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01 Kayaking around Port Lockroy, Antarctica © Al Bakker
02 Polar bear cubs at play © Hans Jurgen Mager

A POSITIVE IMPACT

Aurora Expeditions CEO Monique Ponfoort believes travel can be a powerful force for good, writes Andrew Conway.

Ask Monique Ponfoort what she has learned from the global challenges of the past 18 months, and two things are front-and-centre: the power of positive leadership and the contribution of travel as a force for good in a rapidly changing world.

As CEO of Aurora Expeditions – an award-winning and Australian-owned adventure travel company offering perspective-altering experiences in some of the most remote and unique places on the planet – Ponfoort believes the connection between humans and nature is paramount.

"Now, more than ever, our guests are wanting to deepen their connection to profound places, to be more active in nature, and to push their own personal boundaries," she says. "They are purchasing with purpose and seeking out travel companies that have strong commitments to doing good."

Celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2021 as a pioneer of polar expedition travel, Aurora Expeditions takes its commitment for care of the planet very seriously. "Our guests want to discover the world, what they can do for the planet, and how they can contribute," says Ponfoort. "Our aim is to create a positive and lasting impact through experiences that educate, enrich and help build our guests' legacy with the planet."

Travel is in her DNA

Ponfoort brings 25 years of experience in travel and expedition cruising to her role as CEO, but her love of travel goes back even further to when she boarded her first flight as a young girl. "From the moment that plane took off, I knew right there and then that travel was for me," she recalls.

After 16 years in senior roles at Qantas and another eight years in the luxury expedition cruise industry, Ponfoort is well positioned to guide Aurora on the next stage of its journey. "How you respond in these changing times is what matters," she says. "I believe it is vital to offer a fresh, forward-thinking approach, to collaborate and create value, whilst always being optimistic about the future."

Having joined the brand in the midst of a global pandemic, Ponfoort is acutely aware and deeply appreciative of her team. "Aurora is a humble, courageous and tenacious company with very spirited, clever and talented people," she says. "This combination, along with our relaxed Australian style, builds the true onboard spirit that our guests embrace."

Ponfoort is optimistic about the future. "The pandemic has changed many things, but it has not altered our passion, innovation and purpose," she says. "We have seen right across the business that our guests and trade partners have shown us the most incredible resilience and loyalty throughout all of this uncertainty, and it touches me every day."

From pole to pole

With the welcome return of expedition travel in 2022, it's full steam ahead for Aurora Expeditions. The company has announced its new 2022/23 season program aboard the modern *Greg Mortimer* and brand-new *Sylvia Earle*, which will debut in 2022 and is named after the renowned marine biologist, oceanographer and explorer Dr Sylvia Earle.

The expanded sailings include 16 new itineraries and several returning favourites to destinations such as the Arctic, the Russian Far East, Alaska, the Northwest Passage, Ireland, West Papua and, of course, Antarctica, where it all started for Aurora 30 years ago.

Accommodating a maximum 130 to 140 guests, each ship is designed for discovery with a comprehensive array of activities and a newly expanded and participative citizen science program across the portfolio of voyages. "We're empowering people, communities, the places we visit, and the extraordinary natural world we interact with," says Ponfoort.

"We have passionate, highly skilled and dedicated expedition team members who impart their knowledge to our guests, and by allowing nature to touch them, we've seen guests whose perspectives on the planet have changed completely."

Care for the planet

Aurora has announced a world-first 'Antarctic Climate Expedition' in 2023 in the company of Dr Earle and other conservation champions, which will result in meaningful outcomes for the planet.

In a key milestone announced recently, Aurora Expeditions is certified 100 per cent carbon neutral and has a portfolio of investment projects that help reduce carbon emissions in Australia and overseas.

"Attaining a sustainable future has never been more important, and we see expedition travel as a force for good," says Ponfoort. "The spirit of adventure is rising, and there's a growing desire for deeper, more immersive and active experiences as well as for enrichment and education.

"We want to keep pushing boundaries," she adds, "growing with purpose, and making a lasting difference to our guests, the entire Aurora team, and ultimately the future of the planet."

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