operating costs.

Cost pressures have intensified across multiple operational areas. Alexandrou explained that "increased operating costs driven by fuel & transport volatility, permit & conservation fees, seasonal labour and logistical challenges coupled with suppliers investing in their product are driving up tour prices at a rate much higher than the average CPI and much higher than cruise line expectations." Additional constraints include limited

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_1492476505



safari infrastructure with restrictions on day visitors designed to minimise environmental impact and protect the experience of in-house guests at private game reserves.

### Expedition cruise growth and product innovation

The expedition cruise segment represents a particularly dynamic growth area. “We continue to see an increase in Expedition vessels to our region. We’ve had the privilege of hosting a number of expedition cruise lines, and actively joining scouting trips exploring new and lesser-known ports in our region,” Alexandrou stated.

The region has witnessed continued increases in expedition vessel visits, with operators actively participating in scouting trips to explore new and lesser-known ports. This aligns with the broader industry trend toward ‘small scale immersive, authentic, sustainable experiences’ that showcase South Africa’s biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Product development has focused on creating distinctive, high-value experiences that differentiate African itineraries. Recent innovations include helicopter transfers to Stellenbosch for curated wine experiences, behind-the-scenes gallery visits with local

artists, private Big Five reserve fly-ins, market-to-table culinary experiences, and cultural performances paired with fine dining at heritage venues. Akorn’s development efforts continue along South Africa’s untapped West Coast, including Saldanha and Langebaan, as well as lesser-visited ports such as Hermanus.

The fundamental appeal of African cruise itineraries remains strong, with “unique itineraries combining wildlife safaris, cultural heritage & immersive experience” continuing to fuel demand, observed Alexandrou. This positions the region well for sustained growth, particularly as cruise lines seek new and exclusive excursions, creating opportunities for curated products targeting small luxury cruise operations.

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_1326446313



### Infrastructure development perspectives

Reflecting on the potential of African markets, Martin Westphal, Group Marketing Director at Adelte, shared his insights. When asked about which African markets beyond Morocco and Algeria hold the strongest potential for cruise infrastructure, Westphal pointed to South Africa as the standout. “I believe South Africa has the strongest potential,” he stated.

As for the technical challenges of installing passenger boarding bridges in African ports, Westphal was quick to dispel any notion that Africa presents unique difficulties. “There are no unique technical challenges for African ports compared to ports such as in the Mediterranean or in Florida, USA,” he explained.

### Strategic challenges and future opportunities

As Cape Town consolidates its position as Africa’s premier cruise gateway, several key challenges and opportunities are shaping the sector’s strategic direction. Strengthening operational capacity during peak cruise calls remains a priority, with ongoing efforts to work closely with officials to increase immigration processing, improve baggage flows, and refine traffic management around the terminal.

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_1354406994



Parallel initiatives are underway to equip secondary ports to handle larger vessels and higher call volumes, supporting a more balanced regional distribution that reduces pressure on Cape Town while expanding economic benefits across the Western Cape.

### Sustainability and community inclusion

Sustainability commitments continue to advance through prioritising cleaner fuels, expanding responsible tourism practices, and enhancing transparency in environmental reporting. These measures align with global standards and reinforce the region's position as a leader in environmentally conscious cruising, addressing growing industry and passenger expectations for sustainable travel options.

Community inclusion represents another key focus area: "Expanding SMME participation remains a key

focus to ensure cruise-related benefits reach more local stakeholders. Initiatives are designed to create broader access for local operators and support inclusive growth across coastal communities," said Stander.

### Premium market opportunities

The remarkable 39% growth in international passenger numbers during 2024/25, driven by strong world-cruise and expedition segments, presents significant opportunities to attract premium travellers, increase onshore spending, and strengthen the region's reputation as a must-visit cruise destination. This high-yield international growth trajectory aligns with global trends toward experiential and luxury travel, positioning Cape Town advantageously for continued premium market expansion.

Year-round event programming offers substantial potential for cruise

line partnerships, with major events such as the Cycle Tour, Jazz Festival, marathons, whale watching, wildflower season, and summer festivals enabling themed itineraries and pre- or post-cruise experiences. Leveraging these events can extend visitor stays, diversify offerings, and create packages that appeal to niche cruise markets seeking authentic cultural and natural experiences.

### Regional integration and future vision

Perhaps most significantly, regional sea-and-safari circuits connecting Cape Town with Namibia, the Garden Route, the West Coast, and broader Southern Africa create opportunities for multi-country, multi-season itineraries with Cape Town as the gateway. This approach supports the development of integrated cruise and land-based products, enhances regional collaboration, and increases the appeal of the Western Cape as a central hub for Southern African cruising experiences.

As Stander notes, this comprehensive development approach ensures that "communities across the province benefit from cruise tourism" while positioning Cape Town as an increasingly attractive proposition for international cruise lines seeking authentic African experiences, operational reliability, and strong economic returns in one of the world's most compelling cruise destinations.

PHOTO: WESGRO CAPE TOWN



A view of the gangway from the Cape Town Cruise Terminal

# Unlocking Africa's potential

*Over the next five years, MSC Cruises aims to lead Africa's cruise market transformation, Volk explains.*

**Q: What factors drove MSC Cruises' investment in African operations, and how do you assess the region's growth potential compared to other emerging cruise markets globally?**

**A:** We as a company always take a keen interest in really special destinations and southern Africa represented a golden opportunity for us in that it offered some untapped locations that we could develop.

Our island destinations at both Portuguese Island and Pomene in Mozambique are perfect examples of this approach.

The potential within the African continent is vast, especially given that it is one of the continents with the longest coastlines and is relatively unexplored.

We truly believe that Africa represents a new potential frontier of cruising and with significant investment into infrastructure development, this can be possible.

**Q: How do you position South Africa as a regional hub for African cruise operations, and what infrastructure developments would accelerate market growth?**

**A:** The infrastructure at the cities that we would call is a major component, for any success within Africa, and southern Africa in particular. This applies to port infrastructure development and shoreside facilities for guest excursions that allow visitors to better understand and explore the destinations on offer.

From a geographical perspective, South Africa is perfectly poised as the major centre for the continent's cruise tourism with both Durban in the east and Cape Town in the west as the two major ports providing easy access to their respective coastlines.

From a marketing perspective this is a position that we drive intently about South Africa so as to attract more travellers to contribute to the acceleration of market growth.

**Q: What are the key operational challenges and opportunities when expanding cruise operations across South Africa, Mauritius, and Namibia?**

**A:** The primary challenge is distance. Looking at the Mediterranean Sea as an example; it is 3,500 kilometres in width with ports in close proximity to each other. Africa is the opposite with few cruise ports in between embarkation points.

South Africa's coastline is 2,700 kilometres in length but there is a vast distance to travel between the available ports.

The integration of visa requirements and rules for travellers to ensure a more seamless process much like in Europe, is something that MSC Cruises is pushing for strongly to ensure alignment and ease of access between the various countries, to facilitate better cruising options for holidaymakers.

**Q: Which emerging African destinations represent the greatest commercial opportunities for MSC, and what factors determine your route development decisions?**

**A:** Mozambique, South Africa and Namibia represent our greatest investments and commercial opportunity.

Mozambique has pristine beaches and a proximity to wildlife and South Africa has a rich history and natural landscapes.

Namibia has a beautiful coastline and the Namib Desert, being the oldest in the world, is a great pull for our guests.

Route deployment is based on available port infrastructure, distance, air access



and of course extraordinary destinations that people want to see and enjoy.

**Q: What role do you see MSC Cruises playing in Africa's cruise market transformation over the next five years, and what capacity or infrastructure investments would support this growth?**

**A:** We are right at the forefront of cruise tourism in Africa having operated in the continent for more than 30 years.

We have a great and deep-rooted understanding of the cruising landscape in the region, and we are committed to positive and all-inclusive growth within the continent.

Given our local expertise and market knowledge we will continuously be part of the equation.

We see three elements that are crucial to support the growth: Infrastructure development in cities and their ports for our guests' shore excursion; marketing and promotion to make people aware of the destinations and what they have to offer and drive interest; plus connectivity and visa regulations to simplify the experience of cruise customers.

With these factors in place, Africa can be opened up for the cruise market to showcase the vibrant, cultural and natural beauty of the continent.



creating synergies with GPH's Canary Islands operations while connecting Northern European departures, transatlantic voyages and West African destinations.

### Ghana's Steady Ascent

Ghana has demonstrated consistent growth in cruise tourism over the past three years, with the Port of Takoradi and Port of Tema serving as primary entry points for international cruise lines exploring West Africa. Patience Dadzie, Director and Senior Travel Consultant at Ashanti African Tours, notes that before 2020, cruise calls were limited and largely expedition-style, but since the resumption of global travel, renewed interest has emerged from both mainstream and luxury expedition operators.

"Through 2026, we project moderate but consistent growth in cruise arrivals as more lines diversify beyond traditional African routes," Dadzie explained. Ghana's reputation as a culturally rich and politically stable destination has helped position it as a key stop for cruise itineraries along the Gulf of Guinea.

The main challenges include limited cruise-dedicated port infrastructure, high operational costs compared to other regions, and the need for stronger regional collaboration to promote multi-country itineraries. However, the country's appeal extends beyond political stability to encompass rich cultural heritage and diverse attractions.

"At Ashanti African Tours, we have developed new and immersive shore excursions that highlight Ghana's diverse heritage," Dadzie explained. These include the 'Roots and Culture' Cape Coast and Elmina tour, which explores UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle, combined with local market visits and drumming and dance workshops.

The company has introduced community-based experiences where

### The Rise of West African Cruise Tourism

Several nations emerge as compelling destinations for both expedition and mainstream cruise operators in West Africa. The region's appeal lies not merely in its untapped potential, but in the profound cultural exchanges and educational opportunities it provides. As Andrea Zito, CEO of Swan Hellenic, observes regarding their operations in the Bijagós: "Many of our clients come away changed. Traveling through the Bijagos offers a new perspective on life – our guests see the challenges these communities face, and it increases their awareness of the world outside their own experience."

### Cape Verde: The Established Gateway

Cape Verde has positioned itself as West Africa's most developed cruise destination, recording remarkable growth with 110,554 passengers and 250 calls in 2024, significantly up from 86,945 passengers and 171 calls in 2023. This archipelago nation has become a regular fixture on cruise itineraries, with frequent arrivals at Mindelo (São Vicente) and Praia (Santiago).

The strategic importance of Cape Verde's position was further validated in 2025 when Global Ports Holding announced its partnership with Mindelo,

marking the company's second African operation after Tunisia's La Goulette. Mehmet Kutman, Chairman and CEO of Global Ports Holding, emphasised the significance of this development: "Our expertise in cruise terminal operations and sustainable development aligns perfectly with Cabo Verde's vision to elevate its standing in the global cruise industry. Together, we aim to create a world-class destination that celebrates the unique charm and vibrancy of São Vicente and Santo Antão."

The collaboration encompasses a comprehensive Cruise Destination Development Program featuring marketing strategies, stakeholder training and sustainable tourism practices. Ireneu Camacho, Chairman and CEO of Ports of Cabo Verde, stated: "This collaboration marks a significant step forward in supporting the development, management, and operational success of the Mindelo Cruise Port. We are confident that this partnership will bring mutual benefits, enhancing the infrastructure and services of one of the most important maritime gateways in Cabo Verde, while contributing to the continued growth and prosperity of our country, mainly in the cruise sector."

Strategically positioned off northwest Africa, Mindelo serves as a gateway to São Vicente and Santo Antão at the crossroads of major Atlantic routes,

PHOTO: SWAN HELLENIC



A unique animal encounter for SH Vega passengers in Parc National de Conkouati-Douli, Republic of the Congo

visitors interact with traditional chiefs and artisans, learn Adinkra symbol printing, and sample Ghanaian cuisine prepared by local women’s groups. Key upcoming events that will appeal to cruise passengers in 2026/27 include the Akwasidae Festival in Kumasi, the Panfest and Emancipation celebrations in Cape Coast, and Chale Wote Street Art Festival in Accra.

“We see significant potential in expedition cruising as part of Ghana’s long-term tourism strategy,” Dadzie adds. The coastline stretches over 500 km and offers opportunities for small-ship exploration of lesser-known areas such as Ada Foah, Axim, and Ankobra, where pristine beaches, mangroves, and traditional fishing communities can be experienced sustainably. These sites are ideal for educational and eco-focused expeditions that align with Ghana’s responsible tourism agenda.

Cruise tourism provides direct income for local guides, transport providers, craft vendors, and cultural performers, particularly in Cape Coast and Takoradi. The economic ripple effect is evident in increased demand for hospitality, logistics and artisanal products.

Infrastructure development continues to enhance Ghana’s cruise readiness. Ongoing and planned improvements include the Takoradi Port expansion and modernisation of Tema Port, designed to handle larger vessels and

improve passenger handling facilities. “These developments, coupled with government and private-sector collaboration, will further enhance Ghana’s readiness to welcome more cruise visitors,” Dadzie concludes.

### Liberia’s Historic Return to Cruise Tourism

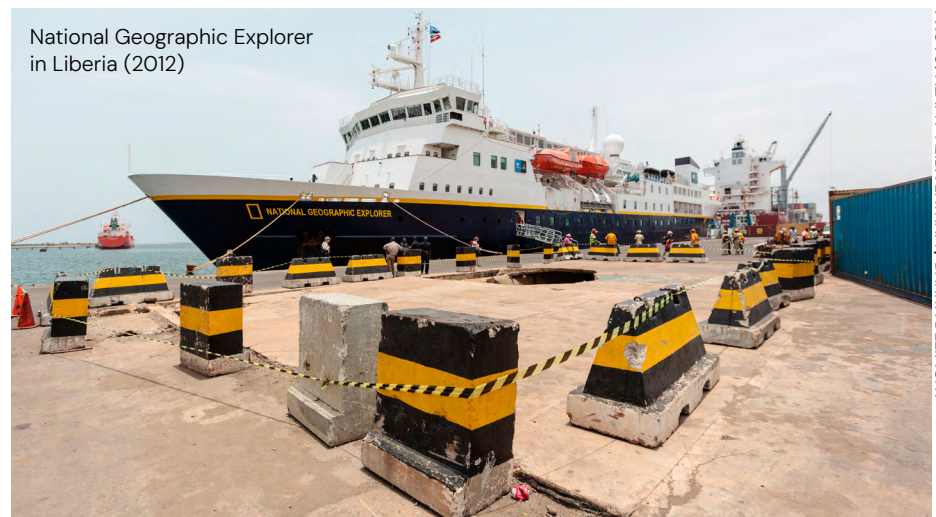
Liberia represents one of the most compelling stories in West Africa’s cruise renaissance. In April 2024, SH Diana made maritime history as the first cruise vessel to call at Liberia since 2012, when National Geographic Explorer last visited the post-war nation. This landmark arrival at Freeport of Monrovia brought 115 passengers ashore for immersive experiences at key historical sites including Providence Island, Providence Baptist Church,

Ducor Hill, the National Museum, and Unity Park. Passengers explored the colonial heart of Africa’s oldest independent republic, echoing the brand’s emphasis on underexplored destinations with local significance.

While infrastructure and sightseeing may be limited compared to more established cruise destinations, passengers are welcomed with warmth, and every call provides new layers of discovery and cross-cultural connection.

The call represents a significant milestone for Liberia’s emerging tourism sector, orchestrated by the Liberia National Tourism Association under the leadership of Madam Mai Bright-Urey, the primary umbrella organisation representing private sector tourism stakeholders in the country. Minister of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism Jerolinmek Matthew Piah officially welcomed SH Diana on behalf of the Government of Liberia with Piah emphasising that the cruise call directly supports President Joseph Boakai’s vision for a viable tourism industry, with the call by SH Diana bringing significant value to the country.

Liberia presents substantial untapped potential across multiple tourism segments, including eco-tourism, adventure travel, wildlife experiences, and coastal and marine tourism.



National Geographic Explorer in Liberia (2012)

PHOTO: ALAMY-ALIDA LATHAM / DANITA DELMONT

PHOTO: GPH & ENAPOR

Cape Verde’s Mindelo Cruise Port opened its doors to the world in June 2025



For cruise planners and operators, Liberia illustrates both the potential and practice of expanding into less-traveled West African markets, balancing adventurous itineraries with robust local engagement, and offering passengers a glimpse of destinations not available through mainstream tourism.

Addressing common industry concerns about safety or operational risk, Zito offers reassurance: “Some people think that we aren’t prudent. The fact is that we have contacts in government and local authorities working to ensure our safety. We do not take any chances, we know what we are doing.” He also dispels misconceptions about relative safety, using Liberia as an illustration that “some countries considered dangerous are often just as safe, if not more so, than many places familiar to guests.”

### Côte d’Ivoire’s Infrastructure Leadership

Abidjan Port has emerged as a significant West African cruise hub, demonstrating its operational capabilities through a historic milestone achieved in November 2024. The port simultaneously welcomed two major cruise vessels, Norwegian Sky and Riviera, marking the first time Abidjan has hosted dual cruise ship operations.

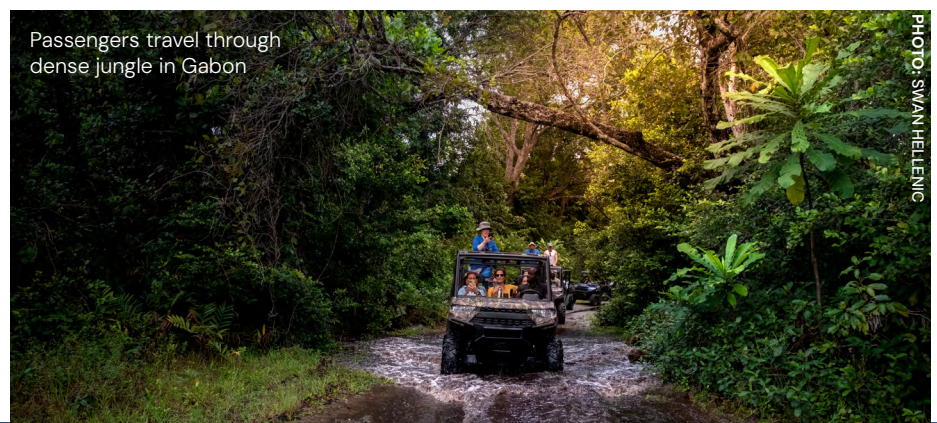
The successful dual berthing operation took place at the port’s new Grain Terminal, a state-of-the-art facility spanning 9.5 hectares with a 700-meter quay length and 13.5-meter

draft capacity. Commissioned in May 2023, this modern terminal has become the cornerstone of Abidjan’s cruise operations. Oceania Cruises, Regent Seven Seas Cruises and Silversea also number among the cruise vessels calling Abidjan.

The passenger experience in Côte d’Ivoire encompasses the country’s rich cultural and historical heritage through curated shore excursions. Visitors can explore Treichville’s Artisanal Village, the Museum of Civilizations, and Saint Paul’s Cathedral in Abidjan Plateau, while also venturing to Grand-Bassam’s beaches and National Costume Museum, and Bingerville’s Botanical Garden.

### Sierra Leone’s Resilience and Renewal

Sierra Leone presents a compelling narrative of resilience and renewal for cruise operators seeking authentic West African experiences. Silversea calls at both Freetown, the historic capital, and Tokeh, a coastal resort town twenty miles south featuring one of West Africa’s largest and most attractive beaches. Swan Hellenic also includes



Passengers travel through dense jungle in Gabon

PHOTO: SWANHELLENIC

Freetown in its ‘Cruise West Africa: Cultures and Wild Coasts’ itinerary.

Freetown’s historical significance as the ‘Province of Freedom,’ founded in 1787 as a British settlement for freed slaves, provides cruise passengers with profound insights into the transatlantic slave trade. Key sites include the Cotton Tree and King’s Yard Gate, which symbolise the city’s role as both a haven for formerly enslaved people and the principal base for British suppression of the slave trade. Colonial architecture remains visible throughout the city, with British influence best observed at the National Museum and preserved Victorian railway system.

The city has emerged as one of West Africa’s most dynamic destinations, characterised by bustling streets filled with Krio dialect and unmistakable optimism despite its challenging 1990s civil conflict history. The diverse cultural heritage manifests through colourful Krio architecture, rice-based cuisine, and vibrant beach culture that reflects the legacy of settlers from Nova Scotia, Jamaica and indigenous communities.

The Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary represents a flagship attraction, located in rainforest outside Freetown. This facility rescues and rehabilitates endangered primates while providing visitors with conservation education and close wildlife encounters. The Western Area Forest Reserve, recognised by UNESCO as a tentative World Heritage Site, offers verdant landscapes and diverse ecosystems within easy reach of the port.

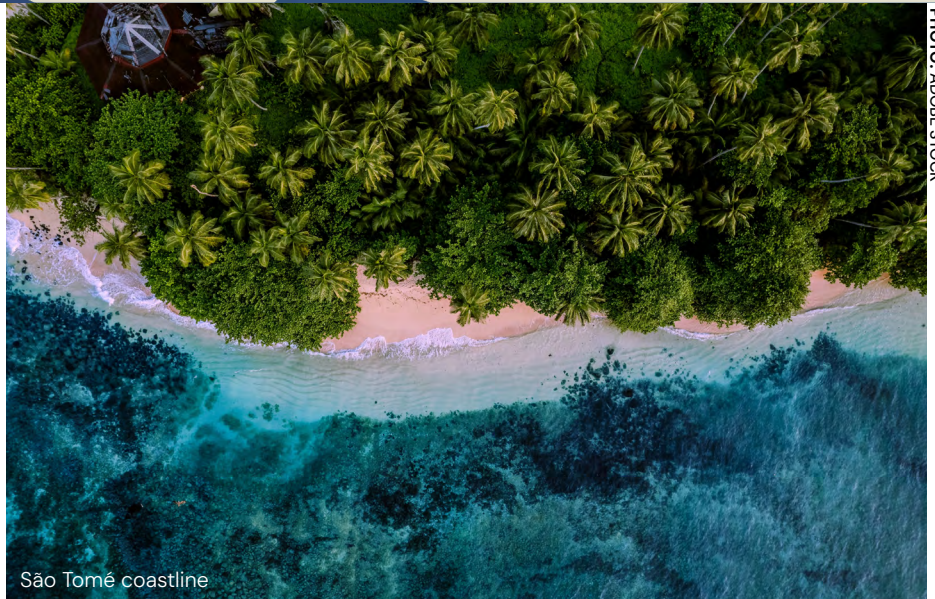
Silversea’s expedition programming includes unique cultural experiences such as Flying Stars Amputee Soccer Games and historical excursions to Bunce Island, a former slave fort that played a significant role in forced transportation to the Americas.

Local operators like VSL Travel have developed specialised cruise ship handling capabilities, offering professionally guided tours with certified guides and personalised service. Their excursions combine historical exploration with natural attractions, including beach relaxation with coastal scenery views.

Tokeh offers contrasting experiences focused on natural beauty and coastal relaxation. Originally founded by a Sherbo fisherman and developed with French investment in 1968, this fishing and tourism town now supports 6,000 residents with modern amenities including resorts and community facilities, surrounded by mountains, forests and pristine coastline.

### São Tomé and Príncipe: Pristine Paradise

São Tomé and Príncipe combine pristine tropical landscapes with fast developing tourism infrastructure. This volcanic archipelago in the Gulf of Guinea offers cruise passengers access to some of Africa’s most unspoiled



São Tomé coastline

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

natural environments, from dense rainforests and dramatic volcanic peaks to pristine beaches and exceptional marine biodiversity.

The islands’ main attractions centre on their remarkable natural heritage and Portuguese colonial legacy. São Tomé Island features the towering Pico de São Tomé, the country’s highest peak at 2,024 meters, surrounded by lush rainforest that supports endemic species and exceptional birdwatching opportunities. The capital city of São Tomé showcases well-preserved Portuguese colonial architecture, vibrant markets, and the historic Fort São Sebastião. Obo National Park, accessible from São Tomé port calls, protects significant portions of the island’s endemic rainforest ecosystems

and provides cruise passengers with guided nature experiences featuring rare bird species and unique flora.

Príncipe Island, designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, offers even more pristine environments with untouched beaches, crystal-clear waters, and some of the world’s best diving sites featuring diverse marine life including sea turtles, dolphins and whale sharks. The island’s remote Ilhéu Bom Bom provides an exclusive tropical paradise experience, while Santo António, the island’s capital, offers intimate cultural encounters and colonial architecture on a smaller, more personal scale than São Tomé.

Cultural attractions include traditional roças (colonial plantations) that have been converted into eco-lodges and

Mount Cameroon



PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK - DIGITAL DREAMS STUDIO - GENERATED WITH AI

PHOTO: SWAN HELLENIC



A settlement in the Bijagós Archipelago, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve located off the coast of Guinea-Bissau

cultural centers, providing cruise passengers with insights into the islands’ cocoa and coffee heritage. The local Creole culture, influenced by Portuguese, African, and Angolan traditions, offers authentic cultural experiences through music, dance, and cuisine that emphasise fresh seafood and tropical fruits.

Several premium cruise lines now include São Tomé and Príncipe in their West African itineraries. Hapag-Lloyd Cruises calls at both islands, featuring Ilhéu Bom Bom on Príncipe and São Tomé for access to Obo National Park. Swan Hellenic’s ‘Southwest Africa Cruise’ includes comprehensive coverage with calls at São Tomé and Santo António on Príncipe Island. Silversea regularly calls at São Tomé on its African coastal expeditions, while other expedition cruise operators are increasingly recognising the destination’s appeal for high-end adventure tourism. The islands’ strategic location makes them ideal for itineraries combining West and Central African destinations, particularly when paired with nearby Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.

Recent tourism development initiatives significantly enhance the destination’s tourism prospects. In 2025, São Tomé

and Príncipe validated its inaugural Tourism Satellite Accounts with UN Economic Commission for Africa support, providing accurate economic impact data for the first time. This evidence-based approach to tourism policy, championed by Minister Nilda Borges de Mata, demonstrates the government’s commitment to professional tourism development.

The country’s four strategic pillars for tourism development include broadening tourist attractions, encouraging local partnerships between tourism operators and local farmers and fishermen, regular data

updates, and improving air connectivity and service quality.

### Regional Market Growth and Economic Impact

Senegal’s travel and tourism market was projected to reach US\$163.20m in revenue by 2025, according to a 2024 report by Statista. The market demonstrates a projected annual growth rate of 5.77% from 2025–2030, with total market volume expected to reach US\$216.08m by 2030. Senegal’s tourism industry is diversifying with an emphasis on eco-tourism and cultural experiences.



Authentic, historic experiences await passengers in Sierra Leone

PHOTO: HOLLY PAVNE

PHOTO: SWAN HELLENIC

Akodessawa Fetish Market, Lomé, Togo offers visitors a unique glimpse into centuries-old spiritual practices in West Africa



The same Statista report estimated that Gambia’s travel and tourism market would reach US\$19.46m in revenue by 2025. The market shows a projected annual growth rate of 6.69% from 2025 to 2030, resulting in an expected market volume of US\$26.90m by 2030. Gambia’s tourism industry is heavily reliant on ecotourism.

### Togo & Benin: Emerging Dual-Port Opportunities

Togo and Benin represent emerging opportunities in West Africa’s developing cruise market, positioned along the Gulf of Guinea with just 90km separating Lomé from Cotonou, enabling efficient multi-port itineraries that maximise passenger experiences while minimising sailing times.

Lomé, Togo serves as the principal cruise gateway, accommodating nearly 40 different ethnic groups within its 1.5m metropolitan area. The port’s expanding infrastructure and strategic location support growing maritime connectivity. Cruise passengers can experience authentic Voodoo ceremonies, explore the renowned Fetish Market, and visit the Grand Market, National Museum, and Cathedral. The city’s blend of colonial architecture and cultural diversity provides compelling shore excursion opportunities, while premium hotel infrastructure supports cruise extensions.

Cotonou, Benin’s chief seaport offers cruise operators access to distinct cultural perspectives despite

geographical proximity to Togo. The port has undergone significant modernisation, with the Terminal 5 expansion project enhancing overall maritime infrastructure capacity. Benin recently introduced a 72-hour visa exemption for cruise passengers, significantly simplifying entry procedures for maritime tourism. The Port of Cotonou’s 2025 AIVP membership, alongside the city government, demonstrates coordinated commitment to sustainable port-city development and modern maritime standards.

Both destinations benefit from established ground handling services and comprehensive regional tour operator support. The short distances between Benin, Togo, and neighbouring Ghana create opportunities for cruise lines to offer comparative cultural experiences while maintaining operational efficiency through clustered port calls, making these markets viable components for diversified West African cruise itineraries with proper security planning.

Both destinations maintain Level 2 travel advisories requiring increased caution due to regional security concerns with the Gulf of Guinea experiencing ongoing maritime security challenges.

### The Bijagós Archipelago: UNESCO Wilderness

The Bijagós Archipelago off Guinea-Bissau has emerged as one of West Africa’s most compelling expedition cruise destinations. This 88-island UNESCO Biosphere Reserve spans over 13,000sq km with only 20 inhabited islands, offering cruise passengers access to pristine marine ecosystems largely untouched by mass tourism.

The archipelago delivers exceptional wildlife encounters including saltwater hippopotamuses, West African manatees, and over 500 bird species within extensive mangrove forests and pristine beaches. Culturally, the indigenous Bijagós people maintain traditional matriarchal societies, elaborate initiation ceremonies, and

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK



Dakar, Senegal, West Africa

Yaounde, capital of Cameroon



PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_27385266

ancestral worship practices that provide authentic immersion opportunities for expedition cruise passengers.

The destination’s UNESCO status and fragile ecosystem require careful visitor management, making it particularly suitable for small-ship expedition operations rather than large-scale cruising. Remote location and limited infrastructure necessitate self-sufficient vessels capable of extended operations in undeveloped waters.

Ponant Explorations Group and Swan Hellenic are among the operators visiting the archipelago, located approximately 20 kilometres off Guinea-Bissau’s coast. Popular islands on cruise itineraries include Carache, Kere, Caravela, Orango, Uno, Bolama, Cavalos, Joao Vieira and Canhabaque.

Swan Hellenic’s supply delivery operations during pandemic-related ferry service suspensions demonstrates the strategic importance of cruise services to isolated island communities, while Ponant’s community investment approach in Anipoc village – including school reconstruction, and literacy programs for pupils and 200 adults – shows how cruise operators can establish sustainable tourism models in emerging African destinations, combining responsible development with long-term destination viability.

### Cameroon: Strategic Gateway Potential

Cameroon presents a compelling opportunity for cruise operators as a potential strategic gateway between West and Central African cruise circuits.

The Port of Kribi represents Cameroon’s most promising cruise development, designed as a deep-water facility capable of handling larger vessels. Bolloré Africa Logistics is developing a multipurpose terminal including dedicated cruise terminal facilities alongside cargo and passenger ferry operations, providing cruise operators with purpose-built facilities and modern passenger services along Cameroon’s coastline.

Mount Cameroon, the region’s highest peak and active volcano, offers world-class trekking experiences for adventurous passengers. Limbe features distinctive black-sand beaches with excellent seafood dining, while Kribi showcases pristine white-sand beaches and the unique Lobé Waterfalls, where freshwater cascades directly into the Atlantic Ocean. Cultural

attractions include vibrant markets, traditional ceremonies, and diverse ethnic communities representing Cameroon’s 250+ ethnic groups.

Cameroon maintains stable political conditions in coastal regions relevant to cruise operations. The developing cruise infrastructure at Kribi, combined with natural attractions and improved visa procedures, positions Cameroon as an emerging destination for expedition cruises and cultural tourism programs.

### Equatorial Guinea: Africa’s Most Untapped Market

Equatorial Guinea represents one of Africa’s most untapped cruise markets, offering expedition cruise operators access to the continent’s least visited destination. With an estimated 6,000 annual visitors according to United

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_1028008366



Island of Annobon  
Equatorial Guinea

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_907061309



Libreville Gabon

Nations tourism data, this Spanish-speaking nation presents unique positioning opportunities for cruise lines seeking authentic, undiscovered African experiences.

The country’s geography spans five volcanic islands and the mainland territory of Rio Muni, strategically positioned between Cameroon and Gabon. Bioko Island, home to capital city Malabo, serves as the primary tourist gateway and represents the most viable cruise destination within the archipelago. The island’s Spanish colonial architecture provides distinctive cultural appeal, while its dramatic volcanic landscape, crowned by the 3,011-meter Pico Basilé, offers compelling expedition cruise content.

Swan Hellenic operates voyages to Equatorial Guinea, calling at Malabo and exploring Corisco Island (Mandji). The 44-kilometre offshore Corisco Island delivers pristine marine environments with exceptional diving and snorkeling opportunities, featuring diverse marine life including rays and tropical fish species. The island’s white sand beaches and palm-fringed coastlines provide classic tropical expedition experiences, enhanced by traditional cultural performances and village tours that offer authentic local engagement.

Operational challenges significantly impact cruise viability in Equatorial Guinea. Poor airlift connectivity limits pre- and post-cruise extensions, potentially affecting passenger flow and itinerary flexibility. The country’s

limited tourism infrastructure requires careful logistical planning.

Security considerations remain however the country’s oil wealth has contributed to relative political stability compared to regional neighbors.

### Gabon: Africa’s Last Eden

Gabon is positioning itself as one of Africa’s most compelling new cruise destinations, with Conde Nast Traveller ranking it among the best places to visit in Africa for 2026. The country’s strategic location as the closest mainland nation to São Tomé and Príncipe creates natural itinerary synergies for cruise operators seeking to combine Central African coastal experiences with Atlantic island destinations.

Located just 20 miles north of the Equator, Gabon offers cruise passengers access to some of Africa’s most pristine rainforest and marine environments. Over 70% of the country consists of lush rainforest that plays a vital role in the Congo Basin ecosystem, while its coastline features sandy beaches, tranquil lagoons, and unique wildlife encounters that transition from forest to ocean environments.

Silversea is among the cruise lines calling at Pointe Denis, Gabon’s premier beach destination situated at the confluence of the Gabon estuary and Atlantic waters. This peninsula provides cruise passengers with access to Pongara National Park, a sprawling

landscape of dense rainforest and mangrove swamps that supports diverse wildlife including chimpanzees, gorillas, elephants, and buffalo. The region serves as crucial breeding habitat for endangered sea turtles. Green, hawksbill, and olive ridley turtles also utilise these protected shores, offering passengers exceptional wildlife viewing opportunities.

Swan Hellenic operates more extensive programming in Gabon, dedicating two full days to land expeditions that showcase the country’s rich cultural heritage, including encounters with the Fang people, the largest ethnic group, whose music and dance traditions provide authentic cultural experiences for passengers.

Further options include Loango National Park, frequently dubbed ‘Africa’s Last Eden,’ offering exceptional gorilla trekking experiences, creating compelling shore excursion opportunities for expedition cruise operators.

The cruise industry timing aligns perfectly with Gabon’s emerging luxury tourism infrastructure. January 2026 will see the opening of Loango Savannah Camp on the iconic Iguela Lagoon, where forest elephants traverse between rainforest and coastline famous for surfing hippos.

The country’s focus on conservation-forward tourism aligns well with expedition cruise values, however tourism infrastructure remains

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_175452725

Doucki Canyon in the Fouta Djallon highlands during Harmattan season, Guinea, West Africa



developing, and wildlife sightings require specialised local expertise.

### Guinea: Highland adventures and coastal opportunities

Guinea presents a developing opportunity in the West African cruise market, anchored by its strategic port of Conakry, which handles approximately 90% of the country’s foreign trade. Located in the Gulf of Guinea on Africa’s west Atlantic coast, Conakry’s cruise port sits in the Kaloum district and has water depths of 10–13 meters suitable for most cruise vessels at high tide.

The port’s location within the Autonomous Port of Conakry complex positions cruise passengers close to downtown areas, fishing districts, and cargo facilities that showcase Guinea’s role as a regional trade hub. Facilities remain basic, though infrastructure development continues as Guinea seeks to diversify its economy through tourism initiatives.

Guinea’s primary attractions centre on the dramatic landscapes of the Fouta Djallon highlands, which provide exceptional hiking opportunities and serve as the source region for several major West African rivers, including the Niger. These mountainous plateaus offer cruise passengers access to some of West Africa’s most spectacular scenery, with multi-day trekking expeditions available through local operators. The coastal plain features mangrove ecosystems and smaller beaches, while the capital Conakry showcases vibrant markets and cultural

sites that reflect Guinea’s diverse ethnic heritage, including Mandinka, Fula, and Susu communities.

Currently, cruise activity to Guinea remains limited. The optimal visiting season runs from October through April when weather conditions are most favorable for both cruise operations and shore excursions. The port’s proximity to Conakry International Airport, located 10–15 kilometres away with 30–45 minute taxi transfers, provides reasonable connectivity for fly-cruise operations, though airlift remains limited compared to other West African destinations.

The US State Department maintains travel advisories citing considerable risk of crimes of opportunity, particularly in Conakry. Guinea’s political situation can experience unpredictable demonstrations and protests that occasionally result in violence.

The country’s developing tourism infrastructure means that shore excursion quality can vary significantly,

requiring careful vetting of local operators and guides.

Despite these challenges, Guinea offers authentic West African experiences for expedition cruise passengers seeking destinations beyond traditional tourist circuits. The country’s rich cultural heritage, dramatic highland landscapes, and position as a regional trade hub provide compelling content for adventure-focused cruise segments. The Fouta Djallon region, in particular, offers exceptional opportunities for active shore excursions including cultural village visits, hiking, and wildlife observation.

### Democratic Republic of Congo & Nigeria: Operational boundaries

Swan Hellenic operates along the West African coastline, calling at most countries in the region with the notable exceptions of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria. This extensive coverage has made several West African destinations accessible to cruise passengers for the first time.

The cruise line’s operations in the region often involve direct engagement with local leaders and communities. In many cases, Swan Hellenic vessels are the first or only expedition ships to visit these ports, establishing initial cruise tourism connections in previously unserved destinations.

Last year, French cruise company Expeditions Ducret launched its Congo cruises, operating the

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_93044797

Conakry capital of Guinea



Princess Ngalessa. The Congo Basin river system presents a unique but challenging opportunity for river cruise development across three Central African nations. The primary navigable route spans approximately 800 kilometres through the Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Central African Republic, following the Congo River and its major tributaries, the Alima and Sangha rivers.

Brazzaville often serves as the natural gateway for these operations, though the region operates under seasonal constraints. Navigation remains possible only from September to December when water levels permit access to smaller tributaries. The shallow nature of these waterways requires vessels with minimal draft.

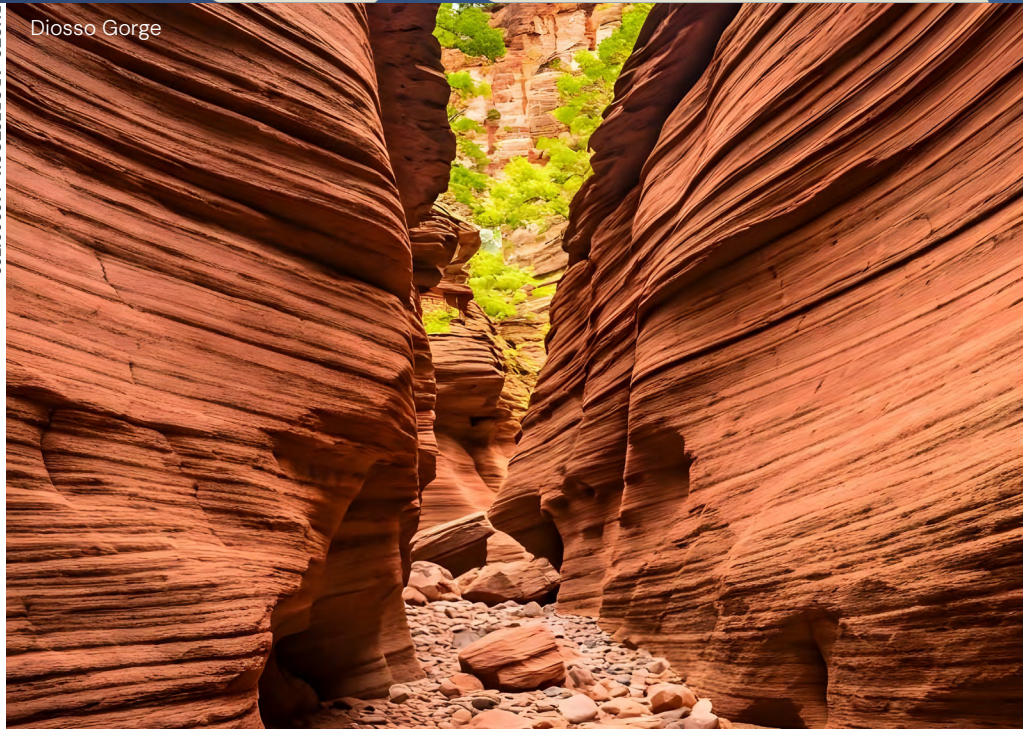
The primary attraction for international visitors centres on wildlife access, particularly Dzanga Sangha National Park in the CAR, which holds UNESCO World Heritage status and contains significant forest elephant populations alongside other large mammals. The DRC offers rare bonobo tracking opportunities through community-based conservation programs, representing one of the few places worldwide where these endangered primates can be observed in their natural habitat. Despite these compelling natural assets, development faces considerable constraints, including political instability across all three countries that creates ongoing security concerns. Current operations serve a specialised market of adventure travelers who prioritise authentic wilderness access over conventional cruising.

### Republic of Congo: Central Africa’s River and Ocean Gateway

The Republic of Congo (Congo–Brazzaville) represents one of Central Africa’s most untapped cruise markets, offering expedition operators access to pristine Congo Basin rainforests and emerging coastal tourism infrastructure. While cruise tourism remains nascent, the country’s April 2024 milestone of welcoming its first foreign tourist cruise

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_142961732

Diosso Gorge



ship, SH Vega, to Pointe-Noire signals growing recognition of its potential as a less-travelled destination for adventure-focused cruise segments.

The country’s dual appeal lies in its extensive river system and Atlantic coastline, creating opportunities for both river cruise operations and ocean expedition calls. The Congo Basin, one of the world’s great tropical rainforests, provides river cruise operators with access to remote wilderness areas supporting gorillas, chimpanzees and forest elephants, alongside authentic cultural encounters with traditional communities along tributary routes.

Ocean expedition cruises typically call at Pointe-Noire, the country’s principal Atlantic port, with Silversea’s Silver Wind and Swan Hellenic currently featuring the destination on their West African itineraries. Noble Caledonia’s 2026 ‘Coastal Cities & Cultures of West Africa’ voyage aboard Hebridean Sky sails from Cape Town to Ghana, with a call in the Republic of Congo.

Such calls provide access to coastal attractions including Diosso Gorge, a dramatic red sandstone canyon, and Conkouati-Douli National Park, which encompasses coastal forests, mangroves and marine turtle nesting

sites. The nearby Tchimpounga Chimpanzee Sanctuary, a Jane Goodall Institute project, offers compelling shore excursion content for expedition passengers.

River cruise operations present significant growth potential, with several operators now offering Congo River expeditions. Expeditions Ducret operates eight-night ‘Mighty Congo’ cruises along the Congo and Alima rivers from Brazzaville. These river cruises provide access to Nouabalé–Ndoki National Park and other remote rainforest reserves that remain inaccessible to traditional tourism.

Brazzaville, the capital, serves as a primary river cruise embarkation point and offers cultural attractions including colonial architecture, vibrant markets in Poto–Poto and Bacongo districts, and the unique sapeur culture. The nearby Lésio–Louna Gorilla Reserve provides gorilla viewing opportunities within reach of the capital, while Les Rapides offers scenic river landscapes popular with expedition passengers.

Infrastructure limitations present both challenges and opportunities, while river cruise navigation depends on seasonal water levels, requiring flexible itinerary planning.



Variety Cruises CEO  
Filippos Venetopoulos

**Variety Cruises CEO Filippos Venetopoulos details the cruise line’s strategic approach to African cruise operations, emphasising long-term community partnerships and authentic cultural immersion.**

‘Africa is a passion project for our family for over a decade,’ Venetopoulos explains. ‘When our President, Lakis Venetopoulos, first encounters the West Africa route through a Stanford University charter, he immediately recognises it as a turning point for our small-ship philosophy. It represents everything Variety Cruises stands for: undiscovered destinations, authentic human connection, and immersive travel off the mass-tourism grid.’

The line’s African operations align with its founding principles established in 1949, evolving from Zeus Tours’ archaeological voyages to today’s ‘Small is Our Luxury’ philosophy. ‘After the pandemic pause, returning to Africa feels both natural and necessary,’ Venetopoulos notes. ‘Alongside our commitments in the Seychelles and Cape Verde, West Africa forms one of our most meaningful navigation routes.’

Variety Cruises integrates community engagement initiatives into its seven-night cruises along the Senegal and

Gambia River. During calls at the Gambian town of Kuntaur, passengers participate in the Kuntaur Film Festival, a weekly event where passengers, crew members and locals construct an open-air cinema for community film screenings. The itinerary includes Tendaba, a Muslim fishing village with approximately 600 residents, where passengers experience traditional community life. Onboard programming features performances with traditional West African instruments, providing cultural context for the shore experiences.

Variety Cruises’ first African explorations in 2011 establish a

relationship with the village of Lamin Koto, where community leaders identify education as their priority. ‘That conversation becomes the birth of the Lamin Koto School, now supporting 100+ children with English–Arabic education, running on a sustainable structure, and expanding through initiatives such as the Rose Museum, the Inside Out art project, and our collaboration with the Explorers Club,’ Venetopoulos says.

The recently launched Rose Museum represents the latest expansion of community programming. ‘The museum (ROSE: Real Objects Spread Education) houses extraordinary





Caption

items donated by the Explorers Club, including: a piece of a NASA spacecraft, meteorites, an Explorers Club flag that travels to space, Giannis Antetokounmpo's signed shoes, a personalised book by Deepak Chopra, portraits by Emma Hepburn Ferrer (Audrey Hepburn's granddaughter) inspired by JR's Inside Out project, educational maps, compasses, books, and materials donated by guests and friends,' he explains.

Venetopoulos identifies time as the primary operational challenge in African cruise development. 'Authentic itineraries, especially in regions untouched by large ships, cannot be designed from behind a desk – they require years of scouting, human connection, experimentation, and continuous refinement,' he says. 'This is the kind of work that no AI system – not even ChatGPT – can replicate. Designing a meaningful African itinerary is like being a detective of cultural immersion: you discover, adjust, return, update, and elevate the program year after year.'

Infrastructure limitations present ongoing challenges, including 'limited port infrastructure, regions with inconsistent access to electricity and clean water, logistical complexities

in sustaining long-term educational and cultural projects.' However, Venetopoulos views these conditions as integral to the authentic African experience. 'We do not wish for remote destinations to mirror the polished uniformity of Monaco. The diversity – cultural, environmental, human – is what gives travel meaning.'

West African passengers demonstrate distinct characteristics compared to Mediterranean guests. 'Our West Africa traveller tends to be highly curious, deeply culturally motivated, often globally experienced, and eager to connect meaningfully with local life. Their expectations revolve around storytelling, immersion, community, and purpose,' Venetopoulos observes.

The company positions itself uniquely within the expedition cruise sector. 'Variety Cruises occupies a unique space at the intersection of: expedition access, boutique comfort, and regenerative cultural immersion,' he explains. 'We are not a traditional cruise line, and we are not a hardcore expedition operator. We are the bridge: small enough to reach where others cannot, but soulful enough to connect travellers with the people and places we visit.'

Through Variety Cares foundation, the company implements comprehensive community engagement programs. 'Through Variety Cares, our foundation guided by Lakis Venetopoulos' belief that "we don't just believe in giving back – we believe in giving," our mission is clear: to create a better world at sea through clean oceans, gender equality, and education for all,' Venetopoulos states.

'Africa is central to our long-term vision,' Venetopoulos confirms. 'We aim to expand our presence not alone, but together with partners: tour operators, charter organisations, and mission-aligned institutions. We want to open up the destination more broadly and help place Africa on the world map of boutique, responsible small-ship exploration.'

By 2030, Africa remains one of three strategic pillars alongside Greece and global Limited Collection adventures. 'Africa embodies everything our company stands for since 1949: purposeful travel, cultural immersion, and creating a better world at sea. It is where small ships matter most – where travel can still change lives, including our own,' Venetopoulos concludes.

Aicha plays with one of our crewmembers after surgery on our hospital ship.



Crew member Anna van Doorn helps student Abigail look through binoculars during a sail.



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PHOTO: BÉNIN TOURISME



Benin is home to lush landscapes and rich biodiversity

**B**enin has strategically evolved from hosting occasional cruise calls to establishing itself as a compelling anchor point for Gulf of Guinea itineraries.

The momentum became apparent in 2025 when Seabourn Sojourn made its historic call to Benin’s shores, marking what industry observers recognise as a watershed moment for West African cruising. According to Bénin Tourisme, the country’s government tourism development agency, this milestone represents far more than a single port call. “Over the past two to three years, cruise tourism in Benin has moved from a niche activity to an emerging growth segment, supported by increasing interest from premium and luxury cruise lines,” the agency reports.

This evolution reflects broader industry trends as cruise operators seek destinations that offer genuine cultural immersion rather than manufactured experiences. Benin’s appeal lies in its ability to deliver what modern cruise passengers increasingly demand: authentic encounters with living heritage, contemporary creativity and spiritual traditions that remain integral to daily life.

### Strategic positioning in a competitive market

The timing of Benin’s emergence as a cruise destination is particularly astute. As Caribbean and Mediterranean itineraries face capacity constraints and homogenisation concerns, cruise lines are actively diversifying their deployment strategies. Bénin Tourisme

acknowledges that “our main challenge, still limited global awareness of West Africa as a cruising region, is also a strategic opportunity.”

This positioning reflects sophisticated destination marketing thinking. Rather than viewing obscurity as a barrier, Benin recognises that in an experience-driven cruise market, being undiscovered can be a significant competitive advantage. The agency emphasises that “as itineraries become increasingly experience-driven, Benin is uniquely positioned to stand out with its profound history, living traditions and contemporary creative scene.”

Rather than pursuing volume growth, Bénin Tourisme projects “steady, qualitative growth driven by small and mid-size vessels prioritising authentic cultural immersion” for 2026. This strategy aligns with industry trends toward smaller ships and more intimate destination experiences.

### Product development and shore excursion innovation

Recognising that shore excursions often determine passenger satisfaction and repeat visitation, Benin has undertaken

comprehensive product development to match international cruise standards. The destination has “recently expanded its excursion portfolio to better reflect the richness of its languages, culture and heritage, with new art and design tours that give cruise guests exclusive access to contemporary studios, designer workshops, and high-end creative boutiques in Cotonou.”

Premium cruise passengers increasingly seek experiences that combine cultural authenticity with contemporary relevance, and Benin’s integration of traditional heritage sites with modern creative spaces addresses this demand directly.

The destination’s flagship offerings remain rooted in its unique cultural assets. Excursions to Ouidah, described as the “historical and spiritual capital of Vodun,” provide passengers with encounters unavailable elsewhere in the cruise world. Similarly, visits to Porto-Novo showcase “royal and Afro-Brazilian heritage,” while Ganvié offers access to “one of Africa’s most emblematic stilt villages.”

Complementing these cultural experiences, Benin has developed premium amenities that meet luxury cruise passenger expectations, including “wellness treatments at the Sofitel Spa and a coastal golfing experience at the Ouidah Golf Club.”

### Expedition cruising opportunities

Bénin Tourisme recognises that “expedition cruising is expected to play an increasingly important role in Benin’s tourism strategy.”



The Bouche du Roy estuary where the Mono River meets the Atlantic Ocean

PHOTO: BÉNIN TOURISME

PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_518221450

Lake Nokoue and Ganvie village



The country's natural and cultural assets fully align with expedition cruising requirements. The agency notes that "Benin offers a rare combination of cultural depth, spiritual heritage, lagoon landscapes and authentic communities, making it an ideal destination for immersive exploration." This combination addresses expedition passengers' desires for both natural and cultural discovery within single destinations.

Particularly significant for cruise operations, Benin is "well-suited for extended or overnight calls, which allow passengers to engage more deeply with both cultural and lifestyle offerings, from historical tours to contemporary creative experiences." Extended calls represent premium revenue opportunities for cruise lines while enabling deeper passenger engagement with destinations.

The country has identified additional development opportunities in "lesser-known coastal and lagoon areas that remain largely untapped." These sites could accommodate "small expedition vessels seeking intimate encounters, community-based tourism and nature-oriented itineraries," representing significant potential for cruise line differentiation.

### Economic impact and infrastructure development

Cruise tourism's economic benefits extend throughout Benin's tourism

ecosystem. The sector "already generates measurable economic benefits for Benin through spending on guided excursions, cultural sites, artisan markets, design boutiques, gastronomic experiences and community-based initiatives." Additionally, "cruise vessels also make use of local provisioning, including high-quality fresh produce and specialty goods."

This economic integration demonstrates cruise tourism's potential for sustainable destination development, creating revenue streams across multiple sectors while supporting local communities and preserving cultural traditions.

Infrastructure development remains crucial for cruise growth, and Benin has committed to significant improvements. The country is "progressing toward the construction of a dedicated cruise quay by 2027, which will significantly enhance



A member of the Egungun, part of the Vodun religious landscape in Benin

berthing conditions and streamline passenger operations."

### Government support and facilitation measures

Perhaps most significantly for cruise operators, Benin's government has implemented policies specifically designed to facilitate cruise tourism. The introduction of visa exemptions for "all cruise passengers staying less than 72 hours" represents a major competitive advantage in a region where visa requirements often complicate cruise operations.

This policy innovation demonstrates governmental understanding of cruise industry operational requirements and passenger expectations. As Bénin Tourisme notes, "this policy strengthens Benin's position as an accessible, cruise-friendly destination and demonstrates our commitment to supporting the sector's sustainable growth."

### Cultural calendar integration

The destination's cultural calendar will offer cruise visitors unique immersion opportunities through internationally recognised events such as Vodun Days in January, the Festival of Masks in August and the music festival WELOVEYA in late December.

The timing of these festivals supports year-round cruise deployment possibilities, extending beyond traditional seasonal patterns.

PHOTO: BENIN TOURISME

Cape Town city and working harbour

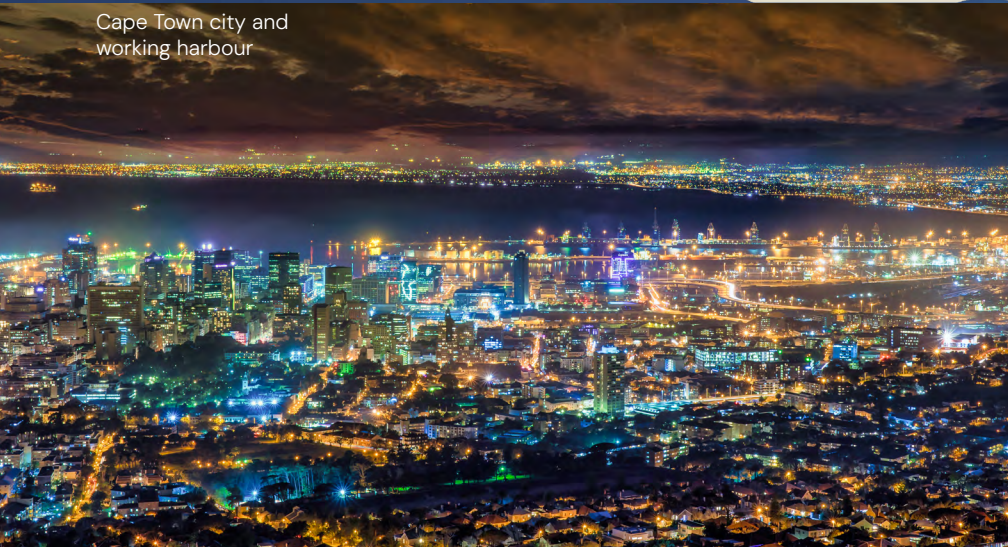


PHOTO: ADOBESTOCK\_431825182

November 2024 by simultaneously welcoming two major cruise vessels at its new Grain Terminal. This state-of-the-art facility spans 9.5 hectares with a 700-metre quay length and 13.5-metre draft capacity. Similarly, Mozambique's cruise infrastructure is undergoing significant transformation through substantial international investment, with MPDC's concession to operate Maputo Port extended to 2058, contingent upon a \$1.1 billion investment commitment by 2033.

### Expedition and luxury segment expansion

The expedition and luxury cruise segments have emerged as central pillars of Africa's strategy, with expedition calls to Cape Town increasing from five in 2023/24 to 16 in 2024/25. These high-yield passengers typically spend more and book extended land programmes, aligning perfectly with the continent's focus on premium market segments. The remarkable 39% growth in international passenger numbers during 2024/25, driven by strong world-cruise and expedition segments, presents significant opportunities to attract premium travellers and increase onshore spending.

The establishment of African Cruise Service by European Cruise Service in late 2025, with a regional head office in Walvis Bay, marks a significant development in the expedition sector. This strategic expansion into Namibia demonstrates industry confidence in the region's potential, with passenger demand for immersive, nature-rich experiences increasing significantly.

Several regions offer significant untapped potential for expedition and luxury operators. The West Coast provides exceptional birding opportunities, seasonal wildflower displays and deep-rooted fisheries heritage through working harbours and coastal villages. The Garden Route offers diverse natural landscapes, protected forests, coastal reserves, and

### Strategic positioning and market maturation

**T**he African cruise industry has undergone a fundamental transformation, evolving from a peripheral market to a strategically significant destination cluster. This transformation is particularly evident in Cape Town's sustained growth trajectory, with an 18% increase in ship calls from 70 vessels in 2022/23 to 79 in 2024/25, whilst passenger volumes surged from approximately 78,000 to 127,000 over the same period, marking a robust 16% annual increase that substantially exceeds the global cruise industry average of 9%.

The economic impact reveals the sector's growing importance, with Cape Town's contribution to Western Cape GDP rising from R1.23 billion to R1.79 billion across three seasons, cumulatively generating approximately R4.34 billion for the Western Cape, R5.32 billion for South Africa, and R3.04 billion in foreign exchange earnings. The sector now represents 0.17% of provincial GDP whilst supporting 0.09% of provincial jobs, with projections suggesting passenger numbers could reach 140,000–150,000 by 2026/27.

This growth has been achieved despite significant operational challenges, including Red Sea diversions that have both benefited and complicated African operations. The geopolitical landscape has significantly influenced regional

cruise patterns, with ongoing conflict in the Red Sea redirecting substantial traffic to African waters, resulting in cruise bookings in Africa nearly doubling compared to pre-pandemic levels.

### Regional diversification and infrastructure development

The expansion beyond traditional Cape Town offerings has proven particularly successful, with new cruise calls to Mossel Bay, Hermanus, and Saldanha Bay bringing 32,000 passengers across 26 ship visits during the 2024/25 season, generating R47.5 million in local expenditure. These emerging destinations offer distinct experiences that complement Cape Town's established attractions, with the Whale Coast providing seasonal wildlife encounters and West Coast destinations showcasing maritime heritage and seasonal wildflower displays.

Infrastructure development across the continent demonstrates the sector's commitment to long-term growth. Cape Town's Cruise Terminal at E-Berth is undergoing phased upgrades as part of a broader R20 billion precinct redevelopment, whilst secondary ports are advancing rapidly, with Mossel Bay's new cruise reception facility opening in 2025 and Saldanha Bay becoming a formal Port of Entry and Exit.

West Africa has witnessed significant infrastructure investments, with Abidjan Port achieving a historic milestone in

marine wildlife encounters, accessible through the Port of Mossel Bay.

### Product innovation and cultural immersion

Shore excursions have evolved to become more inclusive and culturally immersive, with walking tours in Bo-Kaap highlighting Cape Malay cuisine and heritage, and township tours in Langa and Khayelitsha focusing on local entrepreneurship and food culture. Thematic Winelands and regional itineraries now combine wine, art, and heritage, linking Franschhoek, Stellenbosch, the Cape Overberg and the West Coast.

Product development has focused on creating distinctive, high-value experiences that differentiate African itineraries. Recent innovations include helicopter transfers to Stellenbosch for curated wine experiences, behind-the-scenes gallery visits with local artists, private Big Five reserve fly-ins, market-to-table culinary experiences, and cultural performances paired with fine dining at heritage venues.

In Ghana, new and immersive shore excursions highlight the country's diverse heritage, including the 'Roots and Culture' Cape Coast and Elmina tour, which explores UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle, combined with local market visits and drumming and dance workshops.

### Operational challenges and market dynamics

The operational landscape presents both opportunities and constraints. Infrastructure limitations remain a

persistent challenge, with limited deep-water berths and inadequate passenger facilities in smaller ports hindering the consistent accommodation of large vessels. Post-pandemic recovery has also impacted ground transportation, with limited coach infrastructure across South Africa requiring vehicle relocation between multiple ports, thereby increasing operating costs.

Cost pressures have intensified across multiple operational areas, with increased operating costs driven by fuel and transport volatility, permit and conservation fees, seasonal labour and logistical challenges coupled with suppliers investing in their product driving up tour prices at a rate much higher than the average CPI and much higher than cruise line expectations.

### Emerging markets and future potential

West Africa has demonstrated remarkable growth potential, with Cape Verde recording 110,554 passengers and 250 calls in 2024, significantly up from 86,945 passengers and 171 calls in 2023. The strategic importance of Cape Verde's position was further validated in 2025 when Global Ports Holding announced its partnership with Mindelo, marking the company's second African operation after Tunisia's La Goulette.

Tanzania experienced a significant tourism boom in early 2025, surpassing its target of 5 million visitors by April, recording 5.3 million visitors by April and 794,102 tourist arrivals from January to May 2025, marking a 54.3% increase over pre-pandemic levels. Tanzania's cruise infrastructure centres around two primary ports: Dar es

Salaam and Zanzibar, with vessels such as Seabourn Sojourn, Europa, Norwegian Dawn and Viking Sky visiting in 2025.

### Strategic outlook and industry transformation

The African cruise industry's transformation reflects a fundamental shift from opportunistic port calls to strategic destination development. Cape Town's location at the junction of the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean creates natural advantages for both trans-Atlantic and round-Africa itineraries, serving as a key long-haul stop for world cruises.

Regional sea-and-safari circuits connecting Cape Town with Namibia, the Garden Route, the West Coast, and broader Southern Africa create opportunities for multi-country, multi-season itineraries with Cape Town as the gateway. This approach supports the development of integrated cruise and land-based products, enhances regional collaboration, and increases the appeal of the Western Cape as a central hub for Southern African cruising experiences.

The continent's cruise industry transformation represents more than statistical growth; it demonstrates Africa's emergence as a strategically important cruise region capable of delivering authentic experiences, operational reliability, and strong economic returns. As the industry continues to evolve, Africa's diverse offerings, improving infrastructure, and commitment to sustainable tourism practices position it as an increasingly attractive proposition for international cruise lines seeking new frontiers and meaningful cultural exchanges.



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