

Vol. 23 NO 3 FALL 2025

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CRUISE & TRAVEL LIFESTYLES

STUNNING
SEVILLE

MAGNIFICENT
MALTA

TREASURES
OF TURKEY

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GAUGUIN
IN TAHITI

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SCAN FOR OFFER

Welcome to another Cruise & Travel Lifestyles issue



Vanessa at Angkor Wat in Cambodia

AS ALWAYS, THIS ISSUE IS JAM-PACKED with fantastic vacation ideas, whether on land, by sea, or a combination of both. Join us as we take you on an unforgettable journey where luxury and discovery go hand-in-hand.

One of the things I most relish about being

Publisher and Editorial Director is collaborating with some of the finest writers in the business, the majority of whom are from Canada. Cruise & Travel Lifestyles is undoubtedly a home-grown Canadian magazine, designed and produced with fellow Canadians in mind. Our designers are Canadian, as is our marvellous Editor-in-Chief. We feel we know you, our audience, well and strive to provide you with fascinating articles on a host of countries, destinations, river, cruise, and expedition ships that travel the world.

We know our readers are avid travellers and cruisers, and it is important to me to showcase an array of vacation ideas that might pique your interest – and in a variety of ways. As Expedition cruising has caught on more and more, we often focus on such sailings, and I cannot emphasize enough that if you have yet to consider a cruise to the Arctic or to Antarctica, speak to your travel professional. You will revel in such a voyage. I most certainly did – two bucket list trips for sure.

When we first published this magazine in the Spring of 2007, we ran a river cruise article and looking back almost 20 years, I imagine we have often had at least one river cruise article in each issue. As the popularity of river cruising continues to boom, and new destinations and ships are being added all the time, and new brands deciding to dip their toes in the river market, we see nothing but growth and great choice for you, as guests.

In this issue, we cover idyllic French Polynesia and the lovely ship,

the Paul Gauguin, which sails in these crystalline waters year-round. I have been to Tahiti and the other gorgeous islands on several occasions and find it to be a lovely destination, especially if there is a honeymoon, wedding, or vow renewal on your calendar.

We sailed about a year ago on the Mekong River from Vietnam to Cambodia with Scenic Luxury River Cruises, which did a stellar job from start to finish. We adored our intimate little ship, the Scenic Spirit, and it was a perfect way to see these countries and learn about their pasts – a fascinating and enlightening cruise.

My first visit to Seville was last year, and I was so impressed with the magnificent and gorgeous capital of Andalusia. I know you will enjoy our article on this historic city, which combines a land, river, and coastal cruise on Croisi-Europe. It's a must-visit.

Our travels then take us to the sun-drenched Mediterranean jewel of Malta and its capital, Valletta. Steeped in history, the city's baroque streets and harbour vistas provide a perfect backdrop for discovering culture, cuisine, and European charm. Malta is stunning.

And we have more: a fabulous photo essay on Turkey – such a fascinating and worthy destination. Then our editor has a terrific time as she visits the lushness of Costa Rica, enjoying the forests and diverse wildlife. And one more cruise piece on the superb Yacht Club on 16 of MSC Cruises' ships. It's a haven of calm and serenity with all the amenities of a large ship at one's disposal.

As you read this, please note that we are planning our three issues for 2026, featuring a delightful array of articles that are sure to whet your appetite for more travel.

Happy Travelling,
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Vanessa Lee', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Vanessa Lee
IG Vanessa 13577

IN MEMORIAM

We remember those we have lost recently and send heartfelt sympathies to their loved ones.

Steve Geddes, Chris Leach,
Harry Fritz, Martin Povey,
Brad Hamilton, Ron Stearne,
Rod McLeod, Pat Dineen

Keith Travis

Keith was a long-standing and loyal friend and was also the life partner of a cherished girlfriend of mine. He was the strong, silent type, but would often say just the right thing at the right time. Whether to elucidate a point, engage, calm, or raise a laugh – always with a twinkle in his eye. He was a good man who lived life well, enjoyed his work, travelling, sports, his dog Casey, and wintering in Florida. He was devoted to his life partner, Peggy. His company was always a pleasure, and the conversation equally so. We will miss him dearly.





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¹ *Silver Dawn, Silver Nova, Silver Ray, Silver Muse* | ² S.A.L.T. Kitchen and S.A.L.T. Bar debut on *Silver Muse* on December 21, 2025. | ³ Available on *Silver Dawn, Silver Moon, Silver Nova, Silver Ray*. | ⁴ Available exclusively on *Silver Nova* and *Silver Ray* for \$180 per person. | ⁵ Available on *Silver Dawn, Silver Moon, Silver Nova, Silver Ray*. | ⁶ Available on all Oceangoing ships, with experiences tailored to each region's unique culinary heritage.

Features

16 SENSATIONAL SEVILLE

The radiant heart of Andalusia in Spain is truly enchanting. Seville, with its palatial luxury, mosaic-lined courtyards, fragrant orange trees, and a delightful old town, is worth a few days' stay before sailing down the river to the Spanish coastline and the delights of Cadiz and other Moorish towns on Croisi-Europe's ship, La Belle de Cadix.

20 THE RICHES OF MALTA

Known for its rich blend of Arabic, Phoenician, British, French and Roman heritage, Malta and its capital, Valletta, are both fascinating and captivating. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its historic importance and heritage associated with the Knights of St. John, Valletta is rich in baroque architecture, historical fortresses, and temples, and boasts a vibrant foodie scene.

24 TREASURES OF TURKEY

A land where continents embrace, weaving together history, culture, and incredible beauty – this is Turkey. Enjoy the many stunning sights of Istanbul, with its domes and minarets, as well as the otherworldly landscapes of Cappadocia. Discover rich flavours, the ancient ruins at Ephesus, vibrant artistry, bustling bazaars, and turquoise coasts.

30 THE MYSTICAL MEKONG

The intimate Scenic Spirit is a luxurious, all-inclusive way to explore Vietnam and Cambodia, sailing on the mighty Mekong, the longest river in Southeast Asia, through lush rice paddies, past Buddhist temples and ornate golden palaces, and villages on boats, culminating in the enduring and mesmerizing Angkor Wat in Siem Reap. Scenic's ship offers superb service and cuisine, and a delightful home away from home.

36 LUSH LIFE IN COSTA RICA

Be astounded by the beauty of Costa Rica, which offers travellers intimate and amazing encounters with some of the world's most captivating creatures. It is truly a paradise for wildlife lovers, boasting an astonishing variety of species, including mammals, birds, reptiles, insects and amphibians, spectacular scenery and always a warm welcome.

40 PAUL GAUGUIN AND FRENCH POLYNESIA

Enjoy the idyllic isles of French Polynesia, sailing in crystalline waters onboard the newly refurbished and charming ship, the Paul Gauguin. Revel in the sheer beauty of this place as you cruise past lush volcanic peaks, turquoise lagoons, and island-hop through paradise on your gorgeous, upscale, and all-inclusive ship.

44 MSC CRUISES YACHT CLUB

The divine Yacht Club, a calm haven of discretion, exclusivity, and devotion to personalized service, elevates travel from a vacation into a tailored journey. For those who value refinement at sea, MSC offers a private enclave within its ships known simply as the MSC Yacht Club – a ship-within-a-ship sanctuary devoted to luxury, privacy, and indulgence.

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48 In Conversation





Liz Fleming in Costa Rica

YOU KNOW WHEN you find your people.

Their jokes are funny, and their stories are compelling – they seem equally entertained by everything you have to say. You share a magically similar sense of humour. And then you find yourself also sharing cocktails and dinners, enjoying the evening entertainment and even adjusting your shore excursion plans so you can all be together. They are your travel tribe, and you seem to find new members wherever you go. Discovering friends with whom to share your adventures is the highpoint of any trip, a combination of serendipity and an openness to the world around you.

The memory of our first visit to Portofino is warmly shaded by our fabulous cruise companions Marty and Chris who took us under their wing and showed us the very best place for a waterside lunch. And it was that same charming pair who sat with us on a terrace in Barcelona, singing “La Bamba” at the top of our lungs, making a strolling musician earn his tips! When we think of Turkey, we remember how the funny conversation we had with Bruce and Marsha while trekking up the rocky path to Termessos made the heat more bearable. At the top, the delight of finding the ruins of an ancient amphitheatre was doubled because

we shared it. Wandering the wild islands of the Galápagos was made even more fun with our cruise friend Margie at our side – and we had the added bonus of seeing the star quality photos she shared over lunch with her husband Frank.

What is it that draws the members of the travel tribe to one another? It’s a blend of extroversion, adventuresome natures and an eagerness to share the joys and challenges of travel with like-minded others. Not every pairing works. We’ve sat through the odd interminable dinner, listening to random tablemates expounding opinions that clashed with ours. But those evenings have been rare. Far more often, we’ve sat down with strangers, laughed and shared stories and risen from the table fast friends. True travellers tend to share a curiosity about the world, a willingness to try new flavours and an openness to different ideas. Finding themselves in a place where they don’t speak the language is just an opportunity to learn a few new words or practice a bit of miming. Foods they’ve never tried before are enticing, not off-putting and over-eager vendors in a marketplace aren’t annoying – they offer an opportunity for some playful banter, whether you buy what they’re selling or not.

For your next trip, I wish you not only clear skies and calm waters but also an abundance of new friends with whom to share the joys of travel. May your journey be as wonderful as the new members of your tribe that you meet along the way.

Happy Travels,

Liz Fleming
Editor-in-Chief

PS. If you’d like to listen to my show, just google Liz Fleming Travels and you’ll find an archive of more than 150 shows – and some of them feature our publisher, Vanessa Lee, a favourite guest of mine!

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PUBLISHER AND MANAGING EDITOR:

Vanessa Lee

vlee@cruisestrategies.com

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:

Liz Fleming

lizflemingtravels@gmail.com

EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTORS:

**Ming Tappin, Andrew Maclear, Liz Fleming,
Olga Sebestova, Linda Crawley and Vanessa Lee**

ART DIRECTION: **Linda Crawley, Lauren Emery**

production@cruiseandtravellifestyles.com

MARKETING MANAGER: **Olga Sebestova**

osebestova@cruisestrategies.com

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: **John Eckert**

DIRECTOR OF DATABASE MANAGEMENT

AND SUBSCRIPTIONS: **Ruth Peters**

rpeters@cruiseandtravellifestyles.com

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Cruise Strategies Ltd.

135 Pioneer Lane, The Blue Mountains, ON L9Y 0M7

Tel: 416.518.0262

info@cruiseandtravellifestyles.com

vlee@cruisestrategies.com

www.cruiseandtravellifestyles.com

Editorial office, direct line

Tel: 416.518.0262

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COVER: BY LINDA CRAWLEY

A MONK MEDITATES AT A TEMPLE IN OUDONG,
CAMBODIA. SEE STORY PAGE 30.

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COURTESY ATLAS OCEAN VOYAGES

Expeditions to Antarctica and Europe

Atlas Ocean Voyages, a leader in yacht expedition cruising, features six Antarctica 2026/2027 expedition itinerary options ranging from nine to eighteen nights for both variety and flexibility. Each offers a range of Always Included amenities onboard, such as fine wines, spirits, craft beers, and specialty coffees, gratuities for onboard staff and shore landings, along with sightseeing safaris by Zodiac. Expeditions to Antarctica feature a pre-expedition hotel night in either Buenos Aires or Punta Arenas, charter flights from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia or from Punta Arenas to King George Island, as well as an Atlas Immersive Experience in either Ushuaia or Punta Arenas before your cruise. The brand's highly anticipated 2027 Europe season features 24 brand-new Epicurean and Cultural Expeditions across the Mediterranean and Northern Europe, allowing guests to explore seven new ports by expedition yacht, spanning Germany, England, Greece, and the Netherlands. Additionally, the curated collection showcases over 25 overnight stays and more than 90 late departures – all designed to immerse travellers in the heart of marquee destinations and boutique ports. Culinary connoisseurs will delight in Atlas's Epicurean Expeditions, pairing fine wines and cuisine with immersive exploration. Each voyage features renowned guest chefs, vintners, and gastronomic experts, leading both onboard tastings and curated shore experiences.

Swan Hellenic welcomes SH Minerva back

The cutting-edge expedition cruise ship **SH Minerva**, built in 2021 and launching the rebirth of the **Swan Hellenic** brand, returns to the fleet with a stunning 2025-2026 Antarctic season, followed by a first-ever Asia-Pacific season starting in March 2026, and extends the pioneering company's discovery choices worldwide. The new in-depth explorations of the Asia-Pacific region include the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Raja Ampat, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan, offering unforgettable experiences that range from primitive art, ancient rituals, and anthropology to historical WWII sites, wildlife, snorkelling, and watersports adventures. *SH Minerva*, the 5-star Polar Code 5 expedition cruise ship with an ice-strengthened hull, accommodates 152 guests in 76 spacious staterooms and suites, the majority with large balconies. Dining is a highlight, and guests can indulge in one of three dining venues – the main Swan Restaurant, the laid-back Club Lounge and the Pool Bar & Grill or try the 24-hour room service. The crew includes a team of 12 seasoned expedition guides, expert speakers and lecturers, for a total complement of 120 and 140, respectively, offering outstanding staff-to-guest ratios to deliver the highest standards of attentive personal service. Swan Hellenic's all-inclusive fare takes care of pre-cruise hotel accommodations, all meals, select wine and beer, non-alcoholic beverages, 24-hour room service, complimentary Wi-Fi, crew gratuities, and a shore excursion or expedition activity at each port. Guests sailing on polar region expeditions also receive a complimentary branded parka as a keepsake.



SH Minerva

COURTESY SWAN HELLENIC



Seabourn Venture

COURTESY SEABOURN

Seabourn's first-ever "Pole to Pole: Grand Expedition" voyage

Departing on August 17, 2027, this 94-day expedition will span 82° North to 66° South, covering more than 20,500 nautical miles aboard **Seabourn Venture**, and will feature remote destinations, rare wildlife and immersive expeditions from the High Arctic to Antarctica. This ultimate bucket-list voyage begins with an overnight stay in Reykjavik, Iceland, followed by a charter flight to Kangerlussuaq, Greenland, where guests will embark the ship. Over the course of the sailing, *Seabourn Venture* will offer 60 days of expedition experiences and visits to destinations across 14 countries and territories, including five days in Antarctica, three in South Georgia, and three in the Falkland Islands, as well as six days in the famed Northwest Passage and a new three-day experience to the remote and rarely-visited Ellesmere Island in the Arctic Archipelago. Additional highlights include 33 sea days; and crossings of the equator, Tropic of Cancer, and Tropic of Capricorn. Between the poles, guests will also explore sun-drenched tropical islands and vibrant coastal regions across the Caribbean and South America, experiencing the full spectrum of the planet's geography, from icy wilderness to equatorial warmth. The sailing concludes in Ushuaia, Argentina, with a post-cruise charter flight to Buenos Aires. The epic voyage offers incredible expedition experiences wrapped in **Seabourn's** signature luxury style, enriched by conversations on the science, history, and ecology of each destination. *Seabourn Venture's* 30,000 square feet of open deck space provides an ideal vantage point for witnessing the Northern Lights, a breathtaking possibility on this voyage.

An ocean of new itineraries

Explora Journeys has unveiled a trifecta of exciting firsts for its 2027 summer season, which includes visits to charismatic maiden ports in the Mediterranean, the launch of a new LNG-powered ship, **EXPLORA IV**, and the long-awaited Alaska itineraries, adding to the brand's ever-evolving collection of exciting destinations. The first opportunity to experience Alaska's untouched wilderness, cultural vibrancy and hyper-local culinary scene will be aboard **EXPLORA III**, departing from Vancouver on May 10, 2027. From giant rivers and fascinating wildlife to frontier towns where hiking, dogsledding, skiing and boating invite a grounding connection to the great outdoors, these itineraries promise soul-stirring encounters in nature and also offer a curated collection of pre- and post-journeys, ranging from three to five nights, in the stunning landscapes of Alaska and Western Canada. Sunshine lovers can create new memories across 60 alluring journeys available in the Mediterranean, embracing the contrast of east and west, tracing storied shores and discovering its best-kept secrets. Discover the archaeological treasures and pristine beaches of Olbia in Sardinia, the medieval town of Trogir in Croatia, or Slovenia's coastal gem, Topor, steeped in Venetian history. Unfolding from March to November 2027, this new season of itineraries spans some of the globe's most captivating regions, inviting guests to plan and experience the extraordinary aboard this luxury, privately owned, all-inclusive Swiss brand launched in 2023.



EXPLORA III in Alaska

COURTESY EXPLORA JOURNEYS



The Cormorant

COURTESY SILVERSEA

Connecting with mother nature in rural Puerto Williams

Silversea, the leading experiential luxury and expedition travel brand, has unveiled highlights of the land offerings available at its highly-anticipated hotel, The Cormorant at 55 South in Puerto Williams, Chile – scheduled to open in January 2026. Nestled in the heart of the Fuegian Archipelago, The Cormorant at 55 South will offer guests an immersive experience in one of the world's most remote and ecologically rich destinations, allowing them to explore deeper before their journey to Antarctica. More than just a place to stay – the Cormorant will become a new point for discovery at the edge of the world while also making the journey to Antarctica more comfortable and enjoyable. While they enjoy the opportunity to engage with the natural and historical heritage of Puerto Williams, guests will experience the elevated comfort and service that is synonymous with Silversea and can choose from a variety of guided excursions and activities tailored to different activity levels, from unique birdwatching and wildlife opportunities to kayaking in the waters charted by legendary explorers, and hiking in remote Tierra del Fuego. These experiences will provide intimate access to the subpolar landscapes, from the Magellanic subpolar forests such as those in Parque Municipal Ukika to panoramic vistas, and more.

The wait is finally over

Be among the first to experience **Celebrity River Cruises**, as Priority Booking Access for the brand's first-ever river cruise vacations is now open. Guests who make a fully refundable \$500 deposit will receive early access to book a 2027 sailing ahead of the general public and will be among the first to receive the highly anticipated itinerary and stateroom details. Celebrity River Cruises is a natural extension of Celebrity's premium offering that will bring its unique service-first approach to the river. Guests will sail through the heart of culturally and historically significant cities, experience locally inspired cuisine and unique shore experiences – The Celebrity Way – aboard a fleet of transformative river ships that blend the elevated design and sophistication of Edge Series ocean ships with European charm. Discover the Danube and Rhine with fares inclusive of all meals, alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, Wi-Fi, onboard experiences and one shore excursion each day. Guests will also have the option to add a pre- or post-cruise stay in Prague and Budapest when they open for booking in 2026.



Budapest, Hungary

COURTESY CELEBRITY RIVER CRUISES

Star of the Seas
leaving Port Canaveral



COURTESY ROYAL CARIBBEAN

The ultimate family vacation

Star of the Seas, the ultimate family vacation, has experiences in store for every kind of family and vacationers of all ages who sail on her 7-night adventures to the Caribbean from her home port of Port Canaveral (Orlando), Florida. It brings together the best of **Royal Caribbean's** innovative, signature experiences, and the most sought-after destinations, like the brand's popular Perfect Day at CocoCay in the Bahamas, into one unforgettable vacation. Eight neighbourhoods that are destinations in and of themselves, provide adventurers with next-level experiences, day and night, including adrenaline-pumping thrills at a Category 6 waterpark and the Crown's Edge experience 154 feet above the ocean. There are unrivalled ways to chill with seven pools, including a suspended infinity pool at sea. The game-changing experiences also include the stay-and-play-all-day Surfside neighbourhood designed for families with young kids, more than 40 ways to dine and drink, jaw-dropping entertainment – including the cult classic hit “Back to the Future: The Musical” and marquee performances across air, ice, water and theatre – and more.

A landmark season of immersive exploration

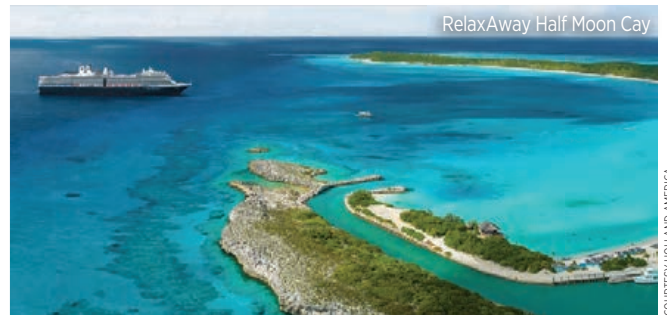
Princess Cruises' much-anticipated 2027 Europe season offers over 200 sailings throughout the Mediterranean and Northern Europe, as well as Transatlantic crossings between the Americas and Europe with access to 108 destinations in 31 countries and over 105 UNESCO World Heritage Sites. A highlight of the 2027 program is the rare opportunity to experience a solar eclipse at sea. On August 2, 2027, guests aboard **Enchanted Princess** and **Sky Princess** will witness the awe-inspiring sight of a solar eclipse while enjoying a day at sea filled with special eclipse-themed programming. *Enchanted Princess* sails roundtrip from Civitavecchia (for Rome) and *Sky Princess* sails roundtrip from Southampton (for London), offering two incredible 14-day voyages during this celestial spectacle. In a historic first, the brand has also announced its most expansive Japan season for 2027, featuring two Japanese-built sister-ships, **Diamond Princess** and **Sapphire Princess**, sailing from the Tokyo region with 78 departures and 50 itineraries ranging from 8 to 28 days in length. Guests can enjoy extended evenings in vibrant destinations like Osaka, Hiroshima, and Hakodate as well as seven spectacular festivals highlighting Japan's vibrant cultural contrasts. From Cherry Blossom voyages to Grand Circle Japan and Taiwan itineraries, guests will marvel at iconic sites, enjoy regional dishes, and delight in Japanese touches on board that bring Japanese culture to life.

Diamond Princess leaving
Yokohama, Japan



COURTESY PRINCESS CRUISES

RelaxAway Half Moon Cay



COURTESY HOLLAND AMERICA

Award-winning private island renamed “RelaxAway, Half Moon Cay”

Holland America's highly rated and award-winning exclusive destination in The Bahamas, known for its beautiful beaches and crystal-clear waters, was renamed RelaxAway, Half Moon Cay, in support of its enhancements and the experience guests can expect as they are immersed in this tropical paradise. The upgrades, jointly made with **Carnival Cruise Line**, will include an expanded beachfront experience, lunch venues, a variety of bars, and other features that will reinforce the destination's natural beauty and tropical appeal. A newly constructed pier on the north side will allow ships to dock, including Carnival's Excel-class ships that will be able to visit the island for the first time. Guests will arrive at distinct welcome plazas on the island's south and north sides, spanning over one mile of white sand beach. The existing development on the south side will receive a refreshing Bahamian touch-up, a new beach club, an updated lunch venue and renovated facilities. The newly developed north side will feature two lunch venues and a variety of island-themed bars. There will also be a new tram service, to make getting around easy and convenient. In addition, lounging areas will be expanded, cabanas added, and a new shore excursion pier on the north side will connect guests with recreational activities. If ships from Holland America and Carnival happen to call on the Island on the same day, they each use their specific area of Half Moon Cay. All RelaxAway, Half Moon Cay upgrades are designed with nature in mind, including architecture that complements the island's stunning authenticity, and are expected to be complete by summer 2026.

A new legacy begins while another ends

Regent Seven Seas Cruises is expanding its luxury offerings with the launch of its seventh vessel, **Seven Seas Prestige**, debuting in December 2026 in Barcelona. The 822-guest ship will be the largest in Regent's fleet, offering one of the highest space-to-guest ratios at sea. Sailing its first full season in 2027, the ship joins the brand's "Unrivaled at Sea" collection of 234 new sailings spanning Africa & Arabia, Alaska, Asia, Australia & New Zealand, Canada & New England, the Caribbean, Panama Canal, Europe, South America, and the South Pacific, offering guests endless opportunities to craft their own unforgettable memories. From shorter escapes to epic journeys, every sailing is designed to provide the perfect balance of enriching destinations and unrivalled luxury on board – from spacious all-suite accommodations and personalized service to unlimited shore excursions, gourmet dining, and fine wines and spirits. Among the standout features of the collection are 19 new ports of call, five epic Grand Voyages, and the 133-night 2028 World Cruise, which will be sailed by **Seven Seas Splendor**. Also included are three Immersive Overnight European itineraries – where every port of call offers an overnight stay – designed to provide a deeper cultural connection and unhurried exploration. From August to October 2026, a trio of commemorative voyages will mark a final chapter of the brand's beloved **Seven Seas Navigator**, leaving behind a legacy of elegance, discovery, and exceptional service which started in 1999. The Farewell Season will honour her legacy with nostalgic onboard celebrations, surprise guest appearances, heartfelt tributes, gala dinners, auctions of ship memorabilia, themed trivia, and engaging panel discussions.



Seven Seas Prestige

COURTESY REGENT SEVEN SEAS CRUISES

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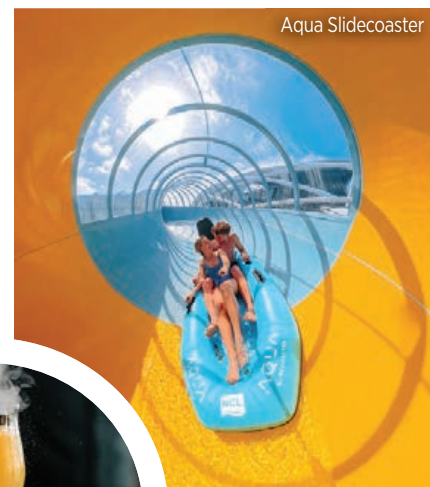
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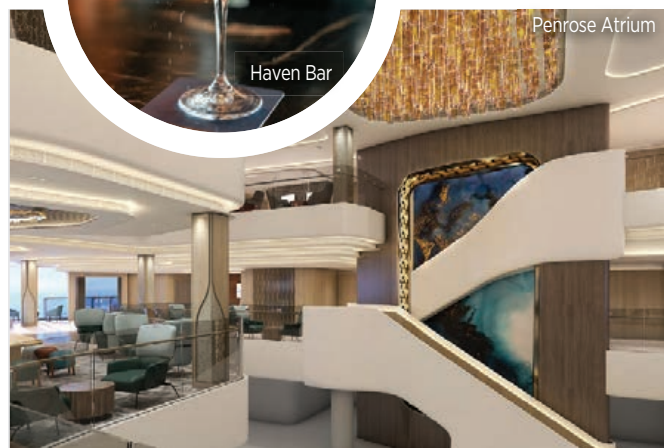
Norwegian Aqua in Miami



Aqua Slidecoaster



Haven Bar



Penrose Atrium

COURTESY NCL

Meet Norwegian Aqua

Norwegian Cruise Line's 20th vessel Norwegian Aqua makes a splashy debut

With the Champagne bottle smashing against its hull, **Norwegian Cruise Line** (NCL)'s newest ship **Norwegian Aqua** was christened in Miami by godparent Eric Stonestreet (of TV's *Modern Family* fame) in April. *Norwegian Aqua* is aptly named in a class of her own - Prima-Plus, as she is ten percent larger than her two Prima class sisters **Norwegian Prima** and **Norwegian Viva**. The increase in tonnage results in new accommodations, redesigned spaces, and enlarged venues that NCL fans will appreciate. However, save for a few venue location swaps, Aqua's principal design and layout remain unchanged, and past Prima-class guests will find familiarity onboard. The three-story Penrose Atrium remains the heart of the vessel, serving as a bustling meeting space for Starbucks coffee, cocktails, shopping, and people-watching. The Whiskey Bar and Belvedere Bar have exchanged positions, and The Local Bar has been expanded with much-needed additional seating. On the exterior, Aqua's pool area on Deck 17 has been enhanced with upgraded loungers and double daybeds. Deck 18 to 20 aft is home to the outdoor family areas, starting with the 12-hole Tee Time mini-golf course themed with various world locales. A new Glow Court has an LED floor that projects various sports court layouts for gameplay, and holds dance parties at night. High atop Deck 20, the three-story Aqua Slidecoaster takes centre stage as Aqua's feature water attraction. The hybrid rollercoaster and waterslide is the first of its kind at sea, sending single or double riders through a covered tunnel, which has a clear section for that well-timed photo of a rider swooshing by. Family fun continues in the Aqua Game Zone arcade on Deck 17, formerly Galaxy Pavilion. The space is designed for spectating as well as gameplay, with two new mini-bowling lanes. NCL's children's program Guppies, Splash Academy, and Entourage teen club round out the family offerings. With 1,659 staterooms and suites, there's something for everyone. Its Studio complex combines solo rooms with a communal lounge and bar, couples have a choice of interior, ocean view, and balcony staterooms, and families can reserve multi-bedded staterooms and suites, many of which are connecting. Aqua also boasts the largest Haven by Norwegian complex, with 123 top-end suites nestled in a private enclave. New onboard is The Haven 3-Bedroom Duplex Suite with Large Balcony that sleeps up to six, featuring a living/dining area, a bedroom with an ensuite bath, and a balcony on the main floor, and two bedrooms with full ensuite baths on the second level. Decades of in-house

productions have garnered NCL accolades in shipboard entertainment, and it continues to be the main event onboard *Norwegian Aqua*. The headline show is *Revolution: A Celebration of Prince*, choreographed and directed by Broadway award-winning artist Patricia Wilcox. The biggest hits by the "purple artist" are performed by four dynamic vocalists and energetic dancers, and the Aqua Theater's flexible setup allows the audience to watch and dance along on the floor, stage-side. *Rumors* - the concert based on Fleetwood Mac's top-selling album and intertwined with stories of the band members' turbulent relationships - has been moved into the Aqua Theater to allow a larger audience. Additional evening entertainment includes illusions and acrobatics in *Elements: The World Expanded*, comedians at *The Improv at Sea*, and game shows such as *The Price is Right LIVE*. On the culinary front, *Norwegian Aqua* brings back popular eateries - many with expanded seating - and introduces new dining experiences. The glass-walled Hudson's and The Commodore Room continue to shine as the ship's complimentary dining rooms, while Indulge Food Hall welcomes a new plant-based outlet called Planterie. Fan favourite Cagney's Steakhouse, Le Bistro, Palomar, Onda by Scarpetta, Los Lobos, and Nama Sushi are back, and the always-booked-solid Hasuki now seats 124, becoming the largest Teppanyaki restaurant in the fleet. To further tempt taste buds, NCL introduced a Thai specialty restaurant Sukhothai. Its origin was inspired by the pad Thai noodles at Indulge Food Hall. *Norwegian Aqua* has spent her inaugural season cruising the Bahamas, Caribbean, and Bermuda, homeporting in Miami, Port Canaveral, and New York City. — MING TAPPIN



Bluefin Beachside Pool



Luxury Collection Swim Up Suite



Swim Up Bar

The O2 Beach Club & Spa, Barbados

Escaping in style and luxury

Nestled along the sun-drenched southern coast of Barbados, the O2 Beach Club & Spa is a modern Caribbean retreat that combines effortless luxury with genuine island spirit. This all-inclusive boutique resort sets the stage for a vacation where relaxation, indulgence, and adventure flow seamlessly together.

The first thing guests notice is the stunning oceanfront location. With its sweeping views of turquoise waters and direct access to a pristine stretch of beach, the resort offers plenty of space to unwind under the Barbadian sun. For those who prefer poolside lounging, three swimming pools – including a rooftop pool with panoramic views – provide the perfect alternative. Ample watersports and other fun activities are available, along with entertainment.

Dining at O2 is a treat. The resort is home to several restaurants and bars, each offering a distinctive culinary experience. From fresh seafood with a Caribbean twist to elegant international flavours, every venue is designed to satisfy both casual cravings and refined palates. We dined at the more formal rooftop Oro where excellent international cuisine is served. Guests can sip creative cocktails at beachside bars, indulge in fine dining overlooking the ocean, or enjoy relaxed tapas with live entertainment. There's a great vibe

here, and days by the adult lounging pool (reached directly from some guest rooms) or on the beach are relaxed and enjoyable.

Accommodations at the O2 Beach Club & Spa combine contemporary style with coastal charm. Spacious suites are gorgeous and thoughtfully designed with modern amenities, plush furnishings, and private balconies—many with sweeping views of the Caribbean Sea. Whether traveling as a couple, a family, or a group of friends, the variety of room categories makes it easy to find just the right fit.

The service at O2 is what truly elevates the experience. Friendly staff go above and beyond to ensure every detail feels personal, from remembering guests' favourite drinks to arranging special activities and local excursions. The on-site spa provides a haven of serenity, offering treatments inspired by the rhythm of the ocean for those seeking total rejuvenation.

Ideally located in St. Lawrence Gap, the resort offers easy access to the vibrant local scene while maintaining an atmosphere of seclusion and tranquility. For travellers looking to combine natural beauty with sophisticated comfort, the O2 Beach Club & Spa delivers an unforgettable taste of Barbadian paradise, which I highly recommend.

— VANESSA LEE

NH Collection Lisboa Liberdade

An elegant, centrally-located hotel

NH Collection is a prevalent name in European cities, and in Lisbon, you'll find the NH Collection Lisboa Liberdade, named for its location on tree-lined Avenida da Liberdade in the Baixa District. This is the heart of the haute couture shopping district, yet the hotel is tucked away unpretentiously from the bustling street, and a stay here won't break the bank.

The hotel is less than six kilometres from the Lisbon airport, and the waterfront is one-and-a-half kilometres away. If you're not in the mood to tackle Lisbon's hilly streets, there's a metro station directly across the street, and the Rossio train station is a five minute walk.

The cozy lobby and bar is a delightful space to relax and enjoy a beverage, from specialty coffees and soft drinks to wine, cocktails, and artisanal beer. We love the Guest Relations desk, which is separate from the check-in counter and attended daily by a staff member who will provide recommendations for dining, entertainment, and activities, as well as make the necessary reservations.

Its 83 contemporary rooms and suites - some with views and terraces -

are tastefully decorated in neutral colours, and there are family-sized options that sleep up to five. Minibars, coffee and tea, high-speed Wi-Fi, personal safes, and hairdryers are standard features. Suites accommodate up to three, and additional amenities include bathrobes and slippers.

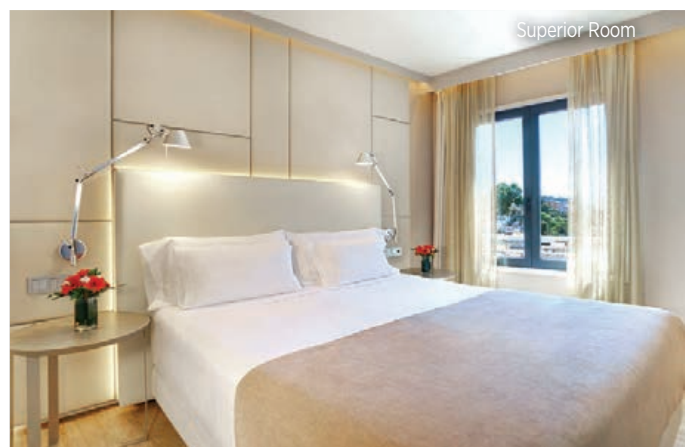
The hotel's pride and joy is the 11th-floor Atico rooftop (open May to September), the place to be after a day of sightseeing. Take a dip in the outdoor pool or put your feet up and sip a delicious cocktail while taking in the 360° city views (Ask for a drink made with Sharish gin, distilled in Portugal's Alentejo region). The bar also serves light bites, perfect for lingering over while admiring the sunset, the orange-tiled rooftops, and the Tagus River beyond. The onsite Restaurante do Teatro serves a buffet breakfast and à la carte meals, but the Baixa District is replete with dining options, all steps from the hotel.

Whether you're here for business or pleasure, NH Collection Lisboa Liberdade will make a well-rounded home base.

— MING TAPPIN



Atico Rooftop



Superior Room



Swimming Pool



Liberdade Lobby Bar

SEVILLE, SEVILLE!

A mid-winter visit to Andalusia's emblematic capital city

ANDREW MACLEAR

ANDREW MACLEAR



La Belle de Cadix at Seville



Seville

ANDREW MACLEAR

CROISIEUROPE'S elegant cruise vessel, *La Belle de Cadix*, is at anchor on a crisp February afternoon, picture perfect on the Guadalquivir River in Seville. Sixty miles south, a choppy Atlantic Ocean is preventing access to the Bay of Cadiz, holding us here an extra day. But if an extra day must be spent somewhere, nowhere is more congenial than this handsome Andalusian city, providing the book-ends for this brief, six-day river cruise. Even on a February weekday, we are reminded of Seville's status as a headline Spanish destination.

Visitors of all nationalities are seduced by its plazas, flower-filled patios, signature ochre-coloured buildings, patisseries, bookshops, hat makers, museums, monuments and bodegas. Steering a course away from these immediate attractions, there is a labyrinth of narrow streets and plazas

peppered with orange trees. Always an elite society, Seville's unique status and place in Spanish history is reflected in its architecture, elaborate municipal design and manicured gardens. References to the ambitious 1929 Latin American Exhibition are everywhere, starting at the extravagant Plaza Espana. This is an exhilarating, sprawling city, its citizens elegant and animated. Yet a comprehensive perusal of Seville requires a map, time and some stamina. Another option is simply to choose a congenial bar and watch the world go by; the rolling panorama of energetic Spanish life is free to behold. A morning of Seville-watching can then be remembered from the comfort of CroisiEurope's river vessel.

With a capacity of one hundred and seventy-six guests, and swathed in more-or-less wrap around glass, the dead white *La Belle de Cadix* feels airy

and spacious. The staterooms on the upper deck have French balconies, those on the middle deck have large flexing windows and those on the main deck have portholes. Seating space in the room is limited but there is a spacious lounge and bar forward of the ship and a smaller lounge at the rear of the vessel. Both have exterior spaces. Add the sun deck to the mix and you'll find plenty of areas for lounging during the day. The ship's staff is multilingual, courteous and efficient. The ambiance of the vessel dictates 'relax mode' and from its soft, pastel interiors you can watch the rowing teams practice on the river and drink a glass of Cava (Spanish sparkling wine) as the sun dips and dusk falls.

Once the ship received word that the Atlantic was calm, we set off down-river and by late afternoon crossed the Bay of Cadiz and berthed at the Port of Santa Maria.



Plaza de Espana, Seville

It was from here that Columbus planned his voyages to America and this small, elegant enclave stands as a testament to the wealth generated by his voyages and those who participated in them. Gothic doorways fronting grand houses are commonplace. At dusk, follow the back alleys into another world and find a glass or two of Fino (dry white, chilled sherry), accompanied by camarones – miniature, deep-fried, crispy shrimp omelettes. This is an overnight stop, so you can explore into the small hours and still find your well-illuminated ship waiting for you. The following morning, La Belle crosses the bay and into the arms of Cadiz, an ancient maritime city standing on the bones of the original Phoenician enclave, laid down three thousand years ago and still being unearthed today.

Comfortably navigated on foot, Cadiz is a small city with an Atlantic breeze whistling around almost every corner. Less flamboyant than Seville, Cadiz is nonetheless a cornerstone of the Andalusian community and a principal element in the evolution of the Spanish empire. Although it now lives in the shadow of past glories, it is a beautiful shadow, and this old maritime city is one of the most charismatic in Spain. As with Seville, several days are required even to scratch its surface, but a morning's walk will provide a colourful, thumbnail sketch.



Forward sun deck



Chef Richard Moll



Cellar of Osborne Bodega



Cadiz Cathedral



PHOTOS BY ANDREW MACLEAR

The itinerary on this brief river voyage is well-crafted and includes excursions to the Osborne Wineries, founded in 1772, a magnificent estate set amongst gardens and including vast, gabled cellars. The whitewashed Andalusian villages provide a morning's interlude, and if a four-hour round-trip bus ride doesn't intimidate you, then a day's excursion to Granada is on hand. For those who want to absorb more of Seville, there is a final, free day and plenty to do. Head to Triana, once the down-at-heel, bohemian quarter, but now a chic enclave harbouring art galleries, energetic tapas bars and spontaneous outbursts of flamenco. On the riverside walk back to the ship, stop at Abades Triana, Seville's most celebrated and elegant waterfront restaurant. Spectacular views and the emblematic Andalusian dishes found here are worth the stop. Or maybe you'll choose to head back to La Belle, your elegant floating hotel, have lunch and contemplate the past day's events.

Veteran fleet executive chef Richard Moll was on board this sailing and allowed me into the galley. Wonderful culinary treats emerge from this small space, and the gala dinner, which closed the voyage, featured handsome beef tournedos and a blazing baked Alaska flambé. Lunch and dinner are a fixed, Chef's choice menu composed of three courses with complimentary wines. A vegetarian option is available daily. Breakfast service closes somewhat early, at nine, so late risers have to go in search of coffee and croissants in the lounge area.

CroisiEurope is a large company operating more than fifty vessels around the world and they are well-practiced in the hospitality business. This is evident at every level of this short cruise experience. Doing little and staying still is becoming the mantra amongst seasoned travellers and there is no better spot than this calm river cruise to do just that. ■



MIGHTY MALTA

MING TAPPIN



Mdina, Malta



Aerial view of Mdina, Malta



Valletta skyline



A SPECK OF AN ISLAND – actually a group of five – located in the Mediterranean Sea, 80 kilometres south of Sicily, Malta appears to be in the middle of nowhere but is easily accessible by a multitude of flights from Rome. On a June weekend, I arrive in advance of a cruise, eager to learn all about a country I know very little about.

On the ground, I meet my tour guide, Eike, to learn about all things Maltese. My lesson starts with numbers: with 550,000 residents occupying just 320 square kilometres and seven thousand years of history, Malta is one of the oldest and most densely populated countries in Europe. The Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Arabs all ruled here, but it was the arrival of the Order of the Knights of St. John in 1530 that enhanced the island republic's fascinating history. The Knights were a religious brotherhood founded to care for pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land; however, Malta's strategic location on the trade route made it appealing to invaders. The Knights had to take on a military and defensive role, which resulted in the island's heavy fortification.

Malta has few natural resources, Eike says, but does have plenty of limestone. And with that, he points to the imposing Mdina rising out of the desert, the ancient capital of Malta, encircled by a wall of beige and yellow-tinted stone. Today, approximately 400 people still live inside these walls, and we wander through some of the charming narrow alleys. Except for cars owned by residents, no other vehicles are allowed here, one of the reasons for its nickname, "The Silent City." We come upon the famous Blue Door, which Eike says, "It's just a door," somehow popularized by social media. Sure, it's pale blue hue contrasts with the overhanging bright pink bougainvillea, but I'm much more impressed with others, some painted bright red, and others carved out of centuries-old wood.



Quiet street in Rabat, Malta



Cafés in Valletta old town.

Our next stop is delightful Valletta – Malta’s capital city since 1571 and home to approximately 6,000 residents. Its unique claim to fame? The entire city has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And I can easily see why. Standing at the main city gate, the ever-present and massive limestone walls surround me. The Knights of St. John spared no effort or expense in adorning the city with Baroque architecture, grand palaces, and opulent churches.

Eike takes me to St. John’s Co-Cathedral, constructed in 1577 and dedicated to St. John the Baptist. Not expecting much from its plain exterior, my jaw drops once I’m inside. Every inch drips with gilded carvings, and the vaulted ceiling is adorned with episodes from the life of St. John. But most interesting is the cathedral floor where each intricate inlaid marble tile is a tombstone of a member of the Order of the Knights of St John. In the oratory hangs *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, a canvas by Italian painter Caravaggio, which I immediately recognize from my art history studies. Painted in his signature chiaroscuro technique that employs high contrast of light and dark, Caravaggio perfectly captured the pain and anguish of the macabre scene.

At the end of my tour, Eike leaves me to wander the Grand Master’s Palace. Built by the Knights of St John, the palace has been the seat of government for 450 years. Its impressive armoury is one of the largest in the world, showcasing the extraordinary cache of weapons the Knights wielded to defend Malta. My visit also coincides with the annual Malta International Arts Festival. Taking place inside the palace is “Voices of Valour”, a performance of 16th-century celebratory hymns sung by KorMalta, the country’s national choir. But rather than being a static affair, the choir performs throughout the palace, and the audience follows. From the grand staircase to the breezy courtyard and the throne room, I’m mesmerized by the harmony, echoing off the palace’s richly decorated halls and ornate ceilings.



St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta

Leaving the palace, I cross the square to dine at Fifty Nine Republic, a trendy eatery listed on the Michelin Guide. For an island with so few natural resources, I’m astounded to learn that Malta still manages to deliver an award-winning gastronomic scene, including seven Michelin-starred restaurants. Naturally, locally-caught seafood reigns supreme here, but rabbit, sausage, and beef also appear on the menu, many cooked in Middle Eastern and Arabic flavours inherited from the country’s bygone rulers.

Malta has so much more to offer, including world-class diving, stunning beaches, and exciting sporting events, which certainly deserve a return visit. As my ship glides down the Grand Harbour towards the open ocean, I view Valletta for the last time from a different perspective, and the city’s formidable limestone walls look as impenetrable today as they did 500 years ago. As the fort’s massive cannons come into view, the message is loud and clear: Malta may be small, but it is indeed mighty. ■



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TREASURES OF TURKEY

Exploring Turkey with photographer Mehmet Ozbalci of Istanbul-based Fantastic Photo Tours was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see and photograph the best of Turkey's natural, cultural and historic treasures.

LINDA CRAWLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEHMET OZBALCI
AND LINDA CRAWLEY

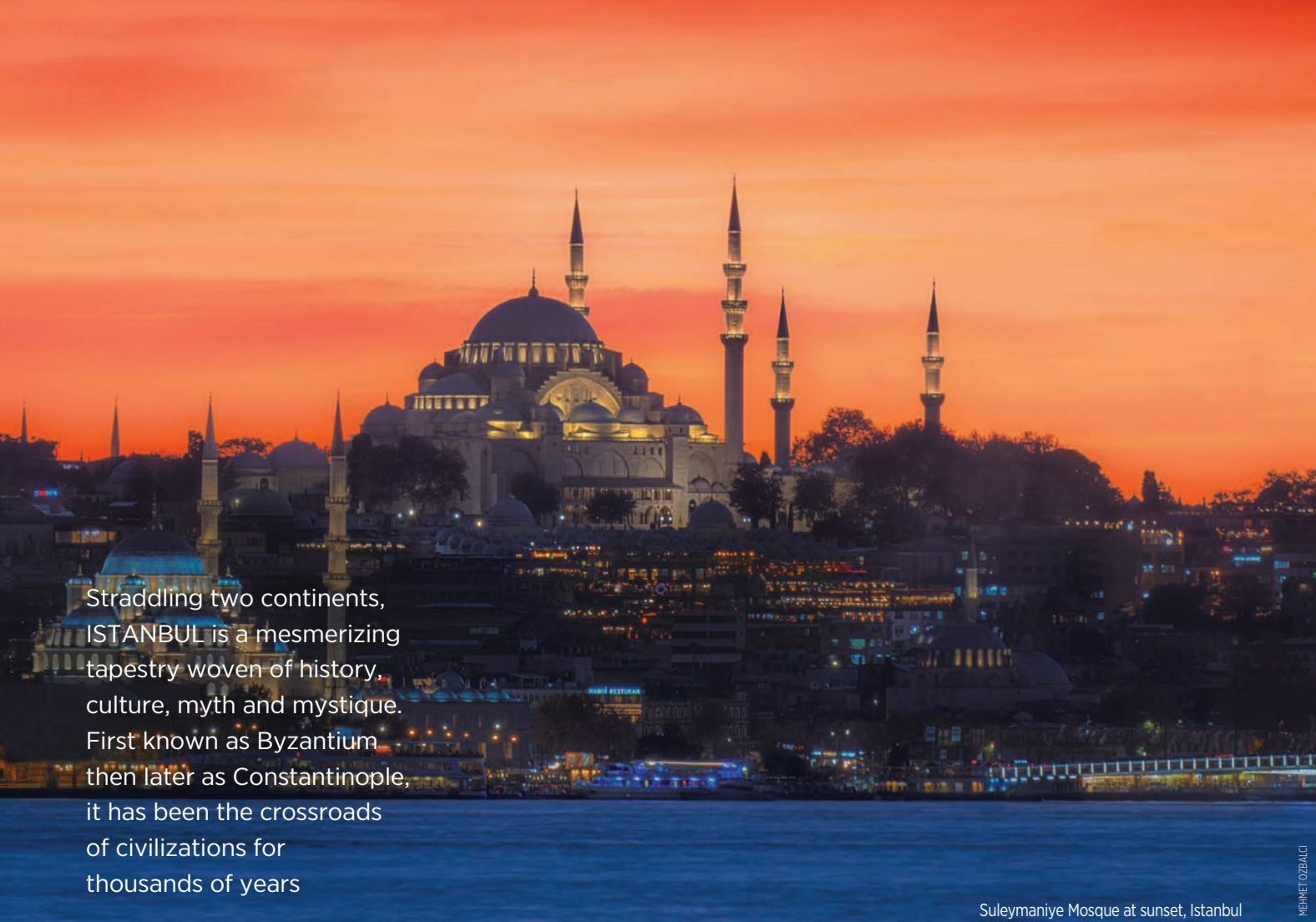


Balloons over Love Valley, Cappadocia



GOOD MORNING CAPPADOCIA

Every morning at sunrise, some 150 brilliantly coloured balloons take flight over Cappadocia. It's a breathtaking sight and you don't even have to be in a balloon to enjoy the spectacle. This is our view from a road-accessible plateau overlooking Love Valley. From our vantage point on the edge of a cliff, the balloons often pass by below us, drifting silently through the "fairy chimney" rock formations.



Straddling two continents, ISTANBUL is a mesmerizing tapestry woven of history, culture, myth and mystique. First known as Byzantium, then later as Constantinople, it has been the crossroads of civilizations for thousands of years

Suleymaniye Mosque at sunset, Istanbul

MEHMET OZBALCI

WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

Istanbul was a pivotal stop along the Silk Road, the legendary trade route which for centuries connected the East and West. Its strategic location at the intersection of Europe and Asia brought together a melting pot of cultures, ideas, and trade and created the vibrant legacy of historic markets, palaces and mosques that makes modern Istanbul so fascinating.

You may want to base yourself in **Sultanahmet** on the European side for it's easy proximity to many of the major attractions, but don't overlook lesser-known neighbourhoods like colourful and charming **Balat**, chock-a-block with galleries, shops and delightful cafés.

Not far from the Spice Market, we visit Sirkeci railway station, the terminus of the legendary Orient Express which whisked passengers between Paris and Istanbul in grand luxury. In the restored waiting room one can almost see the ghost of Hercule Poirot waiting to catch his famous train.



Balat neighbourhood, Istanbul

MEHMET OZBALCI



The Spice Market

CLARA PAVLEY



Orient Express station

LINDA CRAWLEY

SPICE OF LIFE

Istanbul's Grand Bazaar is certainly worth a visit, but I loved the colourful **Spice Market**, with its intense scents of pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg and saffron. Try one of the exotic tea mixtures on offer (they taste just as good as they look) along with copious free samples of Turkish Delight. When your senses are completely overloaded, head out into the surrounding maze of alleys for a lively street market selling everything from jewellery to rugs to toasters.



Hagia Sophia



The Harem, Topkapi Palace

LOOK UP. LOOK WAY UP...

I'm getting dizzy, but still I can't stop gazing heavenwards, awe-struck by the domes and magnificent tiled ceilings of Istanbul's mosques and palaces.

The breathtaking **Hagia Sophia** is a masterpiece of Byzantine architecture, originally built as a cathedral in 537 AD under Emperor Justinian I. Following the Ottoman conquest in 1453, it was converted into a mosque. In 1935, it became a public museum. Today, it once again serves as a mosque, although vestiges of its Christian origins are still visible if you look closely. The main floor these days is reserved for prayer, but the mezzanine is open to visitors.

Topkapi Palace was the opulent residence of Ottoman sultans for nearly 400 years. Set above the Bosphorus, the palace features grand courtyards, intricately tiled rooms, a treasury filled with jewels and the elaborately tiled Harem, once the private quarters of the sultan's family and concubines.



Magnificent mosaics and frescoes at the Terrace Houses, Ephesus

MEHMET OZBALCI



Library of Celsus, Ephesus

MEHMET OZBALCI

A GLIMPSE OF ANTIQUITY

A visit to **Ephesus** is a captivating journey through history, surrounded by the relics of ancient civilization. Wandering through the marble streets, we imagine the ancient city as it once was, bustling with trade and culture. We stop to admire the impressive Library of Celsus and marvel at the spectacle of the grand amphitheatre. But we are especially captivated by the lesser-known **Terrace Houses** with their carefully-preserved frescoes and intricate mosaics. Often referred to as the “houses of the rich,” they offer an intimate glimpse into urban life in this ancient city.



LINDA CRAWLEY

THIS KOOL KITTY is **Garfield of Ephesus**. He’s an international celeb with his own Instagram account, and more than 10,000 followers. He spends his day in the historic ruins posing graciously for selfies with adoring fans (and will accept a tip if it tastes like chicken). Street cats in Turkey are a beloved feature of urban life, especially in cities like Istanbul. These cats are known for their independence and charm, often found lounging in cafés, shops, and on sunny sidewalks. Turkish culture embraces the felines, and locals leave food and water for them. Unlike in many other countries, street cats are seen not as strays but as beloved members of the community



MEHMET OZBALCI

MORE THAN JUST BALLOONS

Cappadocia, located in central Turkey, is a stunning region, famous for its “fairy chimneys,” which are tall, thin spires of rock created by volcanic activity and erosion. The surreal landscape offers fascinating hiking opportunities for all fitness levels. The area is also dotted with ancient rock-cut churches and magnificent frescoes dating back to early Christianity.

The most famous area is Göreme Open-Air Museum, a UNESCO World Heritage site. But **Monk Valley**, (or Pasabag Valley) is well worth a visit for its unique double- and triple-headed fairy chimneys. We explore this easily walkable site marvelling at the many caves which were once home to a community of monks who sought solitude in the natural caves carved into the rock.

We too will sleep in a cave tonight. Cappadocia has many cave hotels, featuring comfy and atmospheric rooms carved directly into the soft volcanic rock. Sweet dreams!



Uçhisar, Cappadocia



Fairy Chimneys, Pasabag Valley



Byzantine Cave Church of St. John, Cappadocia



Dervish performance in Cappadocia

WHIRLING DERVISHES

We take our seats in the front row of the dimly lit room. The music begins quietly, with the unfamiliar sounds of ancient instruments filling the air. A singer joins in with a haunting melody. The **whirling dervishes** enter and stand serenely, waiting. Oh-so-slowly, the first dervish begins to spin, and one by one, the others join in, their faces trance-like. As they whirl, one hand is raised towards the heavens, while the other points down towards the earth, signifying the connection between the divine and the earthly realms. We sit mesmerized as the spinning increases in intensity, the flowing white robes almost brushing us as they glide by.

The whirling dance originated as a religious ritual, tracing its origins to the teachings of the Persian poet and mystic Rumi in the 13th century, but it has also become a symbol of Turkish culture. The visual beauty of the dance, combined with the music and robes creates a captivating spectacle. ■



Sunrise over Angkor Wat



Spirited away ¹ on the mekong

A journey on a small river ship offers an intimate perspective, carrying travellers past emerald rice paddies, floating markets, and stilted villages seemingly untouched by time. It's a tapestry of Southeast Asia's past and present, the lifeblood of daily life, culture and commerce. Sailing on the Mekong reveals a rhythm both timeless and deeply human, where each bend in the river brings a new story waiting to unfold.

VANESSA LEE



This page
clockwise
from above:

Scenic Spirit on
the Mekong River.

Royal Panorama
Suite guests and
butler.

Scenic Spirit
dining room.

Facing page
clockwise
from top left:

Exploring Tra Su
Bird Sanctuary,
Chau Doc, Vietnam.

Scenic Spirit staff in
traditional khmer
attire.

"Crispy critters" a
local delicacy.

Le Longanier, a
French colonial house
in Cai be.

The fascinating, enlightening, and exotic way of life in Vietnam and Cambodia is on full display as we journey upstream on the mighty Mekong River aboard the fabulous, intimate, and all-inclusive Scenic Spirit. Our luxurious river ship holds just 68 guests in 34 spacious suites, each with a private balcony, attended to by a delightful crew of 50, including our butler, Soe, who pampers us constantly. The spacious accommodations are lovely; with extremely comfy beds and all the necessary amenities you'd ever want. The staff are a delight, hailing from Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and China, and we enjoy our time with them, whether we're with the restaurant servers, the bar staff, reception, spa, or housekeeping team. Our Hotel Manager is a marvellous Hungarian woman who we call Timmi. She is one of the finest I have ever sailed with and is an outstanding asset to the Scenic River Cruise brand.

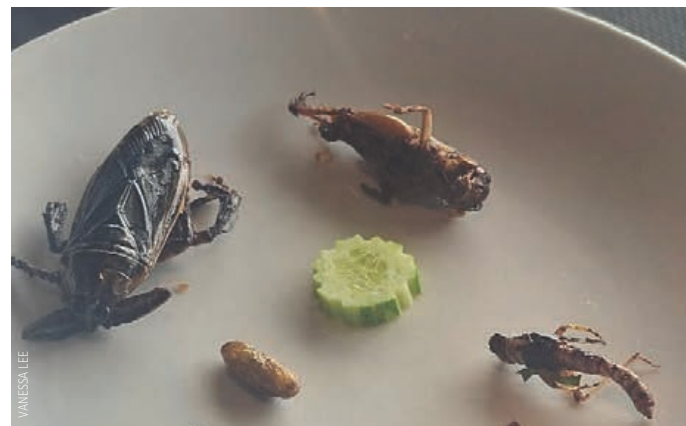
Every evening, as we enjoy pre-dinner cocktails and hors d'oeuvres in the lounge, Timmi reviews what we can expect the next day. Then our guides provide more specifics. There is much to listen to and learn, so rapt attention is required and happily provided by all. Scenic River Cruises impresses every step of the way with a seamless and outstanding river and land stay in these countries, culminating with three nights in Siem Reap, home to more than 72 ancient temples – a wonderfully impressive place to end our Mekong sailing. It's a must-see, and our Gala evening at an ancient temple, courtesy of Scenic, is a spectacular way to say farewell.

From day one, and for the next 12 days, we are in the company of our Vietnamese guides, our Tour Directors for the trip, and they are fantastic. When we arrive in Cambodia, two more guides join us to share their knowledge of the country. Four guides between us, and each is a delight. Guests are split into two groups, each with a guide, and we become reliant on them and their ministrations along the way. We are captive to their charms and knowledge as we embark on a visually intriguing sailing northward on the mighty Mekong.

We begin in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, a busy metropolis that blends French Colonial architecture with modern skyscrapers. Our stay is at the famous Caravelle Hotel, where many journalists stayed during the Vietnamese War. The rooftop bar is a fascinating spot for a drink with a view, replete with sombre photographs of that era.

The Mekong and its surroundings are full of exotic sights, an array of never-ending ornate temples and the occasional cathedral, monks in saffron robes, and colourful dancers swathed in glittering, exquisite costumes. It's not a pretty river, being mostly brown and silty, but it does have a certain romantic, fascinating charm. It also plays a hugely valuable role as a major trade route. Your curiosity is constantly piqued, as the river can be enticing, always culturally diverse, and filled with things to see and do. Occasionally, it is lush and beautiful, and the bird life we see is tremendous. The whole experience is authentic, sometimes gritty and difficult, especially when we visit a wet market. We tour some villages, noting the local Brahman cattle that live in the same space as their owners. A special day for us is a visit to a local school where the youngsters have an English lesson. Each of us finds a child to sit with, and we read English books together. I was fortunate to have two little girls who now say 'banana' with a very English accent!

Many people we meet live very simply, and we seek to understand their way of life as our guides explain this region known as the rice bowl of Asia.



From the bustling floating markets in Vietnam to the serene temples of Cambodia, this cruise is a blend of adventure and tranquility. There is vibrant life thriving on the riverbanks, and it is on display wherever we are. Locals cultivate rice paddies, lotus farms, and fruit. They raise fish, transport goods and live on the river in boats. Their schools sometimes float, and their shops can be on other vessels, which seems curious but also logical. Sampans are common, and we take one on several shore excursions – it’s an alluring mode of transport evocative of the past.

We begin our trip on a coach from Saigon to My Tho, where we embark on our gorgeous little ship, with a stop for an included lunch along the way. We also have our first lesson about the “Happy Room” – important to us all! We learn that there will usually be a few toilet stops along the way when we are on excursions, which can be lengthy. The “Happy Room” is exactly that – a pit stop, if you will. Our guides impress upon us that some of these happy spots are 3-star, possibly 4-star and occasionally 5-star – it’s a standing joke. Some guests even bring toilet paper with them – just in case!

Scenic is very thoughtful about our schedule, and we have appropriate stops for drinks, food and more as we enjoy our shore excursions. There are excellent choices, usually several a day, depending on where our ship is. And before long, we feel immersed in the culture and history of the region. One choice in Cai Be, where we anchor in the middle of the river,



is a Sampan ride to Le Longanier. In this French colonial house, we are welcomed with refreshments and enjoy musicians and singers performing traditional Vietnamese songs in their ancestral attire. Others choose to glide through a floating market to soak in the local life, stopping at some cottage industries along the way. All excursions are included in the price, and most of the ones we choose are excellent.

The days on the river unfold, and we enjoy our tranquil ship with its inviting restaurant and fine dining choices, including specially themed lunches and dinners. One lunch features 'crawly critters', a delicacy here. We are offered tarantulas, beetles, crickets and other bugs! Some taste them and find them delicious – not!!

There are various sizes of tables, meeting people is easy with open seating, and the food is delicious! We are a mix of Australians, New Zealanders, Americans, Europeans, and a few Canadians. Everyone is lovely, and we quickly make friends. The Scenic Spirit features a delightful pool deck that offers shade and proves very popular, even in the rainy season of September, when it can be quite hot. The pool is welcoming, and the atmosphere is very relaxing. There is a top deck where we see some cultural performances, which are most enjoyable. Early in the cruise, we are graced with a performance of the Lion Dance by local teenagers, many of whom are orphans. It's a visual delight, and we are charmed yet again, by these people, who are so proud of their country and their heritage.

Other excursions include visiting a fantastic bird sanctuary, where we are paddled in boats, winding our way through small streams to see herons, kingfishers, egrets, and more. We enjoy rickshaw and tuk-tuk rides (you can negotiate the price beforehand) and take small boat cruises along the river and adjoining lakes.





COURTESY, SCENIC RIVER CRUISES

Activities on our sweet ship include a galley tour, cooking demonstrations, games, a movie night, gym and yoga classes, lectures and port talks to prepare us for what's ahead. We also spend time in the spa, which is fantastic and very inexpensive. One evening, the crew dresses in their country's ceremonial garb while we enjoy cocktail hour. It's sometimes sensory overload on this river cruise, but we revel in the atmosphere, the warmth of the people, and the enrichment of our lives.

As we arrive in Cambodia, we visit the vibrant, bustling capital, Phnom Penh, with its iconic Royal Palace, traditional Khmer roofs, ornate gilding, and the stunning Silver Pagoda. We also visit the former Royal capital of Oudong, founded in 1601, which is lovely and known for its gorgeous pagodas. We see nuns and monks at the many temples we pass by (here, nuns can be male or female, and mostly the monks do not engage with women), and we must all cover our shoulders and knees. The country is known locally as Kampuchea, and the people are Khmer. We also learn more about their dark history, the Khmer Rouge, and the Killing Fields, and many of us choose to visit them and the Tuol Sleng Museum. The history of these two countries, with their tragic pasts and future possibilities, is ever-present in our minds.

As we disembark our ship, we drive over five hours to the unforgettable and glorious gem that is Siem Reap and the renowned and timeless beauty of Angkor Wat, the largest religious site in the world, and a UNESCO World Heritage site.

More than a thousand temple structures are located around Siem Reap, making it a spectacular destination. We stay three nights at the gorgeous Raffles Hotel, courtesy of Scenic and relax in the delightful grounds and large pool, enjoy drinks in the famed Elephant Bar and luxuriate in the experience. Our visits to remarkable temples, including stunning Angkor Wat, dating from the 12th Century, amaze us – especially at sunrise, as the sun's golden rays light up the stonework and are reflected in the water of the surrounding moat. We enjoy strolling on Pub Street, eating local food and engaging with the friendly residents as we shop for silks and mementos.

Scenic offers a very special Gala Farewell dinner – one of their spectacular Scenic Enrich experiences. We are taken at dusk to Prasat Kraven, a small 10th-century temple consisting of five brick towers on a common terrace. Lit torches guide us towards the temple, where we are first offered refreshments and then a magical dinner as a show featuring Apsara dancers from the candle-lit temple ruins brings us a once-in-a-lifetime experience – designed just for Scenic Spirit guests. It is incredibly impressive.

Sailing the Mekong on the outstanding *Scenic Spirit* is an enlightening and rewarding experience, with the opportunity to learn so much about the rich tapestry of cultures and flavours of Southeast Asia. It's a river that offers a unique and memorable sensibility, and above all, it's about the people who have warmly welcomed and hosted us along the way. ■

Above:
Temple dinner and
Apsara dancers.

Facing page
clockwise
from top left:

Lion dance onboard
Scenic Spirit.

Ta Prohm Temple
at Angkor Wat,
Cambodia.

Traditional
architecture at the
Royal Palace,
Phnom Penh,
Cambodia.

A monk in
meditation at a
monastery in
Oudong.



EYES WIDE OPEN IN COSTA RICA

JIANWEI WANG / ISTOCK

If you keep your eyes open
in Costa Rica,
there's no end to
what you might see.

LIZ FLEMING



AS WE WANDERED a well-traveled pathway one morning at Cahuita National Park in Caribe Sur-Puerto Viejo, our guide Fernando spotted a flash of yellow in a nearby tree.

"Don't move," he said. "Let me take a look." That bit of yellow was actually an Eyelash Palm viper, curled cozily on a tree branch. Beautiful but perhaps a wee bit deadly, he was just the first of the many wildlife encounters we would have with Fernando as we explored his beautiful country.

Costa Rica is a real-life Jumanji, a place exploding with more than 500,000 different species – five percent of the world's total in a relatively small geographic area, making it one of the most biodiverse countries in the world – a gloriously green patch of the globe. Eager to see as much wildlife as

possible, we'd planned an itinerary that took us far from the better-known Guanacaste province and into the nature reserves of central Costa Rica and its Caribbean coast. And we loved every minute.

In addition to our enthusiastic guide Fernando, we were accompanied by our driver Giovanni, whose lack of English was more than compensated for by his confident knowledge of the windy roads that took us into the cloud and rainforests. Each day was an adventure.

Outside the Hotel Buena Vista Chic in Alajuela, a pair of sloths lolled in the trees overhead, smiling down at us whenever we left our room. Fabulously cooperative for photographers, sloths stay put for long periods – no need for a hair-trigger on your phone

or camera. In fact, we learned that many sloths stay in the same position, in the same tree for a week at a time, only climbing slowly down to answer the call of nature. Once relieved, they slothfully return to their place for another week. (If you're thinking they might make the perfect pet, think again. They're a protected species.)

Far more active, but no less fascinating were the troops of Howler monkeys we encountered one hot morning. Large and black, Howlers swing through the trees with Tarzan-like grace, barking loudly.

The troop we saw was comprised of a mother and several babies, who dangled heartstoppingly from branches that seemed far too delicate to bear their weight. Though we fretted a bit on the ground below, Mama Howler

Facing page:

A hummingbird approaches a red Heliconia flower in Costa Rica.

Eyelash Palm Viper.

Waterfall, Alajuela Province, Costa Rica.

seemed unconcerned. It was only when we moved closer that she began to bark, prompting Fernando to herd us back onto the path. Apparently, Howler watchers ignore those warning barks at their peril. Get too close, Fernando explained, and you might be hit with Howler poop!

Some of the most fascinating creatures we encountered were among the smallest. In the Trimbina Rainforest Park, one wet afternoon, we heard loud croaking, only to find it coming from a surprisingly tiny, bright red frog with dark blue legs. The Strawberry Poison Dart frog is no bigger than the first joint of my thumb and spends its life tucked snugly into thatches of damp rainforest leaves.



Strawberry Poison Dart frog

AL CARREIRA / ISTOCK

Though harmless itself, that frog has a dangerous taste for a particularly poisonous ant that it gobbles in quantity. Weirdly, the poison ingested doesn't do any harm. It's excreted through the pores of the little frog's skin, making him deadly to any animal – or unlucky human – who might pick him up.

Equally fascinating are the bullet ants that build their nests near rotting trees. Though tiny, the bites of these little creatures pack an incredible punch. In fact, it's considered a test of courage by some local men to allow yourself to be bitten by a few, to gauge your ability to withstand pain! (Note: this seems to be a testosterone-fueled activity. We heard of no women attempting this stunt!)



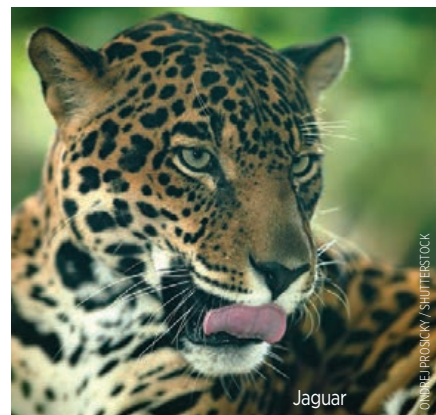
Howler monkey

PETER BAMBOUSEK / SHUTTERSTOCK



Sloth

ALFREDO MADRUEZ PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY



Jaguar

ONIKEL PROSDOCKY / SHUTTERSTOCK

But lest you think Costa Rica is nothing more than a fright factory of dangers, look up into the trees and the sky beyond, where you'll see gorgeous birds of every shape, size and shade. Rainbow coloured toucans, with their long, curved beaks share the air with rare and stunning sunbitterns, quetzels, scarlet macaws and other beauties. Tiny jewel-like hummingbirds flit from one bright bloom to the next in a swirl of whirling colour.

Equally gem-like are the various lizards that skitter haphazardly across the warm stone walkways. Costa Rica's beauty is on display all day and all night. Stay in an eco-lodge as we did and fall asleep to the sound of a waterfall just beyond your balcony. Wake in

the morning to a chirping, cheeping, squawking choir of birds so insistent, you'll have to grab some binoculars and head outside to see who's come calling.

Nowhere will you find a more fascinating opportunity to learn about the flora and fauna of the country – and the efforts being taken to preserve it – than at the Jaguar Rescue Centre in Limón, a sprawling sanctuary dedicated to saving, caring for and housing injured creatures until they return to the wild. A visit offers a unique education.

Snakes, crocodiles, capuchin monkeys, birds of all kinds, giant iguanas, sloths, and the ever-present agouti – Costa Rica's answer to the guinea pig, but much larger and cuter – and dozens of other creatures are



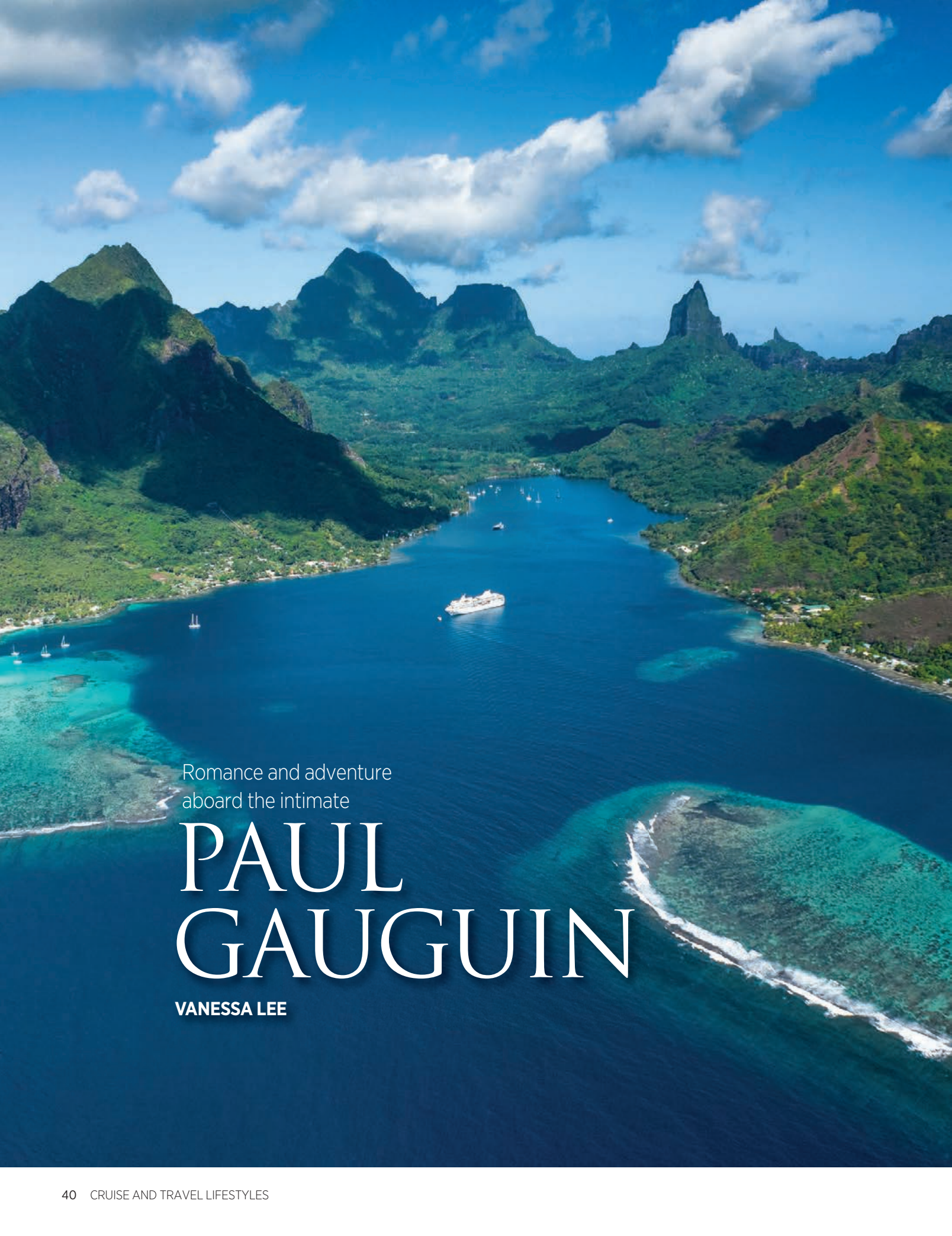
Wake in the morning to a chirping, cheeping, squawking choir of birds so insistent, you'll have to grab some binoculars and head outside to see who's come calling.

Toucan



Scarlet macaws

housed in pens or simply wandering the grounds. Caregivers also wander, bringing necessary medications, water and food from an onsite kitchen filled with the favourite fruit and veggies of the residents. Every corner of the property is fascinating but the best spot by far is the nursery where we found a days-old baby sloth and an equally tiny anteater. To minimize human contact and facilitate their re-entry into the forest, we could neither touch nor photograph them so instead stared through a glass at their tiny, furry perfection. We memorized every detail of their little faces – the smile of the sloth and the long, furry anteater nose – and we think of them often, symbols of the wild wonder that is Costa Rica. ■



Romance and adventure
aboard the intimate

PAUL GAUGUIN

VANESSA LEE



IN THE HEART OF THE South Pacific, where aquamarine lagoons melt into sapphire seas and coconut palms sway in perpetual sunshine, lies one of the most indulgent ways to encounter French Polynesia: aboard the *Paul Gauguin* cruise ship. Sleek yet intimate, this vessel is not simply a means of transportation but a floating boutique resort, crafted for travellers who seek both immersion in paradise and the comforts of a world-class luxury experience.

On a return trip to both Tahiti and the *Paul Gauguin*, I was delighted to see that the ship is still lovely and, after a recent multimillion-dollar renovation, has reaffirmed her position as one of the most refined and delightful ways to explore the fabled isles of Tahiti, Bora Bora, Moorea and their island neighbours.

This intimate ship carries 330 guests, offering a rare sense of exclusivity – large enough to host multiple dining venues, lounges, and entertainment, yet small enough to feel almost like your private yacht. A crew-to-guest ratio among the highest in the industry

ensures guests' needs are anticipated and attended to with charm and efficiency. For the upscale and luxury traveller, this balance of privacy, service and connection is a genuine hallmark of the *Paul Gauguin* experience.

The ship's design is contemporary Polynesian with warm teak finishes, ocean-inspired palettes, and stunning artwork that pays homage to its namesake, the post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin, who immortalized the colours and people of Tahiti in his canvases. Whispering casual elegance, the ship and its décor are completely in step with the idyllic surroundings.

Enjoy your private haven at sea with 165 spacious staterooms and suites, many with balconies overlooking the South Pacific and its ever-changing shades of turquoise. Thoughtful design places comfort at the forefront with plush bedding, marble bathrooms, generously sized closets, and in-room amenities such as stocked mini-bars refreshed daily. Higher-level accommodations include butler service, ensuring discreet and flawless service.

We enjoyed stellar dining on board *Le Gauguin* with a generous choice of venues and amazing staff in each. The service was genuine, warm, engaging and top-notch, making our experiences in each restaurant wonderful. There are many tables for two, as this is one of the most romantic ships on which to sail. Naturally, the ship attracts honeymooners, those choosing vow renewals, celebrating anniversaries and other special occasions. There are also some younger families and solo travellers who were easily able to meet other guests.

There are several distinct dining venues from which to choose, each with its own atmosphere and culinary philosophy. Dining with a Polynesian soul, if you will.

L'Etoile is the ship's signature restaurant, offering elegant evening service with rotating menus blending French haute cuisine and Polynesian flavours, often drawing on the bounty of the seas. Think yellowfin tuna tartare with citrus confit or Tahitian vanilla-infused lobster, or roasted duck paired with tropical fruit glazes. The desserts

Facing page:
Paul Gauguin in
Moorea.

This page
(clockwise from
above):

A Paul Gauguin
painting.

Pool bar.

Les Gauguines
and Les Gauguins,
Bora Bora.



This page
(left to right):
Dining at Le Grill.
Pool deck.
Facing page
(clockwise from top
left):
Paddleboards
in Huahine.
Swimming with
stingrays, Moorea.
La Veranda.
Enjoying the bar
on Motu Mahana,
private island.

are beyond yummy, and the wine list is also excellent, with daily pouring wines included and a French rosé never far away. We invariably chose a table with service from Ryan, who was always a marvellous host and a delight to be with.

We loved the more intimate La Veranda for lunch and some of our dinners, often taken al fresco, gazing at blissful views. It combines panoramic ocean views with à la carte dining, usually serving interpretations of local dishes. Themed buffets are offered at lunchtime, and there are always burgers, a daily soup, and pizzas available. Guests can also make dinner reservations in the evening for a menu that changes every four days during the cruise and La Veranda also serves afternoon tea. It became a favourite spot for many

Poolside, the newly redesigned indoor/outdoor, reservations required, Le Grill delivers a memorable blend of casual chic. Freshly grilled seafood, crisp salads and indulgent island-style desserts make this spot a clear favourite during warm afternoons or for a breezy dinner under lantern-lit skies. And, of course, wherever you dine, you receive indulgent service with a smile. Staff and guests quickly bond, and you find yourself seeking out a preferred table and a favoured server.

And of course, there are magical evenings in paradise – with a sophisticated balance between lively and laid-back. The *Gauguin's* bars and lounges are inviting, no matter your preferences. We often enjoyed pre-dinner cocktails at La Palette, listening to live music and sought out Le Grand Salon for after-dinner shows such as dance performances or regional cultural showcases, as well as live entertainment. The Piano Bar is always a popular spot, as is the open deck where we watched perfect sunsets over stunning Bora Bora or Moorea – with a Mai Tai or a glass of Champagne – the very essence of South Pacific indulgence.

The days on *Paul Gauguin* can be busy, and much time is spent in the sparkling lagoon waters. The destination is as much of a star as the ship, and it begs to be explored. Choose from snorkeling expeditions, dives (if PADI certified), swimming with stingrays and sharks – every adventure is amazing, especially when a singing ukulele player accompanies you in the same craft! We enjoyed a particularly amazing morning sail into Rangiroa, gliding through what seemed to be a string of emeralds scattered on a brilliantly blue canvas. Can life be better, I thought as nature showered us with her beauty.

Excursions are designed to highlight the region's natural beauty and cultural richness. The ship's water-sports team hands out snorkel gear and flippers at the beginning of the cruise, which you can use during your sailing. There might be a chance for a catamaran sail, kayaking in pristine bays, paddle boarding off the ship's marina platform or enjoying one of your best days ever on the brand's private Motu Mahana (a small, private island), a highlight of any *Paul Gauguin* cruise. Settle into a comfortable lounge chair, snorkel in the lagoon, enjoy a barbecue lunch, freshly made fruity cocktails or any preferred beverage as you loll in the crystalline waters – yes, this is paradise. Just don't sit under a coconut tree.

There are land excursions too, which offer a window into Polynesian life. Enjoy village visits, hikes to volcanic peaks, exploring lush rainforests, and pearl farm tours. Learn as you engage with the resident *Les Gauguines* and *Les Gauguins* – your hosts during each cruise – wearing their local dress, leis, and performing songs, playing the ukulele, hosting games, teaching pareo tying and jewelry making, and simply being a sheer delight and a charming addition to the cruise. They are unique to *Paul Gauguin*!



The allure of French Polynesia is undeniable, and it's best seen aboard a ship offering a selection of itineraries and pre- and post-stay hotel options. We cruised in December on a 10-night itinerary, round-trip from Papeete to the Society Islands and the Tuamotos. We spent quality time in incredibly stunning Bora Bora and Moorea, with its jagged peaks, but also cruising to Huahine, Rangiroa, Fakarava, and Taha'a with a day at sea during which we could relax by the newly refreshed pool deck or enjoy a spa service. We could laze the day away with a good book, enjoy a cheese or wine tasting, attend a lecture or try a dance class. Whichever sublime indulgence suits you, know that the delightful *Paul Gauguin*, a ship of dreams, and the isles of French Polynesia will be one of the most amazing trips of your life. ■



THE ULTIMATE ESCAPE AT SEA

Discovering MSC Cruises' Yacht Club Experience

VANESSA LEE



Top Sail Lounge



Ocean Cay MSC Marine Reserve

ON SOME OF THE WORLD'S FINEST cruise ships, discretion, exclusivity, and a devotion to personalized service elevate travel from a vacation into a tailored journey. For those who value refinement at sea, MSC Cruises has created a private enclave within its ships known simply as the MSC Yacht Club – a ship-within-a-ship sanctuary devoted to luxury, privacy, and indulgence.

I have been fortunate to sail in the Yacht Club on at least six different ships in the fleet and have revelled in each experience. Far more than an upgraded stateroom or suite category, the Yacht Club is an immersive experience that blends five-star hotel comforts with the cosmopolitan flair of MSC's imaginative voyages. Designed for discerning guests, it offers complete seclusion in an elegant retreat combined with effortless access to all the vibrancy and amenities of a modern, resort-style cruise ship.

AN EXCLUSIVE WORLD AT SEA

Upon arrival, Yacht Club guests experience a priority check-in that bypasses queues, ensuring that your journey begins in tranquility. Within moments of boarding, you step into an enclave reserved solely for Yacht Club travellers – a private area accessible only by key card, where serenity and service are paramount. It feels like discovering a hidden boutique hotel tucked inside a cosmopolitan city.

The Yacht Club's expansive suites offer both space and refinement – a sense of understated sophistication. Marble bathrooms, premium bedding, expansive walk-in closets, and floor-to-ceiling windows that open onto private balconies create an ambiance that rivals high-end hotels on land. The top categories, such as the Owner's Suites and Duplex Suites, offer two-deck living spaces, panoramic views, and in some cases, even whirlpool tubs on private terraces.

One of the most fabulous aspects of the Yacht Club experience is the personalized service at every turn. Every suite in the MSC Yacht Club comes with a dedicated butler, available around the clock – and there's a concierge too. Trained to anticipate preferences rather than respond to requests, these butlers are the cornerstone of the guest experience. They'll unpack your luggage if you wish, press garments before a gala dinner, or draw a bath after a long day in port. Their knowledge also extends to every nuance of the ship. From securing a spa reservation to arranging a private shore excursion or the best seats at the evening theatre performance, no detail escapes their attention. Though the ship is large – often hosting thousands of guests – the Yacht Club butlers ensure their guests feel as though they are in a much smaller, intimate setting, where every request is remembered and every desire anticipated. They escort you to your choice of restaurant, or to the theatre, where there is a special section for Yacht Club guests. Ask anything, and they will be there immediately and always with a smile. I love having a butler – it really is special.



MSC World America at Ocean Cay, MSC Cruises' private island in the Bahamas.



Private Sun Deck.

ELEVATED DINING AT SEA

Gastronomy is the centrepiece of the Yacht Club experience. While the ship itself offers a dizzying array of restaurants, lounges, and specialty venues, Yacht Club guests enjoy exclusive private dining rooms. Here, internationally acclaimed chefs bring creativity and finesse to a menu that changes daily, reflecting both Mediterranean influences and locally sourced ingredients from ports along the journey.

Tables are spaced generously, service is unobtrusive, and the wine list is curated with depth and precision. On some of the older ships, such as the *Divina*, the restaurant for Yacht Club guests is reached by walking through the vessel, but on the gorgeous new *MSC World America*, the restaurant overlooks the Top Sail Lounge situated in the Yacht Club itself. Afternoons might be filled with bespoke tastings – fine Champagne on transatlantic crossings, Sicilian olive oil during Mediterranean voyages, or artisanal chocolates when sailing Northern Europe.

Meanwhile, the Top Sail Lounge, the Yacht Club's crown jewel, provides a refined backdrop for day-to-night indulgence. Guests can sip cocktails beneath glittering crystal chandeliers, enjoy afternoon tea, or watch the horizon over pre-dinner canapés and piano music. This lounge, like all spaces within the Yacht Club, is all-inclusive with beverages, premium spirits, specialty coffees, and snacks always at hand. It becomes a delightful home-away-from-home with staff always ready to offer any indulgence – it's truly sublime.

One of the most coveted areas is the private sun deck and pool, reserved exclusively for Yacht Club members. This elevated retreat offers plush loungers, whirlpool baths, shaded cabanas, and an uncrowded, tranquil atmosphere. Attendants deliver chilled towels, gourmet snacks, or fresh tropical cocktails as desired.



MSC Yacht Club sundeck and pool



MSC Yacht Club restaurant



MSC Yacht Club restaurant

A defining feature of the Yacht Club is its all-inclusive philosophy. Nearly every aspect of the experience is already accounted for: unlimited top-shelf beverages, 24-hour in-suite dining service, select specialty dining inclusions, Wi-Fi packages, priority seating for entertainment, and thermal suite access at the spa. Of course, gratuities are also included.

Equally important is priority access across the ship. Yacht Club guests enjoy priority embarkation and disembarkation in each port, reserved seating at Broadway-style theatres, and expedited tenders to shore when the ship cannot dock. It's a subtle but vital distinction – no waiting, no lines, no sense of rush – just seamless enjoyment from one moment to the next.

What makes MSC unique is how masterfully it balances its signature cosmopolitan energy with the serene intimacy of the Yacht Club. Guests can retreat into their private world whenever they wish, yet still have full access to vibrant shopping promenades, water parks, dazzling entertainment, and nightlife across the larger vessel. The Yacht Club serves both as the perfect cocoon for guests seeking serenity and as a convenient base camp for those who want to engage with the dynamic spirit of a contemporary cruise. The combination of lavish suites, round-the-clock butler service, all-inclusive privileges, private dining, and exclusive spaces makes this enclave an irresistible option for luxury seekers. There are 24 ships in the MSC Fleet, and 16 now offer a Yacht Club experience. If sailing in the Bahamas and the Caribbean, the impressive Ocean Cay MSC Marine Reserve is an exceptional private island providing a dedicated beach area and Beachclub dining with private transportation from the ship for Yacht Club guests.

Cruising within the Yacht Club is not merely travel; it is a journey defined by personalized attention and a sense of belonging to a discreet, privileged world aboard some of the most innovative ships at sea. MSC has struck gold in creating a haven that feels both rarified and inclusive – welcoming travellers not only to explore the globe but also to do so from the lap of luxury. ■

AmaWaterways and Smithsonian Journeys alliance

Eleven **AmaWaterways** expertly curated itineraries showcasing Europe's most breathtaking and historic rivers – including the Danube, Rhine, Douro, Seine and Rhône – will launch in 2026 and return in 2027 in collaboration with Smithsonian Journeys, the travel program of the Smithsonian Institute and a recognized leader in small-group explorations. Each journey features exclusive excursions and enriching opportunities to engage with a diverse array of experts, from art historians and archaeologists to scientists, anthropologists and more. All departures include a selection of optional pre- and post-cruise land packages, hosted by an AmaWaterways cruise manager, allowing guests to delve even deeper into the cultural and historical richness of each destination. Among the highlights in 2027 are two new itineraries: one takes guests along the picturesque waterways of France – the Seine, Saône and Rhône rivers, and the other, along the winding Mekong River through Vietnam and Cambodia. Drawing on the Smithsonian's 175+ years as the world's largest museum, education and research complex, each itinerary features two distinguished Smithsonian Journeys experts and experiences designed to foster deep cultural engagement. Cruising with AmaWaterways includes fine dining in multiple venues, unlimited wine, beer and soft drinks with lunch and dinner, daily Sip & Sail cocktail hour, a variety of small group excursions, high-quality Wi-Fi, a Wellness Program with a variety of host-led fitness classes, airport transfers, and much more.



PIXELS EFFECT / ISTOCK

Riverside Luxury Cruises introduces beer-themed Rhine itinerary for 2026

Riverside Luxury Cruises has unveiled a new specialty sailing for summer 2026 called "Hops & Heritage: Cruising Through Centuries of Brewing Craftsmanship". The eight-day itinerary, running from July 29 to August 5, 2026, will be hosted by beer sommelier James Kellow and will celebrate International Beer Day on August 7. The program highlights Europe's brewing heritage with guided brewery visits, tastings, and educational sessions. Guests will sail from Basel to Amsterdam, with calls including Cologne and Arnhem. Regional beer specialties will be featured along the route, from Swiss lagers to German pilsners and Kölsch, and Dutch brands such as Grolsch. Onboard programming includes tastings, food pairings, and recommendations integrated into the Waterside restaurant's daily menus. For an additional fee, guests can book the Vintage Room, a seven-course dining experience pairing regional beers with locally inspired dishes, created by Kellow in partnership with the ship's executive chef. Riverside will also extend beer programming on other departures throughout August 2026. Guests on Rhine sailings during that month will have access to Kellow-curated brewery tours in port, along with a bar stocked with regional beers, tasting notes, and pairing suggestions. This luxury river brand has been receiving stellar reviews on all its ships, with guests enjoying superb service, cuisine and accommodations in all destinations. Prost!



COURTESY AMAWATERWAYS

New river frontiers

As **Emerald Cruises** charts a bold course into the future, its river cruise portfolio is set to reach exciting new frontiers. Following the debut of the 180-guest **Emerald Astra** in 2026, the 10th Star-Ship in the brand's European river fleet, the company will introduce two new river ships in 2027, including its long-anticipated debut on the Seine River. Purpose-built for this romantic and storied waterway, *Emerald Lumi* will navigate the Seine's unique dimensions, unlocking access to coveted ports such as Honfleur and Rouen, and bringing a modern take to French river cruising, seamlessly blending luxury, cultural immersion and boutique charm. Guests can expect extended and overnight stays in ports, French-inspired cuisine, wine pairings and locally curated excursions. Thoughtful onboard programming will highlight art, culture and regional storytelling. The second, yet unnamed, Star-Ship debuting in 2027 will sail the iconic Rhine-Main-Danube corridor, further expanding Emerald's footprint in Central Europe and elevating the contemporary experience guests have come to love, offering greater destination access, onboard comfort and cultural connection.



Emerald Astra

COURTESY EMERALD CRUISES

Vanessa Lee asked **Chris Austin**, President, North America at Explora Journeys about their luxury fleet and growth plans as they launch more ships in the coming years.



Explora Journeys has earned rave reviews and an impressive level of repeat guests in just two years. Why do you think the brand has resonated so quickly with luxury travellers?

Explora Journeys was born from a family vision to reimagine what ocean travel could be. We are more than a cruise line. We are a boutique, ultra-luxury European resort whose home is the ocean. Our “Ocean State of Mind” philosophy was crafted by listening to thousands of guests and travel advisors to ensure we created something truly different. This guest-centric approach has led to exceptional feedback, strong repeat rates, and industry recognition, with multiple prestigious awards in just two years. Guests tell us they love the sense of space, choice, and connection that defines every journey and keeps them coming back for more.

With *EXPLORA I* and *II* now sailing and *EXPLORA III* arriving in 2026, what can guests expect as the fleet expands?

With every new ship, we’re building on what guests already love and we listen carefully. Guest feedback and evolving

travel trends play a big role in shaping each new vessel. With *EXPLORA III* we are optimizing the additional space created by LNG power, not maximizing guest count, which remains the same. This allows us to introduce larger suites, add a second uniquely designed Owner’s Residence on Deck 7, and expand public spaces for greater comfort. With six ships planned by 2028, we are bringing even more destinations, overnights, and opportunities to linger longer, including Alaska and Asia starting in 2027, ensuring every ship feels fresh, modern, and relevant.

2027 marks the debut of Explora Journeys’ first Alaska and Asia journeys. How will Explora’s approach to these places differ from other luxury brands?

Our itineraries are designed to be as immersive as they are luxurious. In Alaska, we’re offering journeys ranging from 7 to 12 nights, including smaller, harder-to-reach ports and scenic sailing days. In Asia, guests can expect overnights in iconic cities like Tokyo and Singapore, private and small-group experiences, and opportunities to explore hidden gems beyond the typical highlights. It’s about creating meaningful encounters with culture, cuisine, and community and not just checking off destinations.

Explora Journeys has partnerships with brands like Steinway & Sons, Rolex, and Jannik Sinner. How do these collaborations enrich the guest experience?

These partnerships help us position Explora Journeys as more than a ship. It is a floating resort that celebrates culture and craftsmanship, where guests can enjoy live performances from Steinway Artists, discover boutique shopping experiences with brands like Rolex and Buccellati, or take part in special on-board wellness activations inspired by our global ambassador, Jannik Sinner. In 2026, *EXPLORA I* will be docked in Port Hercule during the Monaco Grand Prix, offering

guests a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience Monte Carlo during one of its most glamorous events. Importantly, every partnership is chosen because it aligns with our values, and our shared commitment to excellence, artistry, and authenticity, ensuring that each collaboration feels like a natural extension of the Explora Journeys ethos.

The term “all-inclusive” can mean very different things across the cruise industry. How does Explora Journeys define its inclusions, and how does that elevate the experience for travellers?

At Explora Journeys, we believe true luxury should feel effortless and our inclusions are designed to deliver exceptional value. Guests enjoy unlimited fine beverages, including premium wines and spirits, nine culinary experiences, seamless, high-speed Wi-Fi, and gratuities, as well as access to our Ocean Wellness programming. These experiences are delivered by one of the highest guest-to-host ratios in the industry, with passionate hospitality experts ensuring every detail feels effortless. There’s no second-guessing or tallying extras, just the freedom to fully immerse in the experience. This transparency not only simplifies planning but allows our guests to focus on what matters most: enjoying their journey, their way.

What should Canadian travellers know right now about Explora Journeys?

Canadian travellers value authenticity and connection, and that’s exactly what Explora delivers. As a family-owned brand headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, we bring a distinctly European sensibility to luxury ocean travel. With *EXPLORA I* and *II* already sailing, *EXPLORA III* arriving in 2026, and new destinations like Alaska and Asia coming in 2027, there’s never been a better time to join us and experience life at sea in a way that feels personal, elegant, and refreshingly different. ■



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SIP YOUR WAY THROUGH EUROPE

Riverside Luxury Cruises' "Hops & Heritage" expert-led Rhine river cruise gives guests access to some of Europe's oldest and tastiest ales – all while sailing through historic towns in Germany and the Netherlands. On shore, visit local breweries, pubs, and establishments that highlight each port's connection to beer.

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