

Down with the Titanic one last time as tour company alters course

United States

Will Pavia New York

Next summer a pair of Russian submarines will travel two and a half miles under the Atlantic Ocean and hover in the pitch-black depths over the encrusted bow of the *Titanic*.

Peering through portholes on successive trips will be a London banker, an explorer from Hungary, a doctor from Missouri, an American police officer and others willing to pay \$60,000 (about £39,000) to see this wreck on the centenary of its sinking.

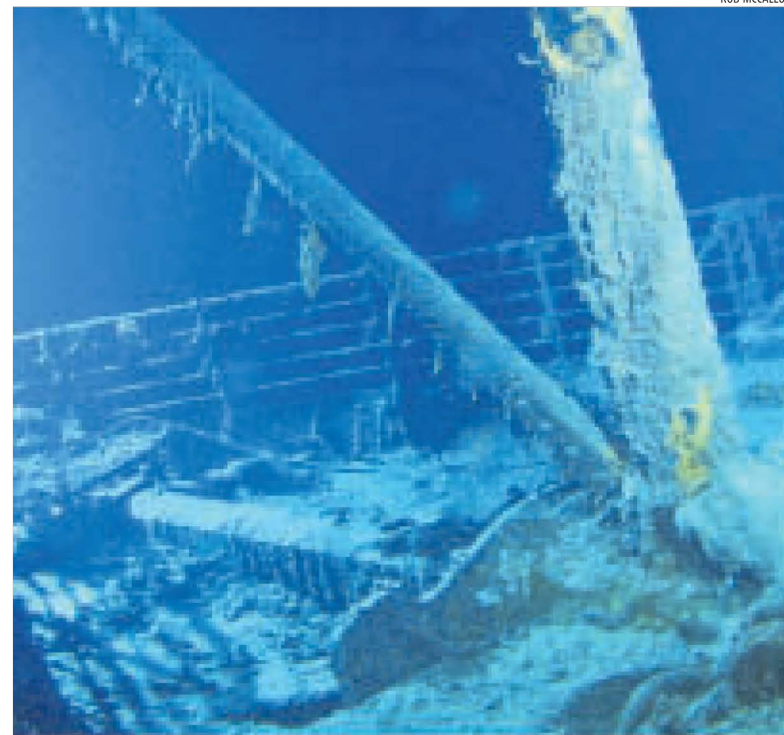
Tickets for the voyage were selling fast before Christmas. "I sold three this morning," said Rob McCallum, the expedition leader, in an interview last week. Seventy people have paid their fares and Deep Ocean Expeditions, his company, expects to ferry at least 80 to the bottom of the Atlantic. But this will be the last season. "We never set out

to be a retail travel company," Mr McCallum said.

Although his company recently took a European customer to the seabed beneath the North Pole, its main work is research. It provided the vessel that found the wreck of the Air France Airbus that crashed in the Atlantic in 2009. "Next year will be a poignant year to make the trip. It's a good time for us to sign off," he said.

Titanic tourism is a sensitive issue. After the wreck, which sank in April 1912, was discovered in 1986 by Robert D. Ballard, holes have appeared in the sunken liner that experts attribute to tourist trips in submarines.

To visit the grave of the 1,517 people who died in the disaster, each Mir submersible takes on two passengers and descends two hours into the darkness. "The pilot turns the lights out to save power," said Mr McCallum, who made the trip himself in 2005. The



ROB MCCALLUM

It costs £39,000 for a submarine trip to the Titanic, which sank 99 years ago

organic matter disturbed by the passage of the sub glows red, orange and blue, like an undersea Aurora Borealis. Strange fish loom against the portholes. When the sub reach the abyssal

plain the lights are turned down and they track towards the bow.

Mr Ballard discovered the wreck in 1985 despite the loss of sonar and tracking devices on his submarine. He

followed a series of giant mud balls thrown up as the ship ploughed into the seabed.

"Finally, out of my window on the starboard side, there is a wall of mud," he told an interviewer in 1991. "We came around the corner and it was in my view port. There was this wall of steel. Like the slab in 2001, like the walls of Troy at night."

The immensity of the wreck has startled every visitor since. "I knew the ship was 882ft long, that it broke in two,

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that it was standing upright on the seabed," Mr McCallum said. "But when I actually looked up out of the porthole at it I thought: 'Holy Moly!'"

Between the two parts, the ocean floor is strewn with bottles, cups, knives and leather suitcases. "Some people want to be where a relative had been," Mr McCallum said. "Some are engineers and want to see all the mechanical bits. Some just want to be there."

Per Wimmer, 43, the owner of a London-based investment bank, whose other outings have included sky-diving over Everest and bookings with three suborbital space companies (he aims to be the first Dane in space) is in the latter category. "I just had to see it," he said.