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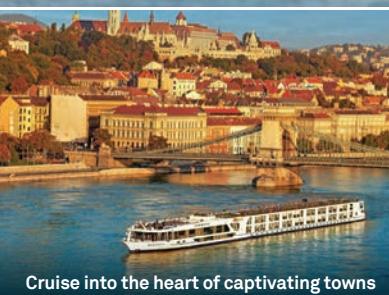


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Vanessa Lee in Madeira

WELCOME TO OUR SPRING AND SUMMER ISSUE, which, as usual, contains many interesting and informative articles we hope you'll enjoy. Historically, this issue has focused on Europe, whether by land or sea; however, a few months ago, for obvious reasons, I decided we would add some Canadian content to this issue – on short notice, as you might imagine. Some of you may recall in 2017, we dedicated most of our summer publication to Canada's 150th anniversary, and it was one of our most popular issues – for me, it was a labour of love.

As the British-born daughter of a Canadian father and an

English mother, I have long been a Canadian citizen – choosing to live in this remarkable country and become Canadian in every way. Sometimes, choosing a country (or having a country choose you) can be a more patriotic choice. It's certainly not an accidental one!

So, with many Canadians considering a staycation this summer, we have a few articles to tempt you to explore more of our beautiful country. In this issue, we're featuring British Columbia, Alberta, Ottawa and Quebec. We're also showcasing some wonderful European vacations in Turkey – now known as Turkiye – Spain, a cruise from Malaga to the Canary Islands, and more about two new ships joining their fleets.

Canadians are always intrepid travelers, warmly welcomed wherever we might venture. We're aware of local customs, ensuring we are embraced as thoughtful tourists and ultimately gaining a deeper and more abiding knowledge of the lands we visit. Whether you'll stay home more this year or head overseas, we hope our magazine provides some inspiring ideas and that we pique your interest in the many destinations featured. This magazine is indeed a labour of love, and I relish planning the three issues a year, finding great writers and choosing inspiring places to populate our pages. And you know there is much more to come.

When we travel, our hearts and minds are opened, our eyes see more, our taste buds are tantalized, and we learn so much.

Have a wonderful and safe summer, and may you find awe-inspiring vistas, return to places you love, find new destinations to enjoy, go somewhere you have yearned to visit for years, and hopefully add more places to your bucket list.

Happy Travelling,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Vanessa Lee".

Vanessa Lee

IG Vanessa 13577

IN MEMORIAM

We remember those we have lost recently. Some were good, long-standing friends, and all are sorely missed by their loved ones.

Chris Crapper, Helen Downie-Bosco,
Paul Jervis, Dan Pedelaborde,
Sue Urié and Brian Ward



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Features

20 WILDLIFE AND WONDER

The remote peace of British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest is explored in depth by Maple Leaf Adventures and their small vessel, the Cascadia.

24 SPRING IN THE LAURENTIANS

March skiing in Quebec offers sensational slopes, sugar shacks, and other very tempting, delectable bites – another great Canadian moment.

28 LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE

Our writer chronicles her coastal journey along Spain's northeast coast while enjoying nature, great food and drink and historic small towns.

34 YACHT-STYLE CRUISING

Atlas Ocean Voyages, a relative newcomer to expedition and exploration cruising, offers a charming itinerary featuring Morocco, Madeira and the Canary Islands.

40 TURKEY'S TURQUOISE COAST

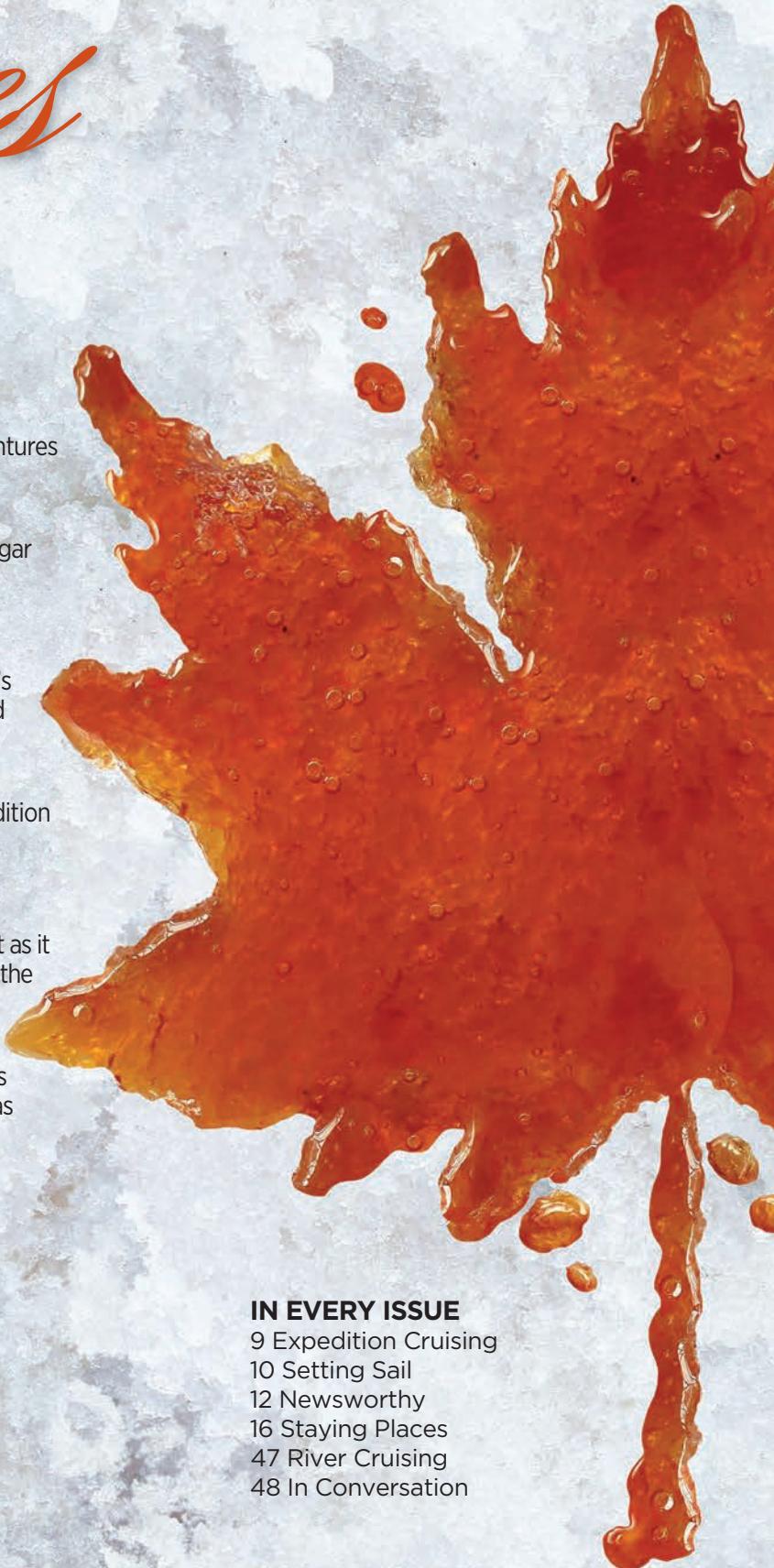
A week of adventure unfolds on a typical sailing gulet as it sails the magnificent 1,000-kilometre coastline along the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas.

44 MSC WORLD AMERICA ARRIVES

The newest ship in the European-based MSC Cruises fleet, built specifically for North American guests, has arrived with great anticipation and fanfare.

IN EVERY ISSUE

- 9 Expedition Cruising
- 10 Setting Sail
- 12 Newsworthy
- 16 Staying Places
- 47 River Cruising
- 48 In Conversation





Liz Fleming enjoying Western Newfoundland

THE WORLD IS A TURBULENT PLACE these days – sometimes the very ground on which we stand seems to be shaking. And yet, even in the midst of the madness, good things are happening.

Canada is enjoying a new era of national pride that surpasses anything we've ever seen, eclipsing even the fervour that surrounded our centennial in 1967. We're proud of who and what we are and we're opening our arms wide to the world as we showcase our beautiful country. This issue of our magazine is a grand introduction to just a precious few of the fabulous destinations, exciting experiences, fascinating history and welcoming people that make Canada what it is. There's no need to make our country great again – Canada has always been great!

And maybe this will be the year for you to explore Canada.

From the wild fjords of Newfoundland, to the shores of the Bay of Fundy where the tides are the highest in the world, to the ancient stone walls of Québec City, to the towers of the Vancouver skyline, to the wild waves on the beaches of Tofino, and the icy stillness of the arctic tundra in Nunavut, Canada offers a wealth of adventurous

possibilities. No country in the world has a more diverse offering of travel possibilities.

Several summers ago, I spent an incredible ten days in Labrador's Torngat Mountains. Staying at as remote a base camp as you could imagine, we had only a satellite phone to connect us to the outside world – and then, only for true emergencies. No cell phone service, no internet, no television and no radio. Instead, we were immersed in and entertained by a heart-stopping landscape, where jagged peaks strained to reach the sky, minke whales breached just off the beach and bears wandered just beyond our small enclave of tents. Run by an entirely Inuit staff, the Torngat camp was a place of warm camaraderie and high-spirited adventure – days were filled with sights and sounds we'd never have experienced anywhere else and nights were alive with laughter, game-playing and drumming, all under skies drenched in northern lights. Though physically and culturally, I was light years away from my Niagara home, I've never felt more comfortable or more Canadian. This year, while Canada's heart is glowing red and maple leaf flags are waving proudly across the country, come explore, experience and enjoy. Whether your dream holiday involves urban cityscapes or rugged wilderness, you'll find just what you're looking for and chances are good that you'll want to stay – and feel more Canadian than ever.

Happy Travels,

Liz Fleming

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!

CRUISE & TRAVEL LIFESTYLES

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SCAN FOR OFFER

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COURTESY HX EXPEDITIONS



HX Expeditions launches first-ever Greenland cruises from New York

HX Expeditions, the world's largest expedition cruise company, announced the launch of flight-inclusive Greenland itineraries with nonstop flights from Newark to Nuuk, just a four-hour journey. Commencing on June 21, 2025 (Greenland National Day), and marked by the summer solstice, HX's hybrid-powered voyages feature itineraries developed in collaboration with local Greenlandic communities, ensuring guests enjoy an authentic travel experience as they sail the country's west coast aboard the **MS Fridtjof Nansen**. HX Expeditions, with over 20 years of experience in Greenland, offers unmatched expertise with a legacy of Arctic exploration that dates back to 1896. The company also provides exclusive locally designed itineraries crafted and managed by Greenlanders, built in collaboration with local communities and featuring cultural ambassadors on every sailing. Sustainability leadership is crucial in this fragile part of the world, and the hybrid battery-powered *MS Fridtjof Nansen* is recognized as one of the world's safest and most sustainable cruise ships, prioritizing emissions and waste reductions. New itineraries from Newark include the 12-day Icy Giants of Disko Bay, the 16-day Mythical Lands of the North expedition, the 20-day Farthest North to Thule and Kane Basin, which ventures farther north than HX Expeditions has ever gone, and the 26-day Northwest Passage Through the Arctic Labyrinth, expedition, a truly exclusive travel experience.

See What Others Don't with Swan Hellenic

See What Others Don't is more than just a tagline—it's an invitation to experience the world in a way few ever do. A **Swan Hellenic** cruise is for the curious traveler, the explorer at heart, the seeker of the extraordinary, revealing the unseen wonders of the world's most fascinating destinations. With an impressive, lengthy history, Swan Hellenic has been revitalized and offers new ships that dazzle - **SH Vega** (158-guests) launched in 2022 and **SH Diana** (192-guests) in 2023. Both are offering global itineraries that span both poles and everything in between. Witness rare wildlife in its natural habitat, step onto untouched shores or engage with Indigenous communities in ways few travelers do. The ships feature an elegant Scandinavian design with floor-to-ceiling windows, all complemented by ample outdoor deck space. Onboard facilities include an observation lounge, a library, self-service launderettes, a fitness center, a beauty salon, and an ocean-view sauna, a Jacuzzi, a spa, and a heated outdoor swimming pool. Accommodations are all ocean-view, with a choice of large windows or balcony, plus premium suites that sleep up to four. Amenities such as glass-enclosed rain showers, fluffy bathrobes, minibar and Illy coffee machines ensconce guests in comfort and style. Dining is a highlight, with menus offering Asian and Italian fusion, French, and international fare. The onboard dress code is casual and guests dine at leisure with whomever they like. A host of experts accompany each voyage, including geologists, meteorologists, historians, photographers, ornithologists, and marine biologists. Activity leaders guide kayaking, snorkelling, snowshoeing, and hiking excursions. 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.



COURTESY SWAN HELLENIC



A Shining Princess

Sun Princess, Princess Cruises' 16th ship, is heralding the line's new Sphere Class

Princess Cruises' Sun Princess, the line's sweet 16th ship, heralds the upscale, elegant, new Sphere Class with its striking new exterior design and more stylish interiors for 4,300 guests.

The ship's extravagantly enormous glass dome on the top deck looks like a glistening diamond crown. Midship, it looks as if the ship has swallowed a giant crystal golf ball, with curves reaching out for sea and sky views. These two brilliant architectural features bring a wealth of natural sunlight inside.

NEW SANCTUARY ENCLAVE

The ship marks many other firsts for the line besides its modern royal look, boasting its first 'ship-within-a-ship' concept, a private-access enclave called the Sanctuary Collection for discerning guests who like a VIP experience.

While there are 2,157 staterooms in total on board, the Sanctuary has three special categories of staterooms such as 80 full suites, 123 mini-suites and 12 balcony suites. These three options allow for savings within families or groups who can choose the suite that suits them. Children 16-plus are also permitted.

The Sanctuary also has its own restaurant, pool, hot tub, private cabanas, luxurious two-story lounge and two bars. Additional perks include the Princess Premier package for premium drinks, unlimited specialty dining, the highest-performing Wi-Fi, reserved theatre seating and more.

ONBOARD FEATURES

There are five pools – including a stunning infinity-style pool at the aft and an indoor/outdoor pool under the spectacular dome – as well as nine hot tubs.

The signature Piazza atrium is the heart of many Princess ships and for Sun Princess, additional seating now accommodates about 300 guests who can enjoy watching live music, dancing, performances and other activities.

A two-storey spa, a thermal suite, salon and gym are also available and the top deck has a netted sports court and running track. Princess also went 'all in' with a casino that's the largest of the fleet. Retail space has been expanded and features more than 200 premium brands.

ENHANCED DINING

Designed to be a foodie destination at sea, Sun Princess has 29 restaurants and bars to tantalize all tastes. While beloved favourites such as the 116-seat Sabatini's Italian Trattoria and 132-seat Crown Grill remain, the ship introduces an exciting array of new dining experiences, highlighted by celebrity collaborations.

Love by Britto, a boutique restaurant featuring the vibrant works and tableware of renowned Brazilian artist Romero Britto, has a whimsical seven-course meal designed for 68 guests and presented with heart-shaped food.

Sushi master Chef Makoto Okuwa brings his creations to Makoto Ocean, where traditional sushi is redefined for 70 guests.

World-renowned butcher Dario Cecchini presents Butcher's Block by Dario, an 88-seat family-style restaurant featuring the finest cuts of beef.

Spellbound by Magic Castle offers a fun, immersive dining experience with a magician/comedian, spooky spaces and Instagram-worthy cocktails.

The Catch by Rudi, another culinary gem that's on four Princess ships, features seafood specialties with international influences curated by Chef Rudi Sodamin. The venue accommodates 88 diners.

Guests can also indulge at the Love Line Premium Liquors Collection, a collaboration with celebrities like Matthew McConaughey and his Pantalones organic tequila and Blake Lively and her new Betty Booze and Betty Buzz (non-alcoholic) sparkling beverages. Renowned mixologist Rob Floyd delights guests with his globally-inspired cocktails.

Model Tyra Banks has her unique Smize ice cream on board. Chef Darren McGrady's delightful High Tea presentation (he's served both Queen Elizabeth II and Princess Diana) adds to the onboard culinary tapestry.



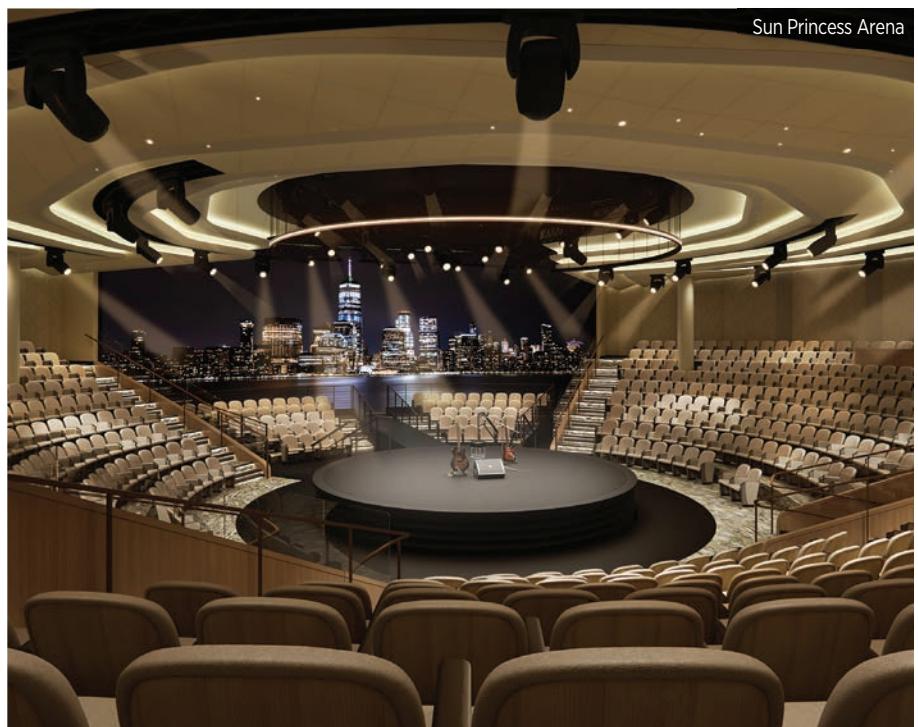
ENTERTAINMENT FOR MULTIGENERATIONS

Eager to appeal to younger generations including those 35-plus, Princess has curated more engaging, late-night entertainment. There are three new large-scale production shows at the 980-seat Arena theatre with four lead vocalists and 13 talented dancers. Smaller shows featuring eight extraordinary acrobats perform at the Piazza and in the 250-seat dome (the indoor part of the indoor/outdoor pool can be covered with a stage).

The vibrant entertainment is complemented by sail-away parties, interactive game shows and silent discos (great for people-watching even if not participating). Throughout the ship there are bars and lounges featuring high-quality live entertainment and DJs. On the top deck, an outdoor giant TV screen is ideal to watch movies and sporting events.

While many loyal, repeat Princess guests may feel a bit lost on the new Sun Princess because some traditional venues are in different places than its fleet mates, others say it was time for a change and that the ship both 'surprises and delights' in many wonderful ways.

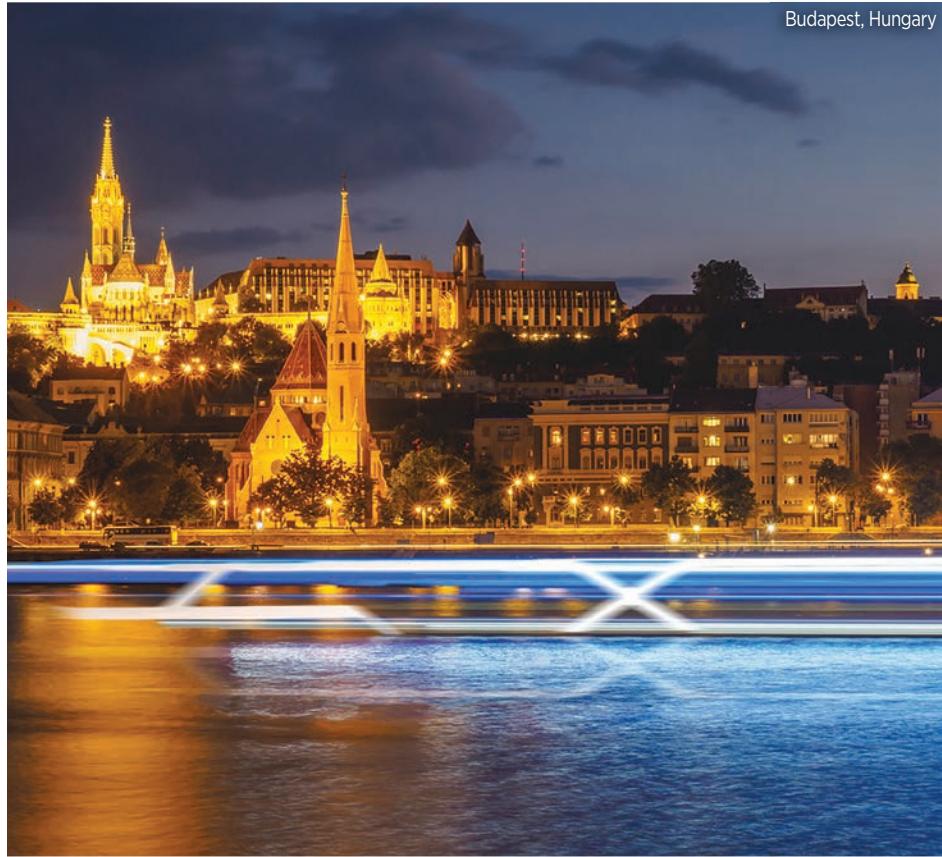
Star Princess, a twin to the Sun Princess, will debut in fall 2025. — DIANE TIERNEY



COURTESY PRINCESS CRUISES

This is how they river

Celebrity Cruises, a premium cruise brand with a fleet of 15 ocean ships travelling to nearly 300 destinations across all seven continents, as well as an industry pioneer for more than 35 years, will usher in a new era of river cruising with the launch of Celebrity River Cruises, expected to start sailing in 2027. The brand has signed an initial order for 10 transformative river vessels that will take guests to historic cities on Europe's most iconic rivers, with the brand's personalized service, world-class amenities, and unique itineraries expected to wow even the most discerning guests. With every detail elevated beyond expectation, Celebrity River Cruises will bring the remarkable design and sophistication of its Edge Series ocean ships to the river, with 360 degrees of breathtaking views, locally inspired cuisine and every moment designed to immerse guests in the beauty of their journey. Combining that with the brand's signature hospitality, Celebrity River Cruises will deliver unforgettable experiences – The Celebrity Way. Once you experience it, you'll never want to vacation any other way. Sign up for e-mail, follow Celebrity Cruises on social media or contact your Travel Professional to be the first to know once Celebrity River Cruises is open for sale – sometime in 2025.



COURTESY CELEBRITY CRUISES

Azamara Pursuit in Alaska



COURTESY AZAMARA CRUISES

A 2026 return to Alaska for Azamara Cruises

After a seven-year hiatus, **Azamara Cruises** will once again offer its signature, intimate voyages to one of the world's most unspoiled places – Alaska. Beginning in May 2026, the **Azamara Pursuit** will embark on a series of 10- to 13-day cruises featuring remote Alaskan destinations, cultural encounters with Indigenous communities, and wildlife excursions such as whale watching, bear spotting and glacier hiking. Azamara is known for its extended stays in port and Alaska will be no different, with time in port of 10+ hours. Visits to Juneau, Wrangell, Skagway and Ketchikan, as well as Nanaimo and Victoria, BC will provide guests ample time to explore each destination. There will also be access to remote locations like Kodiak, known for its stunning natural beauty and wildlife spotting. Dutch Harbor, the gateway to the Aleutian Islands, and Icy Strait Point will also offer exceptional whale watching and adventure activities.

Terrace Suite



Explora Journeys launches Explora Club

Explora Journeys, the rapidly growing luxury lifestyle cruise brand of the MSC Group, has unveiled the Explora Club - a new loyalty program created to honour and reward Explora's repeat guests. The program offers a seamless and intuitive five-level structure - Classic, Silver, Gold, Platinum, and Diamond - each tier unveils a curated array of incremental privileges and benefits. From priority access, dedicated assistance, elevated onboard services and invitations to bespoke events to thoughtful, personalized gifts and meaningful savings, all created to enhance guests' experiences onboard and ashore. Tiers are determined by weighted nights at sea, multiplied by suite category, with additional points earned through Destination Experiences purchased pre-journey or on board and eligible onboard spending such as Ocean Wellness spa expenditures, exclusive culinary experiences and beverages, laundry, and purchases at The Journey boutique. Once enrolled, past cruises will be factored into each member's level. By July 2025, guests will have access to a personalized "My Explora" online area where individual benefits and status levels will be displayed. Guests holding loyalty status with other luxury cruise brands are invited into Explora Club with an equivalent level of recognition from their very first journey. It is a celebration of the Ocean State of Mind - where loyalty is recognized and genuinely valued, and every return feels like coming home. Explora Journeys has two ships and will welcome **Explora III** in 2026 and three more ships thereafter, each featuring all-suite accommodations with terraces, many dining choices and an all-inclusive lifestyle at sea.

COURTESY EXPLORA JOURNEYS

Riviera welcomes a new river ship

Riviera River Cruises has welcomed its newest five-star river ship, **Riviera Rose**, purposely built to sail along Portugal's enchanting Douro River. The innovative 114-guest ship is the first to debut the brand's new split-level design, creating a bright, open space filled with natural light, and marking the beginning of a new generation of Riviera's ships. Guests will enjoy a tasteful culinary experience at the onboard restaurant, with breakfast and lunch served buffet or made to order-style, and dinners offering a three-course menu blending international favourites with regional specialties, crafted with ingredients sourced from local markets. *Riviera Rose* features 57 river view staterooms spread across three decks, each designed for comfort and convenience. Every room includes convertible double-to-twin beds, a bathroom with a rain shower, a desk and chair, a flat-screen TV, air conditioning, a coffee machine and a tea kettle. The ship's standard rooms include a French balcony and an indoor seating area while balcony suites feature an outdoor seating area. Staterooms on the lower deck have fixed windows. *Riviera Rose* sails the seven-night Highlights of the Douro Valley & Salamanca River Cruise with an optional Lisbon extension which includes a fully escorted three-night stay in Lisbon after the cruise. In addition to discovering the highlights of Lisbon, the itinerary features a day trip to the ancient city of Coimbra and to Fátima, an important Catholic pilgrimage site, and concludes with a visit to the romantic 19th-century Pena Palace and other iconic landmarks in Sintra.



COURTESY RIVIERA RIVER CRUISES

The Mediterranean and Europe beckon with Silversea

Silversea Cruises knows their discerning guests are travel seekers. They revel in authenticity, have a refined sense of adventure and a strong desire to explore and see the world by sharing magical experiences with like-minded travellers. As an ultra-luxury brand, Silversea's all-inclusive lifestyle at sea is an ideal way to sail to some of the Mediterranean's choice destinations. This summer, Silversea Cruises has more than 80 itineraries on six ships, which are calling on hidden gems, colourful destinations and iconic cities alike. The extensive choices include some delightful sailings on the newest ship in the fleet – the stunning 728-guest **Silver Ray** launched last year, offers a series of eight and nine-day cruises between Barcelona, Monte Carlo and Rome, visiting such magical ports as Palamós, Valencia, and Tarragona in Spain, the island of Mallorca in the Balearic Islands, and the chic French resort towns of St Tropez and Cannes. The equally delightful 596-guest **Silver Muse** sails Athens roundtrip on several itineraries in July and August to the ever-welcoming Greek Isles. Sun-drenched coves, domed churches, white-washed buildings and picturesque streets are all hallmarks of islands dotting the blissfully blue Aegean Sea. **Silver Whisper** is sailing between Barcelona and Malaga or Valletta, Malta, this summer on 11-day itineraries. If sailing to Malta and the tiny capital of Valletta, guests will love the walled city established in the 1500s by the Knights of St John – always a highlight. Whichever cruise you choose with Silversea this summer, be it in the sunny Med or the intriguing lands in Northern Europe, you will arrive in style as you delight in the exceptional onboard service of Silversea ensconced in your gorgeous suite with 24-hour Butler service and an excellent choice of fine dining options.



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COURTESY REGENT SEVEN SEAS

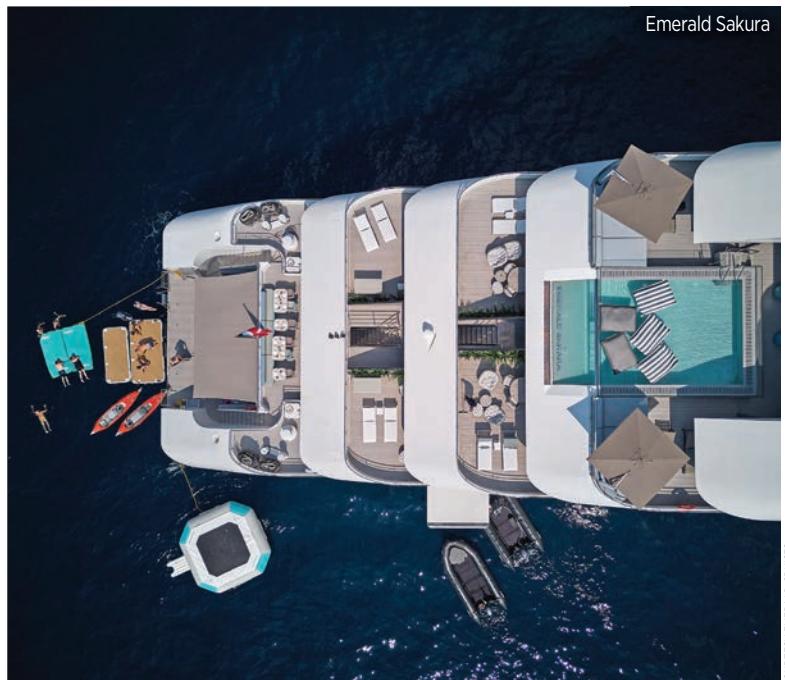
Seven Seas Mariner

Regent Seven Seas Cruises unveils transformation plans

Emphasizing the cruise line's relentless Pursuit of Perfection, the thoughtfully planned refurbishments of the all-suite, all-balcony **Seven Seas Mariner** (700 guests) and **Seven Seas Voyager** (698) will feature the same impeccable attention to detail seen in Regent's renowned Explorer-Class ships, providing guests a consistently elegant look and feel across the entire fleet. The multi-million-dollar investment will transform the two ships, with refreshed suites, lush new carpeting throughout, beautiful public spaces, and an enhanced Pool Grill featuring a new wood fired pizzeria concept for relaxed al fresco dining. The new suites will exude modern elegance as design led choices prioritize the highest standards of guest comfort. Sophisticated neutral tones will create a serene retreat, complemented by stylish yet functional furniture. Refined details will transform suites beyond vacation accommodation and create a true home away from home feel, elevating the standard of ultra-luxury all-inclusive cruising on board. Refurbishment for *Seven Seas Mariner* (launched in 2000) will begin on November 3, 2025 and will be complete by November 26, 2025 before she embarks on a 14-night transoceanic voyage from Barcelona to Miami. From there, she will sail a series of Miami round trip itineraries, before embarking on her iconic 2026 World Cruise, The Sense of Adventure. *Seven Seas Voyager* (launched in 2001) enters dry dock on April 26, 2026 ahead of her May 21, 2026 12-night Eastern Mediterranean Gems sailing from Barcelona to Athens. She will then embark on several Western and Eastern Mediterranean journeys across Italy, Portugal, Turkey and Greece, before debuting her elegant renovations to guests sailing the British Isles.

A growth spurt for Emerald Cruises

Following the anticipated debut of **Emerald Kaia** in 2026, **Emerald Cruises** is introducing two new next-generation superyachts – **Emerald Raiya** and **Emerald Xara** – arriving in late 2026 and early 2027 respectively. The new superyachts will accommodate up to 128 guests and have the same sleek design as their sisters (**Emerald Azzurra**, **Emerald Sakara**, and the above-mentioned **Emerald Kaia**), offering seamless open-air living, spacious all-suite accommodations, wellness-focused amenities, an expansive Sky Deck with private cabanas and panoramic views, as well as the guests' favourite – a swim-up marina platform designed for easy access to the sea. Signature touches also include an open-air fitness area, the Elements Spa, multiple dining venues serving regionally inspired cuisine, and a collection of water toys, such as paddleboards and SeaBobs, delivering the brand's hallmark blend of adventure, relaxation, and understated superyacht allure. *Emerald Raiya* will debut in the Seychelles in December 2026 before making her way to the Eastern Mediterranean in April 2027 for an unforgettable summer of sailing the Greek Isles and Turkey. The *Emerald Xara* will sail first in the Mediterranean from April 2027 before crossing the Atlantic to the Caribbean, where she will cruise this beautiful region from October 2027 to March 2028. Bookings will open in June 2025, but guests can join a waitlist now.



COURTESY EMERALD CRUISES



Barcelona Penthouse



The Arts Hotel Exterior



The Arts Hotel

Luxury and superb service define this exquisite hotel

The luxurious Arts Hotel has long been known as one of Barcelona's finest, offering service with genuine care, a gorgeous atmosphere and excellent eating and drinking choices. Fresh flowers and glorious art punctuate the hotel's warm, comfortable, yet sophisticated design.

Part of the Ritz-Carlton family, the property's location is unique for a city hotel in Barcelona. Set where the city meets the sea, this 5-star, highly-credentialed venue is a destination unto itself. It's the tallest hotel on the coast, overlooking the beachfront, offering panoramic city and beach views, yet it's just a short cab ride to the charming old town and numerous historic sites.

Discover an authentic Mediterranean essence with a 2 Michelin star experience at Enoteca Paco Pérez restaurant, serving Catalan cuisine inspired by the seafood and fresh products of the Med. The Pantry, where we enjoyed a remarkable and tasty dinner, is a delight. With its unique, intimate speakeasy concept, fantastic, engaging service and great atmosphere, this spot is a winner with some of the best food I have ever enjoyed – anywhere! It's mouth-watering, simple cuisine made with the finest ingredients and combined with the tastiest treats. The Pantry is located in a "secret" place within the hotel, part of its delightful charm.

For pre-or post-dinner aperitivos or a digestif, Bar P41 is the place to be where consummate mixologists prepare world-

class cocktails and offer a side of fascinating conversation as an accompaniment. Named for Parallel 41, where the hotel is situated, this is one of those atmospheric bars you wish could be found in every great hotel.

There are many open spaces – enjoy the artistically designed family pool overlooking the attractive gardens, next to the fabulous Frank Gehry-designed shimmering fish (or whale) – a massive sculpture. On the other side is a more recently added adults-only infinity pool. The casual Marina Coastal Food is open for lunch daily in warmer weather and offers al fresco dining. Two other choices include Lokal for breakfast and Bites, serving coffees, informal meals and healthy choices daily.

The accommodations, as one would expect, are fantastic. Each elegantly designed, spacious room, suite or two-level penthouse has stunning views, and all offer a contemporary design and everything you'd expect from a hotel of this standard. Certain rooms on the higher floors offer a club lounge with complimentary drinks, snacks and other extras. The Spa is a haven of calm and serenity with outstanding services.

The Arts is a marvellous hotel with exceptionally warm service ready to meet your every need.

Note: starting in June 2025, certain renovations will be ongoing at the property.

— VANESSA LEE



The Aria Hotel, Budapest

An interlude in Budapest

As you enter the calm, musically-inspired and delightful haven of the boutique Aria Hotel, in central Budapest, close to St Stephen's Basilica and the pedestrian shopping streets, you must prepare to be charmed.

The Aria is well-named as the whole, historic property – formerly a palace – is dedicated to and inspired by music. There are just 49 utterly stunning, spacious rooms, named after different artists, with each wing reached by a corner elevator. Room designs come in four distinctive styles inspired by Jazz (Olive), Classical (Turquoise), Opera (Orchid) and Contemporary (White with a pop of Orange) music.

As we discovered our gorgeously designed Aria Signature Room in the Opera section, music gently wafted to our third-floor retreat with an open-air balcony overlooking the charming Music Garden glass-covered courtyard. Our room was magnificent, with high ceilings, great lighting and a contemporary yet warm and gracious décor, with every feature anyone could need. The King bed was supremely comfortable, and the furnishings included a loveseat and bistro table with chairs, ample closet space and a large smart TV. The bathroom had a chandelier, heated towel racks, robes, a separate tub and a shower featuring Molton Brown amenities. There

was also a Nespresso machine, included Wi-Fi with an iPad in the room, free water and a nightly turndown service complete with chocolates.

As you enter the hotel you can't help but be entranced by the Music Garden lounge with its black and white polished floor designed to replicate piano keys, impressive flower displays and colourful seating. A pianist performs most days from 4 to 6 pm and this pleasant room offers complimentary daily wine and cheese service reminiscent of a Palm Court. It's very popular, as you can imagine!

The Aria also offers a complimentary breakfast buffet and a lower-level spa with a pool, jacuzzi, saunas, steam room, gym and treatment rooms. Enjoy the stunning year-round multi-level roof garden with 360-degree panoramic views of Budapest's skyline, where you can have dinner or sip cocktails at the hip High Note Skybar. Culinary experiences include Café Liszt with its thoughtfully curated menu serving modern Hungarian and international dishes, a small library, and a café/bar offering the tastiest macarons and other treats.

Top-notch service is yours at every level, ensuring continuous comfort and the entire hotel exudes a rich, lavish feel with its colourful surroundings. It's THE place to stay in Budapest.

— VANESSA LEE





Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel

Canada's Castle in the Rockies

Better with age

Banff wouldn't be Banff without the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel.

The iconic castle towers above the town, overlooks the Spray and Bow Rivers, perches amongst awe-inspiring mountain peaks, and resides in the hearts of millions of castle-lovers the world over.

The grand dame of grand hotels, built in 1888 by the Canadian Pacific Railway and remodeled in 1928, recently underwent a \$35-million face lift. And what a beauty she is.

The warmth and integrity of an old-world castle, with its stone walls, turrets and winding staircases, happily cohabits alongside modern conveniences and amenities with a Rocky Mountain vibe. This renovation includes 110 Gold guest rooms, "the hotel within the hotel." A private arrival and check-in area welcomes Gold guests who have access to concierge service and a lounge where they can enjoy breakfast, snacks, evening canapés and a full-service bar. The remaining 647 guest rooms are also up-to-the minute contemporary, without sacrificing the hotel's time-honoured charm and natural habitat.

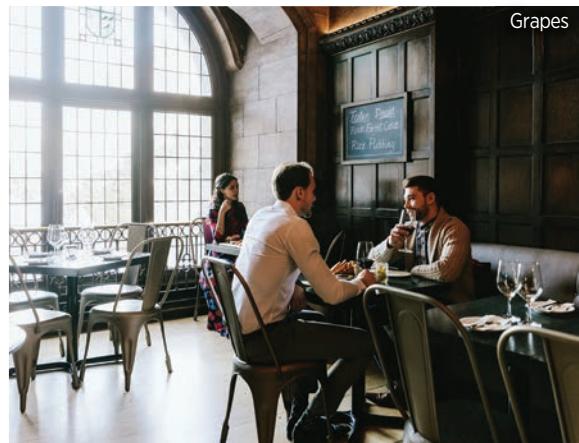
The Crown Suite, nestled at the peak of the castle's turret has undergone a sumptuous transformation. Hello royalty and five-star celebrities!

The staff are primed to spoil guests year-round at the golf course, the Willow Stream Spa, indoor and outdoor pools and a four-lane, five-pin bowling alley. Family programming features nature safaris, horseback riding, even treasure hunts, while fourteen upscale boutiques will delight shopaholics. Oh yes, dogs are welcome.

The choice of eateries includes a 24-hour snack bar, ethnic-inspired restaurants, Grapes Wine Bar and the Vermillion Room which serves French favourites with a Canadian twist.

You can still catch a glimpse of the past in the see-through mail chute that goes all the way from the top floor to the lobby and in the stories of the Ghost Bride who, 100 years ago, tumbled to her death down the marble staircase. Then there's Sam, the phantom bellman. Like every staff member today Sam is reported to be friendly.

— ANNA HOBBS



Grapes



Golf Course

The Metcalfe

A capital experience

Whether it's business or leisure that takes you to Ottawa, a stay at the 4-star Metcalfe Hotel will position you in the heart of downtown within a short walk of the Parliament Buildings, Rideau Canal, and National Art Gallery.

The 100-year-old stately red brick building, once home to the YMCA, was redesigned in 2022 as part of the Gray Collection, a Montreal-based, family-owned group of hotels. The result? A boutique property with 108 guest rooms and suites with a cool vibe that, through wooden beams and exposed brick walls, maintains the warmth and integrity of the heritage building.

Although most of the guests are business travellers, on our weekend getaway, we were immediately at home in what feels more like an inviting living room than an impersonal hotel lobby. Natural light floods through a stunning, five-storey glass-encircled atrium. Little details lend a sense of home away from home – artwork by Ottawa artist Claudia Gutierrez, a profusion of plants, comfy leather sofas, vintage photos and a

library wall, complete with rolling ladder, where guests are welcome to borrow books. Pets are also welcome. Between the living room and the curved bar that leads to Cocotte Bistro, several small café tables serve snack options and beverages throughout the day.

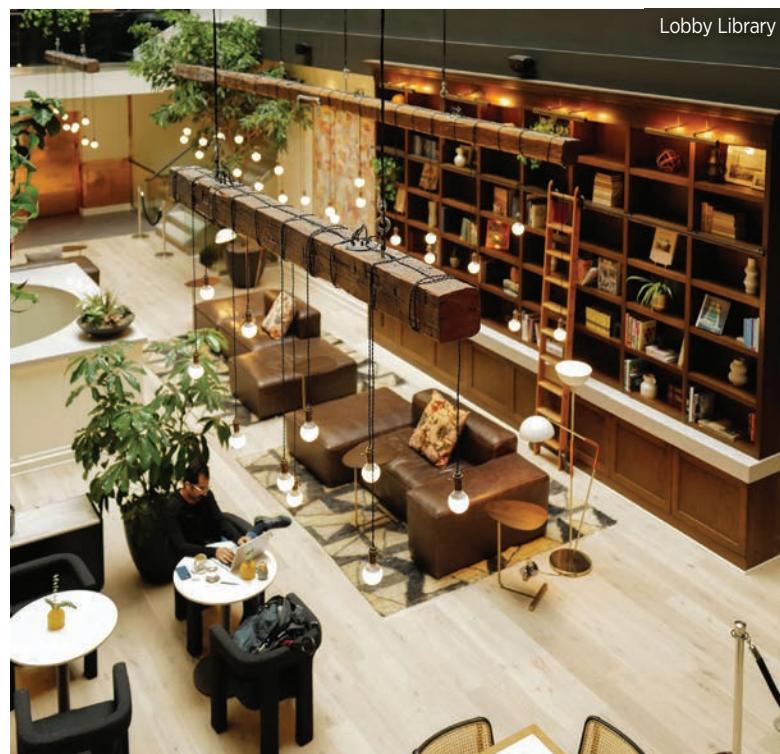
Our lofty, executive king room, simple, stylish and spacious, featured a light neutral colour palette with dark wood, straight-line furniture and a puffy duvet-topped bed. As you might expect, there's a fridge, minibar, safe and, best of all, stellar headboard-mounted reading lights. Bathroom décor features black and white slate and tile and a double walk-in spa shower with amenities by Santal 33.

A worktable by a tall window offers a skyline perspective of life along the length of Metcalfe Street. With plugs exactly where plugs should be and a cushy, adjustable ergonomic chair, it's no wonder business travellers love to stay here.

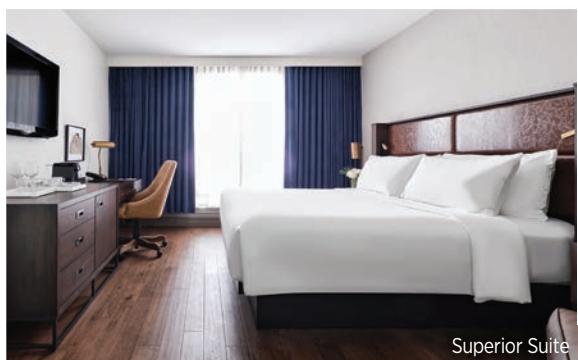
So did we.
— ANNA HOBBS



Cocotte Bistro



Lobby Library



Superior Suite



The Metcalfe Hotel



WILDLIFE AND WONDER IN THE HEART OF THE
**GREAT BEAR
RAINFOREST**





Kevin Smith



PHOTOS COURTESY MAPLE LEAF ADVENTURES

Canadian company Maple Leaf Adventures sails into the isolated beauty of British Columbia

LINDA BARNARD

IN THE REMOTE PEACE of British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest, I heard the exhalations of humpback whales, the howls of elusive marine wolves and the thunderous rush of a gushing glacial waterfall as I held my cup to capture a drink.

Canadian eco-tourism company Maple Leaf Adventures' 138-foot expedition catamaran *Cascadia* makes this remarkable area of rainforests and mountain-lined fjords accessible to travellers. There are no through roads in this area roughly the size of the Republic of Ireland and small vessels like *Cascadia* are the only way into the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest.

The Victoria B.C.-based company has been bringing curious travellers here, as well as to Haida Gwaii, northwest Vancouver Island and Alaska, since 1987. *Cascadia* is the largest and newest of the three vessels in the small-ship fleet.

Built in New Zealand, *Cascadia* can accommodate 24 guests. It's a hand-crafted, 12-cabin beauty, with large windows and gleaming wood trim and interiors decorated with First Nations' art. Most cabins have doors leading onto the deck. The fuel-saving engines and twin hulls make for a quiet, smooth ride.

With 18 guests from Canada, the U.S., Germany and the U.K. on board, we headed into the Kitlope, the last stand of protected and unbroken temperate rainforest on the planet and home to First Nations people since time immemorial.

Maple Leaf president and co-owner Kevin Smith was expedition leader. As we nosed into the Douglas Channel from a small marina near Kitamaat village, he said we were about to be immersed in "a unique very, very special corner of this one blue planet."

Typical of expedition sailing, what we saw and where we went was dictated by tides, weather and the whims of the wildlife. The daily itinerary posted in the salon before breakfast was jokingly called "Plan A." We learned to relax and let the day come to us.

There were morning and afternoon tender explorations aboard the pair of 10-passenger vessels Auklet and Puffin. Thanks to their drop fronts, it was easy to get off and on the tenders at island beaches and for rainforest hikes.

What we didn't see hardly mattered given the natural wonders we did encounter. On an early morning tender excursion, we watched a group of sea wolves reunite with spine-tingling howls on a white-sand beach. This rare marine species lives primarily on seafood. Unlike other wolves, it swims to hunt. We were thrilled to watch one paddle for shore from a rocky islet.



Sea wolf

This page:
Wildlife of the Great
Bear Rainforest:
(clockwise from
above):

Sea wolf.
Spirit bear.
Humpback whale.
Facing page
(clockwise from
top):

Tender explorations
aboard the pair of
10-passenger
vessels. Thanks to
their drop fronts, it
was easy to get off
and on the tenders
at island beaches.
Sunset around the
campfire.

Cascadia
accommodation.
Cascadia lounge/
dining room.

The cabins were comfortable. Heated bathroom floors were welcome on chilly mornings. But I didn't spend a lot of time in my room. If I wasn't admiring the scenery, watching for humpback whales, or relaxing in the top-deck hot tub, I was in the roomy salon. The combination lounge, dining room and hangout hub is the heart of *Cascadia*. It's ringed with windows, has comfy furniture and two long tables for meals.

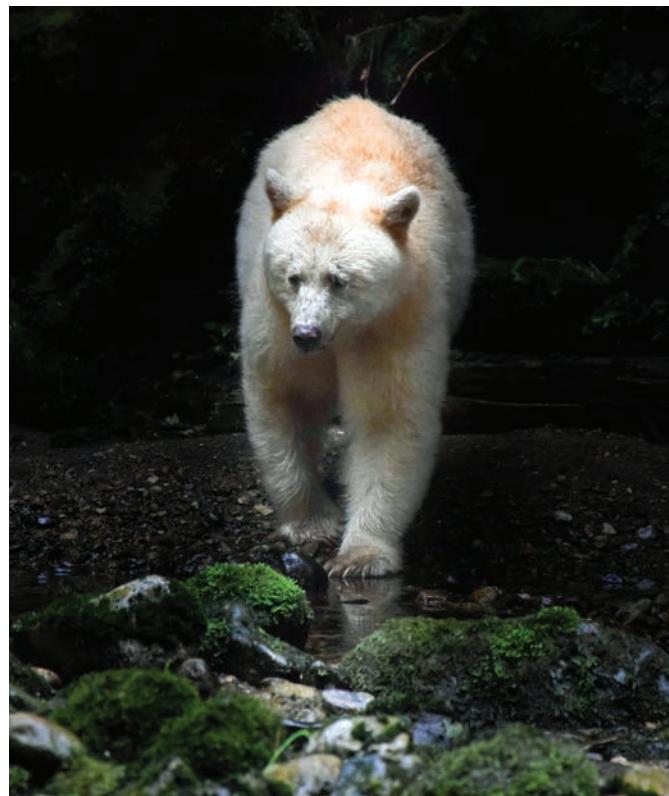
We gathered here to play cards or peruse the small library of photography, nature and local history books. Some sat at the long dining table to work on a wildlife and nature-mapping project with on-board naturalist Janet Winbourne. Others tried watercolours or indulged in a sofa catnap.

On our eight-day sailing, we enjoyed excellent locally sourced food prepared by a pair of skilled chefs. Three-course dinners included local seafood like halibut and albacore tuna, accompanied by top-flight B.C. wines.

For some, days began with a sunrise kayak excursion or yoga on the rear deck. Others preferred an espresso and the sunrise buffet of yogurt, fruit and homemade granola before we all sat down to a hot breakfast with dishes like wild salmon Eggs Benedict. While we ate, we watched Smith and Captain Jeff Harvey confer at an interactive navigational map, planning the day. Guests could follow *Cascadia*'s route on a wall-mounted big-screen TV. The bridge was usually open to interested visitors.

The capable crew of 10 looked after everything, from serving meals and making lattes, to launching kayaks and piloting the nimble tenders.

We sailed through deep channels bracketed by glacier-topped mountains, into estuaries and blue bays that looked more Caribbean than Canadian and close to shallow rivers where spawning salmon fought to survive to spawn. As we entered an estuary, we watched a young grizzly paddle across, then climb on shore to lope across the meadow.



We learned about culture and history from Haisla First Nation guests Louisa Smith and Liz Robinson, who joined us for part of the trip and helped us connect with their traditional territory.

The day ended with *Cascadia* at anchor. We'd meet for a pre-dinner glass of British Columbia wine, beer, or the cocktail of the day on the back deck or in the salon.

Because Maple Leaf believes Wi-Fi takes us away from the beautiful world outside the ship, guests are on a weeklong digital detox. It felt strange at first, but within a day or two, I didn't miss it. It was more interesting to chat with each other than to check email.

The guests who began the trip as strangers soon became friends. Sharing the experience of being immersed in the fragile beauty of the magnificent Great Bear Rainforest brought us together quickly, and gave us a common goal – a desire to ensure this wild place remains protected and stays as it is forever. ■



A LAURENTIAN SPRING

The sweet case for indulgence





COURTESY HOTEL MONT GABRIEL

COURTESY HOTEL MONT GABRIEL

There's a special sweetness to March in the Laurentians. Snow is still deep and white on the ski hills, but the afternoon warmth turns hard-packed slopes to soft corn, and days end with skiers sitting at picnic tables, jackets unzipped and faces turned upwards to the sun. The sap is running and sugar shacks are full of hungry maple lovers. It's springtime in the mountains.

LIZ FLEMING

Sensational Slopes

Mont Tremblant is by far the best known of the Laurentian ski centres, and its vertical drop of 645 meters (2,116 feet) and 102 ski runs on four slopes attract visitors from around the world. With restaurants, shops, bars and a host of hotels at its base, many within an easy walk of the lifts, Tremblant is a skiers' paradise. The snow and the beer are cold and the nightlife is hot. But Mont Tremblant is just a part of the Laurentian picture. There are a dozen other ski areas dotted throughout the region, each with its special charm.

The small, welcoming town of Saint Sauveur, a little more than an hour's drive from Montreal, is home to the Manoir Saint-Sauveur resort. There, the lights at night come not from skyscrapers but from the night skiing illumination. Les Sommets – Olympia, Saint Sauveur, and Morin

Heights – are slopes that encircle the town. For dinner, choose Le Manoir's top notch steak house or if you're craving a beer, a burger and a live band, try Le Saint-Sauv Pub Gourmand for hearty food and live music.

Just a little further down the road is Sommet Gabriel, in Ste. Adele. What



LUCE MORIN / SHUTTERSTOCK

sets it apart from its snowy compatriots is the Hotel Mont Gabriel, built in 1936, now part of the Marriott Tribute collection and recently renovated to maintain its historic charm. Stay in one of its well-appointed guest rooms and dine at Le Victor, an elegant but relaxed restaurant that focuses on local produce (don't miss the foie gras with its touch of maple syrup perched on a tiny waffle), or try Le Hartford Bar where the traditional poutine is delicious and the staff couldn't be friendlier. Later, enjoy the outdoor thermal experience, soak in the steamy hot pool and bake in the sauna, then enjoy the best sleep of your life. When morning arrives, toss your skis and poles on your well-rested shoulders and walk to the top of the slopes. Snap into your bindings and schuss down to the lodge to buy your surprisingly inexpensive lift ticket. It couldn't be any easier.

Facing page: The village and ski runs of Mont Tremblant.

This page (clockwise from above):

Hotel Mont Gabriel's steamy hot pool.

Making maple syrup taffy in the snow.

Hotel Mont Gabriel.

Pure Canadian maple syrup.


PHOTOS COURTESY ABBAYE D'OKA

Interior of historic Abbaye d'Oka.

Accommodation at Auberge de l'Abbaye d'Oka.

Historic photo of monks at work in the abbey's gardens.

Facing page (clockwise from top:)

Sugar shack dining at Labonté de la Pomme.

Making maple syrup taffy at Érablière Ste-Marguerite.

Dining at Au Petit Poucet sugar shack.

Chômeur, a moist cake-pudding topped with a maple glaze. at Labonté de la Pomme.

A snowy history

The Laurentians area has a rich and lively cultural history. Visit the Musée du Ski des Laurentides for an immersion in winter's favourite sport, a chance to see an impressive collection of vintage equipment (Hey! I had those boots and skis!) and the opportunity to learn about Jack Rabbit Smith-Johanssen and the other founders and creators of the ski world. Locals will tell you that skiing as we know it in Canada was born in Saint Sauveur.

Then for a taste of something entirely different but equally historic, book a night or two at Auberge de l'Abbaye d'Oka. The rooms are simple and comfortable and your stay will include a continental breakfast in the

refectory, but what will make your visit truly memorable will be the tour. Wandering the quiet halls of the vast abbey with your guide, you'll smile at the 'sshhh' signs reminding you to respect the former cloister and you'll hear the story of the Cistercian monks who once lived, worked and worshipped there. Clever men, the monks devoted themselves to agricultural development, better cheesemaking and farming practices, even raising extra-hardy strains of chickens that could flourish through harsh winters. Though there were once more than 170 monks in the order, the remaining 14 have now moved to a smaller home, leaving their abbey as a tribute to their devotion to their faith, the land and its people.

Sugar Shacks

No trip to the Laurentians in spring-time is complete without a sugar shack experience. We loved it so much, we did three!

Officially, a sugar shack is the building in which sap gathered from maple trees is boiled into syrup. In Québec, however, that term takes on a delicious new meaning. There, a sugar shack is a place where friends and family gather to celebrate the loosening of winter's grip on the landscape by enjoying traditional foods that showcase – what else – maple syrup!

Our first sugar shack meal was at Labonté de la Pomme, where apples shared centre stage with maple syrup. Set in a rugged rural landscape, the red and yellow-trimmed building is less a shack than a rustic restaurant. Inside, the air is rich with the aromas of freshly baked bread and the Oka cheese for which the region is renowned. We started with a tasting flight of ciders – apple, apple-cherry and apple-rhubarb and available in both alcoholic and non-alcoholic forms. We then indulged in what was described as "the world's best French onion soup" (a completely accurate description) and an apple-bread bowl filled with melted Oka cheese and ringed with toasted bread cubes for dipping. Next up was a waffle sandwich, brimming with ham, bacon and – you guessed it – more Oka cheese, sides of grilled sausages and maple syrup-kissed beans and coleslaw. For dessert, there was maple taffy on vanilla ice cream and a slice of old-fashioned Chômeur, topped with a maple glaze. We could barely hoist ourselves out of our seats at the end of the two-hour extravaganza.

Our second feast – following 24 hours of recovery – was at Érablière Ste-Marguerite. A traditional-style sugar shack in Ste-Marguerite-du-Lac-Masson, the Érablière was a huge wooden-floored room, filled with long tables topped with black and red checked cloths and filled with happy



COURTESY LABONTE DE LA PONNE



LIZ FLEMING



LIZ FLEMING

local families, all enjoying Québécois-style pea soup, omelettes, maple cured ham, meatballs, potatoes, sausages and of course, more maple cured beans. Outside, a smiling woman stood in front of a tureen filled with hard-packed snow, onto which she poured ribbons of hot maple syrup. A bit of a twirl with a wooden stick and she'd created maple taffy – the sweetest treat of the season. Little children played happily, and country music encouraged a bit of intergenerational dancing between the tables – Grand-mère always gets to lead! The words were all in French as was the conversation. We were the only Anglophones in the place and our French is sadly lacking, but it didn't matter. Big smiles filled the gaps.

It's hard to believe, but we managed to squeeze in one more Laurentian sugar shack experience in St. Sauveur, at the popular Au Petit Poucet. A family-owned place that honours the sugar shack tradition year-round, Au Petit Poucet is dominated by a

huge fireplace in the centre of the room and the feeling is traditional with flair.

The food is, quite simply, fantastic. We ordered the Québec Meal which consisted of not only the family's private recipe maple-glazed ham, roasted potatoes, maple beans and turnip but also rich pork-laden tourtiere with a side of homemade fruit relish that made me think of my grandmother's kitchen. Best of all, there is a shop that sells most of the goodies we fell in love with and so we were able to leave with treats to share at home.

Should we have eaten at three sugar shacks? Perhaps it was a case of over-indulgence but the wisest among us know that life is uncertain and the sweet pleasures of skiing down a sunny slope, simmering in a hot pool while the still-cool air nips at your ears, savouring the taste of fresh maple syrup and the smiles of warm and welcoming hosts should be seized at every opportunity. ■



COURTESY AU PETIT POUCET

COASTAL CHRONICLES



Begur, Spain



DZIOREK/SHUTTERSTOCK



Flamingoes, Delta de L'Ebre

MELBA PHOTO AGENCY / ALAMY

Taking it slow in Eastern Spain

DIANA BALLOON

AFTER YEARS OF both frenetic and leisurely travel, I've learned that a slow pace is the fastest route to a peaceful mind. My first-ever trip to Spain in 1989 was part of a mad-dash Eurail blitz across 10 countries.

But for my recent return to that country, I instead spent three weeks exploring a small section, along its northeast coast. I got onto a bicycle whenever feasible and I focused more on lesser known, and more serene natural landscapes instead of big cities and famous sites.

Delta Ebre: Where land meets sea

Despite thousands of acres of natural park, rice patties and sprawling beaches, the Delta Ebre – where Spain's longest river flows into the Mediterranean Sea – seems to have been overshadowed by its bustling neighbours, Barcelona to the north and Valencia to the south.

I don't understand why. In mid-May, miles of rice plants dominate this horizontal plain, their sprigs of tall bright green grass waving in unison with the breeze, like thousands of

synchronized swimmers. By later summer these fields will have turned golden, and then as spring approaches again, the fields will resemble blue glass mirrors, the sky reflected in the water that is saturating the roots of these plants, which get ready to grow again. And while the fields are chameleon, the mountains beyond are stalwart, a dramatic backdrop against an otherwise horizontal landscape.

For several nights, we stayed at Masia Tinet, an old renovated farmhouse, its back patio overlooking these fields. By day, my husband and I explored the region, cycling along a path adjacent to its rice fields, without a car in sight. One day we stopped at MonNatura Delta de l'Ebre, a nature centre where you can view through telescopes the flamingoes, ibises and other birds that flock here. There are some 340 species in the area, drawn by a terrain that combines sky, land and sea. We watched as literally dozens of flamingoes stood on one leg in the shallow waters, and then took flight, their pink and orange wings clearly discernible against the sky.

Close by was the almost deserted six-km-long Trabucador Beach, which made for a perfect stop for a swim and a stroll. Then 15 minutes from there is El Poble Nou de Delta, a tiny village created after the Spanish civil war, its streets lined with palm trees and white colonial houses. There we enjoyed a multi-course lunch at El Algadir, a Michelin Bib restaurant where their “zero-kilometre” commitment to using fresh local ingredients was like a virtual walk through the delta.

The region shared this focus on local in many of its other establishments as well. The Musclarium in Sant Carles de la Ràpita, for example, is essentially a tapas bar on water where we took a boat out to a floating restaurant to learn how oysters and mussels are harvested, and then ate them fresh from a catch! In the town, Miami Can Pons restaurant was another great destination for seafood and other traditional Mediterranean dishes.

We also got to sample great regional wine in the Ebro at a “clandestine wine tasting.” With only GPS coordinates to guide us, we biked to a small bridge overlooking the Ebro River where we were joined by sommelier Llúcia Castaño, also on a bike.

“We are in the heart of the delta because we are on an island in the middle of the river, which separates two counties in the middle of the delta,” Castaño tells us, explaining her choice of the area. Together we biked to a nearby event space where Castaño produced two DO Terra Alta local wines, and two tappas, served on a white tablecloth, which we enjoyed while watching the sun set over the water.

Another day, we replaced bike with kayak, and did a guided birdwatching trip with family-run Enblau Adventures. Quietly we paddled a narrow windy river, as we watched a black kite soar above us, listened to a Eurasian golden oriole singing, and admired grey heron and the colourful hoopoe bird.



BLUE NOTE ROOM PHOTOGRAPHY



DIANA BALLON



DIANA BALLON

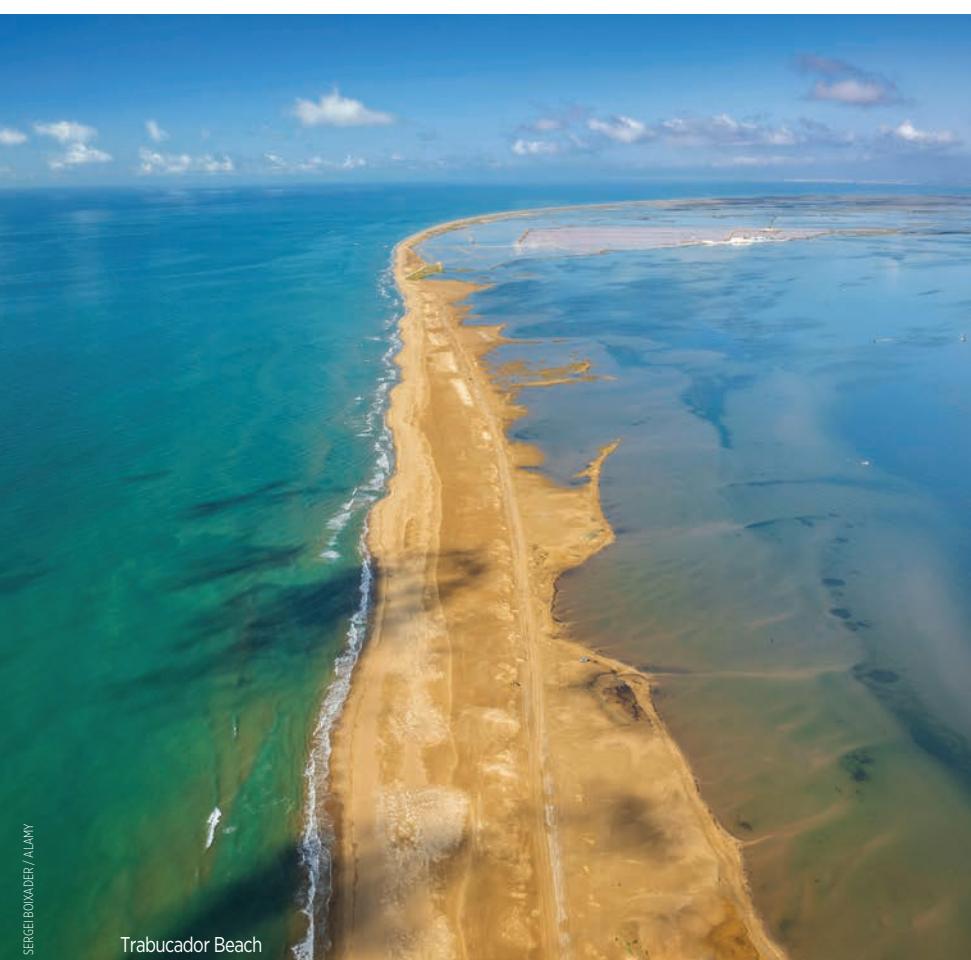
From nature to ruins

The next stop on our tour was Tarragona, which we had chosen as a laid-back alternative to the more touristed Barcelona about 80 kilometres away.

Tarragona proved to be the right tenor for our slow-travel mandate. A blend of Roman, medieval and modern, this town is a UNESCO world heritage site famous for its Roman ruins. To orient ourselves, we booked a 2.5-hour tour with the fabulous Alexa Toral Harper of Explore Free Tours. She explained how Tarragona, originally called Tarraco, was once a military base established by the Romans in 218 BC.

“The Romans loved stones,” she remarks, gesturing at the black and white stones beneath our feet.

In this town, stone is really everywhere — underfoot, in the structures of its buildings, the walls of the cathedrals, and of course the ruins left by the Romans. Among the most impressive are the 2nd AD Roman amphitheatre, where gladiators once fought exotic animals like tigers, lions and even bears; the Circus where they had chariot racing; and the Provincial Forum.





Begur Castle

STEPHEN HUGHES/ALAMY



Village of Peratallada

Costa Brava: Where cliffs meet sea

From Tarragona, we then took a train 1.5 hours north to Girona in Costa Brava, an area known for the craggy cliffs and crashing waves that surround its coast. Over several days, we based ourselves in Begur, a small seaside town with a castle that sits on top of a mountain, overlooking the village. Our “masia” this time was the Hotel Galena Mas Comangau, a traditional farmhouse restored from the 16th Century, and located just about a 10-minute walk from the town centre.

Our daily ritual was simple and serene. We would enjoy a swim in the turquoise waters at Aiguablava beach in the morning, and then visit a medieval town in the afternoon. Our favourites were the town of Pals, with its archways and castle towers; the ancient village of Peratallada, for our memorable three-course lunch at the Bar del Poble de

Peratalla; and S’Agaro, where we found ourselves meandering along the “Cami de Ronda,” an historic seaside walking path that follows the coast.

For our last few days in Spain, we based ourselves at Camiral Golf & Wellness resort, located just about an hour from the Barcelona airport, and just outside Costa Brava. There we enjoyed some top-shelf amenities, ate delicious Mediterranean cuisine, had treatments at their wellness centre and stayed in one of their luxurious apartment-style suites.

Admittedly, we never did make it to Figueres, the birthplace of Salvador Dali, or to Portlligat and Pubol, which inspired the famous artist’s work. My younger self would have found it unconscionable to have missed these iconic spots. But as the trip taught me, sometimes seeing less will allow you to enjoy more. ■



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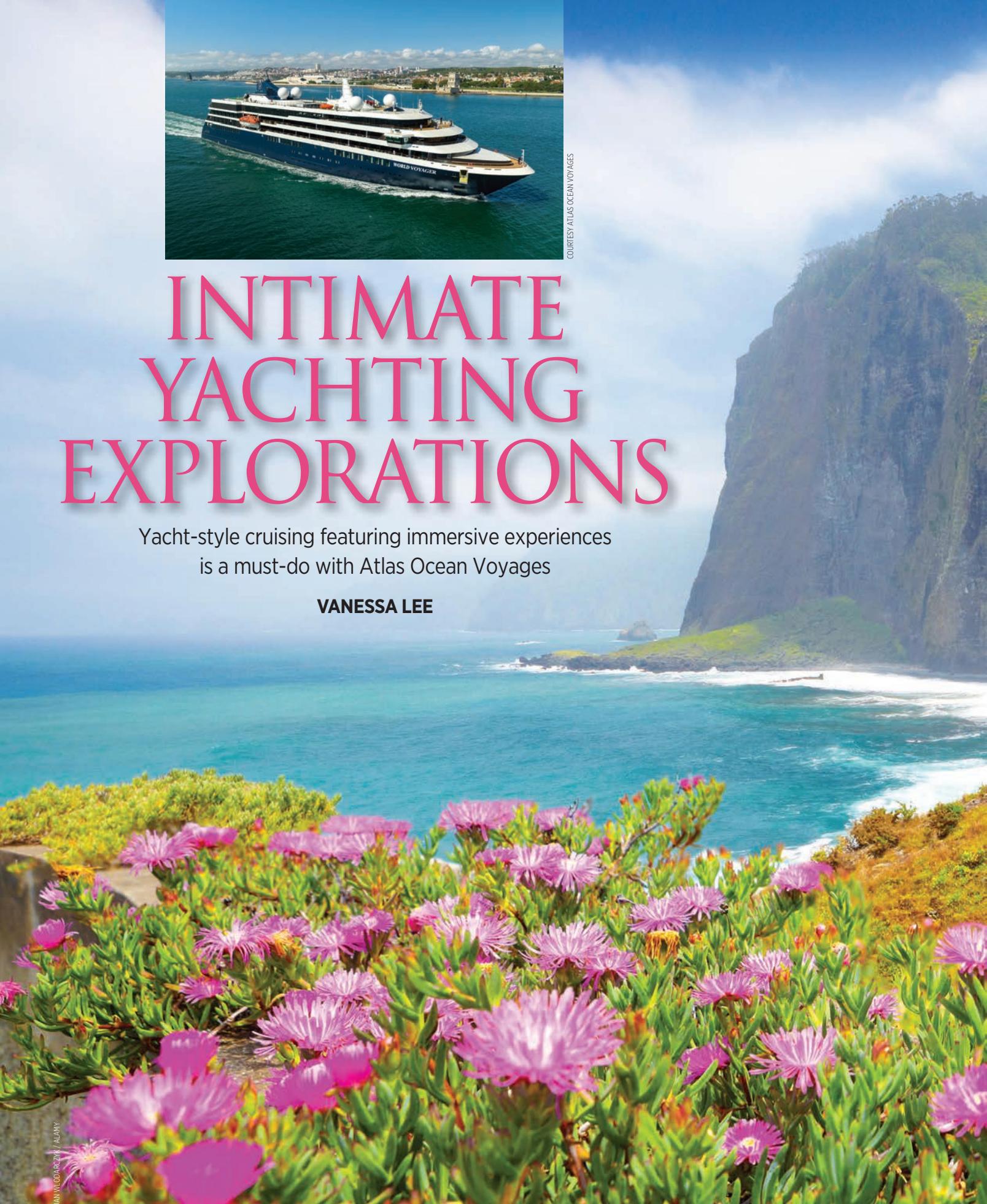


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VANESSA LEE



JAN VALODARZNY / ALAMY



Madeira coastline



Malaga, Spain



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A RELATIVE NEWCOMER to expedition and exploration cruising, Atlas Ocean Voyages is making its mark, offering fantastic voyages with its three incredibly charming yachts.

We had previously sailed on Atlas to the Arctic in the fall of 2023, enjoying both the cruise line and the ship – *World Traveller* – so much that we decided to return. This time, we sailed the Med and places south, cruising from Malaga, Spain to the Canary Islands on a nine-night itinerary, visiting some delightful, lesser-visited ports.

The three expedition-style ships in the Portuguese-owned Atlas Ocean Voyages fleet are the *World Navigator*, the *World Traveller* and the *World Voyager*. Virtually identical, each carries just under 200 guests in a relaxed yet stylish onboard atmosphere – a luxurious all-inclusive lifestyle at sea. Their attractive itineraries and excellent pricing are just two reasons for the immediate success Atlas has enjoyed since launching in 2021.

In the winter months, the three vessels sail the icy depths of Antarctica. In the warmer weather, they cruise both to the Arctic and to Europe on exploration sailings, emphasizing culinary and cultural immersion. These intimate ships are a delight, as are their staff. In fact, every aspect of sailing

with this company is a pleasure – think intimate yacht-style cruising with wonderful onboard camaraderie. There are no casinos and no big theatre for entertainment; the atmosphere is low-key, focused on destinations and the joy of exploration, and their like-minded guests mix and mingle with delight.

We arrived in Malaga a few days before the cruise departed and found it a wonderful embarkation port with a lovely old town, cozy restaurants and lively nightlife.

Our itinerary was one of the reasons we chose *World Traveller* again. We enjoyed stopping in Gibraltar, where guests were thrilled by their island tour, and visited two ports in Morocco – Casablanca and Safi. A sea day followed before reaching Madeira, and the Portuguese Islands of Porto Santo and Funchal. Everyone loved Madeira, which is very beautiful with fascinating mountainous terrain, abundant foliage, and the lovely town of Funchal on Madeira itself (a very popular spot for Canadians). We then sailed onward to the Canary Islands, the lush tropical islands off the coast of Africa, called at Santa Cruz in La Palma and then San Sebastian on La Gomera before ending our nine-day cruise in Gran Canaria and Las Palmas.

The ship has a very appealing nautical-style décor with shades of blue, polished, gleaming wood and an airy, welcoming feel. One instantly feels at home, and the staff members are outstanding in every way. The staterooms are well-furnished, with comfortable queen beds with sumptuous Portuguese linens, an in-room stocked minibar, 24-hour room service, a Nespresso machine and tea service, and still and sparkling water in reusable bottles. There are plush bathrobes and slippers, a roomy marble bathroom with shower and L'Occitane products, a spacious wardrobe and TV with infotainment system.

We enjoyed our well-appointed, relaxing haven as we watched the world go by from our balcony. Guests who choose a suite also enjoy butler service, double sinks and a tub (in the Navigator Suites). Although Atlas offers an indul-



Funchal, Madeira

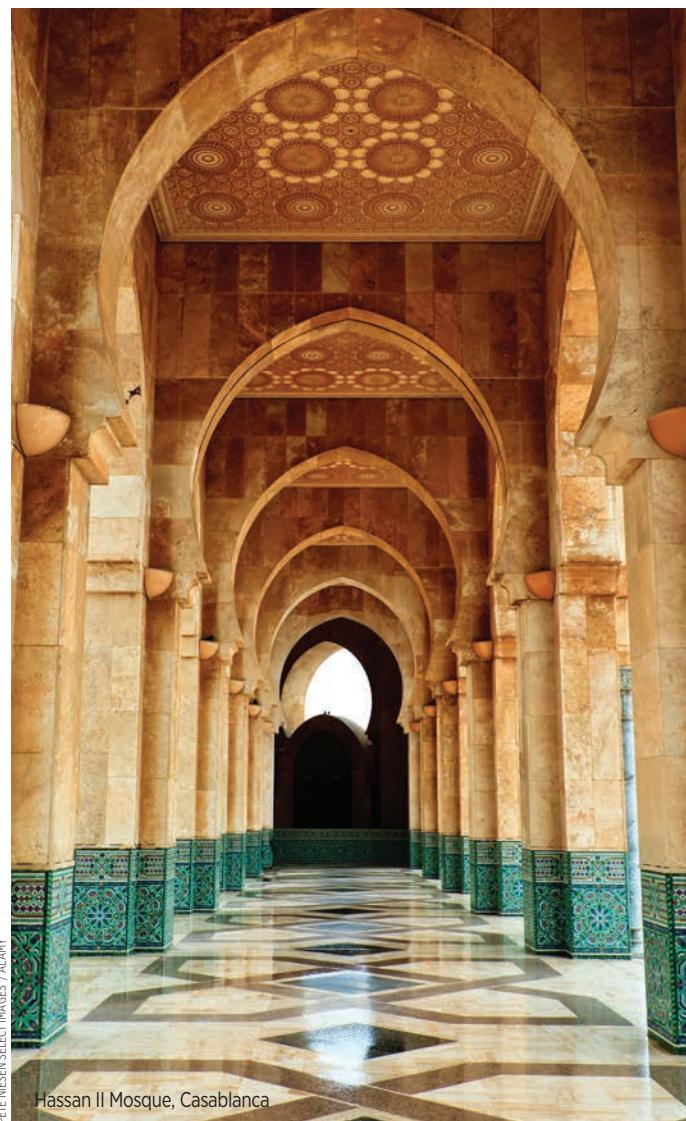
gent, inclusive lifestyle at sea with all wine, liquor and gratuities included in the fare (and some access to Wi-Fi) when on cultural expeditions, the shore excursions are extra. There was a lengthy list of choices in each port and we found them all to be of great interest, making it hard to choose.

Visiting Morocco for the first time, we decided to tour the city and see the stunning Hassan II Mosque. Our guide shared fascinating information about the city and its history, telling our group that the Berbers founded it in the seventh century BC. Thereafter, the Phoenicians and then the Romans used it as a port, and it became a French territory in the early part of the 20th century. Many guests visited Rick's Café, made famous by the movie, "Casablanca", but little did they know, there was never a Rick's café – it existed only on a Hollywood movie set (a clever entrepreneur is cashing in

anyway!). A second call in Morocco brought us to Safi, where a tour of the Medina or old town was fascinating.

The Madeira Islands Archipelago, a Portuguese territory, was a great hit, leaving everyone gushing about these two islands – Porto Santo and Funchal. Located in the North Atlantic Ocean, they offer panoramic views, delightful small villages and towns, marvelous scenery and welcoming locals. Some guests toured Funchal by Tuk-Tuk, some did a 4x4 expedition on rocky Porto Santo, while others enjoyed a wine tasting. There was something for everyone – just what you want in a destination.

Our two ports of call in the lush and dramatic Canary Islands were enjoyable with a panoramic tour of La Gomera (unbelievable views and winding cliff-side roads) and a National Park tour in Santa Cruz. All were beautiful islands worthy of visiting.



Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca



COURTESY ATLAS OCEAN VOYAGES

Pottery demonstration, Morocco



Atlas Ocean Voyages includes a special Shoreside Epicurean Cultural Immersion on each of its European itineraries, and ours was on the island of La Palma. Dressing in cream and white, as instructed, almost 200 of us were taken into the countryside to attend a typical Carnaval de Los Indianos – a re-creation of one of Europe's most original and striking festivals. We enjoyed cocktails made with 100 percent local and organic products, saw artisans producing cigars, visited a sugar cane pressing workshop and listened to a fabulous 11-piece live Latin music band, which soon had guests up and dancing. We tasted local delicacies and enjoyed the stunning views, appreciating the cruise line's efforts to set up such a unique experience.

Back on the ship, there were wonderful lectures and port talks, movies with popcorn and cooking demonstrations given by renowned visiting guest chef, Christy Rost. Tea Time was offered daily to accompany piano stylings and occasional engaging games of Trivia or Name That Tune. Our Cruise Director, Michael, was ever-present, charming and talented, and we enjoyed various shows in the Dome Observation Lounge and the Atlas Lounge – the crew show was fantastic!

A great kick-off at the cruise's start was "Meet The Neighbours," where everyone was encouraged to open their stateroom door, enjoy cocktails and canapes, say hi to their neighbours, and meet some of the ship's officers. It was a great way to set sail, and on such a small ship, part of the charm was meeting fellow guests in whatever fashion. ■



Dome Observation Lounge

Our ship offered one main restaurant – Lisboa – with a popular dining terrace at the aft, ideal for a cruise in warm climes. Guests dined when, where and with whom they pleased, encouraging even more camaraderie – one of the things I love best about small ship cruising. On the Pool Deck, the 7 Aft Grill served a buffet lunch, snacks in the afternoon and dinner for 18 guests per evening at the Josper Grill, which offered an à la carte menu with reservations required. We enjoyed a few lunches and two dinners from a small menu. The self-serve ice cream cart nearby was also a big hit! Paula's Pantry offered daily snacks, tasty treats, sandwiches and drinks from 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Atlas Ocean Voyages is getting everything right, by offering guests appealing journeys to the world's most delightful places while ensuring a carefully curated and much-appreciated onboard atmosphere. It is now firmly in place as one of my favourite cruise lines. ■



Dining terrace



Veranda Stateroom



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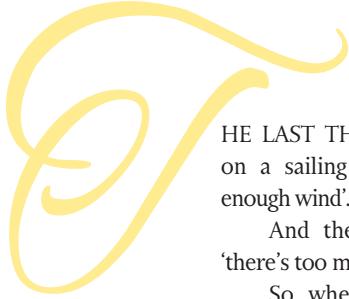
TURKISH DELIGHT





Turkey's Turquoise coast yields simple pleasures

SUZANNE MORPHET



THE LAST THING you want to hear on a sailing cruise is: 'there's not enough wind'.

And the second last thing is: 'there's too much wind'.

So, when I meet a girlfriend in Bodrum, Turkey in mid-September for a week of adventure on a sailing gulet, our faces fall when we hear the latter. We look at each other, then at the captain who delivered the unwelcome news, then at the calm water in the busy harbour. Really ... there's too much wind?

Sure enough, soon after motoring past the Castle of St. Peter – the imposing stone structure that has marked the entrance to Bodrum harbour since the 15th century – the red and white Turkish flag snaps in the wind. But the salt water spray lifts our spirits and soon we're smiling again.

Turkey is famous for its Turquoise Coast, an almost 1,000 km stretch of magnificent land and waterscapes punctuated by sleepy fishing villages, ancient ruins and modern resorts along the country's Aegean and Mediterranean Seas.

For my first visit to the region, I wanted to explore some of that scenic coastline and the best way to do so is on a gulet – the traditional, two-masted, wooden ships that have been hand-crafted by generations of Turkish boatbuilders in Bodrum and beyond.

Originally designed for fishing and trading, gulets have evolved into elegant yachts that provide comfortable, even luxurious, interiors and amenities. We're travelling with SCIC Sailing – Sailing Cruises in Comfort – a Dutch/English company that offers a fleet of gulets and more than a dozen

routes in the Aegean Sea (in both Turkey and Greece) from April through October.

Accommodating between eight and 16 guests, each 'comfort' gulet offers cabins with ensuite baths, a stylish wheelhouse and bar, sunbeds on the midship deck and a roomy, shaded aft with padded seating and large table for al fresco dining. (Luxury gulets are also available but for exclusive charter.)

Our cabins are small but typical of sailing yachts, with built-in beds and cabinets, all made from gleaming teak or mahogany. Windows slide open and air conditioning is available, but in mid-September we don't need it. White cotton sheets and dark starry nights ensure we sleep soundly each night.

Each gulet has a small crew of certified sailors, so we also don't need to know knots or tell the difference between a jib and a jibe. One day, Captain Recep proudly shows us several trophies he's won in the Bodrum Cup, a sailing regatta for wooden yachts held annually since 1989.

The title bestowed on the winners – Fisherman of Halikarnassos – refers to the late Turkish author Cevat Sakir Kabaagacli, who lived in Bodrum (known as Halikarnassos in ancient times) in the mid-20th century and famously wrote under that nickname. Kabaagacli single-handedly, and likely unintentionally, made Bodrum a travel destination by writing about it and the other seaside villages that he explored by gulet in the decades he lived here.

Now, every year, thousands of people come to the Turquoise Coast and many of them book a trip just like ours with the romantic notion of sailing on a wooden ship, just like Kabaagacli and the ancients before him. The enduring popularity of gulets is understandable, as life on board is satisfactorily simple. With only a loose itinerary and no pre-arranged ports of call, we live by the wind and by our whims.

Besides my friend and me, only four others signed up for this late-season sailing – a Dutch couple and two Belgians – one of whom did this same cruise a few years ago with his mother and is now back with his partner. We quickly get to know each other and our crew, who do their best to grant our every wish. Coffee on the bow at sunrise? No problem. Beans every day for this primarily plant eater? Of course.

Speaking of food, the variety that comes out of the tiny galley kitchen below deck is remarkable. Tasty mezes, colourful salads and perfectly roasted fish, seafood and meat. It isn't haute cuisine, but it's fresh, healthy and delicious. When a sparkling birthday cake emerges one night for moi, I'm not really surprised – just delighted!

Despite the crew's attentiveness, I'm sorry to say I sometimes mix up their names – Ugur, Omer and Onur – which all sound similar to my ears. But I won't forget their agility and dexterity when it's time to sail on the third day. They leap into action, hauling lines and trimming sails. Soon, the captain kills the engine and an enormous silence washes over us, while Nemesis – our ship – skims lightly over the deep blue sea.

Some days we barely leave the boat, simply sailing from one secluded bay to another where we swim, snorkel, stand-up paddleboard and kayak. The water truly is turquoise and at a pleasant 24C, I can't wait to dive in before breakfast every morning.



COURTESY SIC SAILING

Other days we explore on land, where pine forests cover limestone ridges. On the morning we head to Sedir Island our captain ensures we arrive early to avoid the crowd likely to descend later. The island is famous for its distinctive white sand on a beach named for Cleopatra, once Queen of Egypt. According to legend, Mark Anthony imported the sand from Alexandria to please his wife.

Today, it's permitted to swim at Cleopatra Beach, but the sand above the water's edge is roped off so you can't sit or lie on it and many signs warn you not to take any sand with you. The lifeguard is also a 'sand guard' and when a young woman hops over the rope to snap a selfie, the guard is quick to blow his whistle!

Hanging out at this beach is a humorous highlight, but we're enthralled with the rest of the island too, especially the well preserved Roman amphitheatre where a team of archaeologists is at work. When I ask archaeologist Selim Yildiz about the legend of the origin of the sand, he says it's just that – a legend.

"We did some chemical analysis, and we've learned that the sand here is actually 1,000 years earlier than the one in Alexandria...so the truth is, the sand is originally made here from the natural process."

Perhaps my favourite excursion is to the village of Oren for the weekly market. A market reveals so much about a place – its climate, of course, and the tastes of local people.



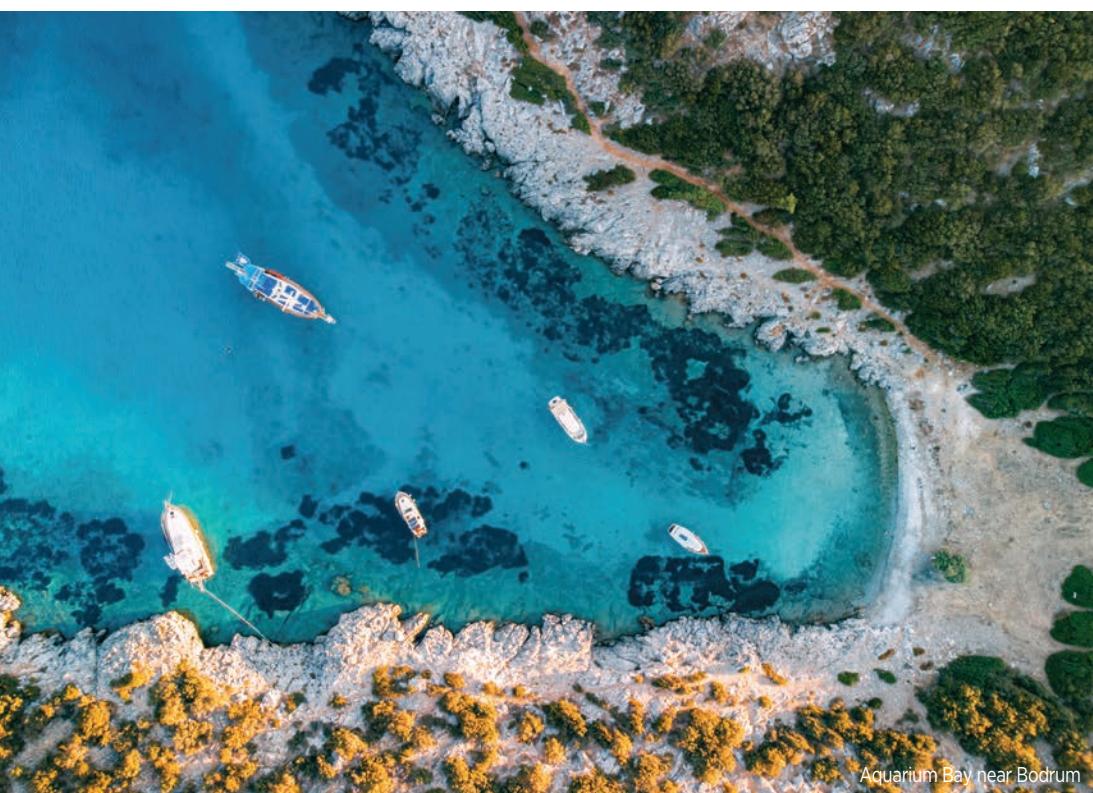
COURTESY SIC SAILING



COURTESY SIC SAILING



Bodrum harbour



Aquarium Bay near Bodrum

MONTECINO / STOCK

But the act of selling also reveals something fundamental. It sounds cliché, but in Oren, we meet genuinely friendly locals. They smile, they offer samples of their crispy baklava and their multi-coloured olives without any pressure to buy. One family welcomes us into their yard to watch them prepare red peppers for canning. And instead of raising their hands and saying 'no photos', which is understandable when everyone carries a camera these days, more than one person asks us to take their picture, then poses with grace and humility.

Yes, I'll remember many things about this cruise, but what I'll miss most is the water. That striking blue-green colour isn't unique to Turkey of course, but it's especially fitting here since 'turquois' means Turkish in French. Floating on my back on our last day, I marvel at how colour can transform a place, even putting it on the map. ■

LET'S HOLIDAY!

VANESSA LEE

CA

AS THE NEWEST SHIP in the MSC Cruises fleet arrived in Miami in April, invitees to the naming ceremony, part of a three-day inaugural cruise, heard this catchy refrain often: "Let's Holiday!"

Echoing Drew Barrymore and Orlando Bloom's inspiring and charming commentary about the dazzling *MSC World America* in the commercial that ran during the Super Bowl and on the ship on numerous occasions, 'Let's Holiday' became a mantra for the guests and staff as we kicked off a fabulous celebration of this remarkable vessel. A perfect muse for holidaymakers, aka cruisers, this ship is a brilliant showpiece for her more than 6,000 guests; it was successfully named by her Godmother, the delightful Ms. Barrymore, to the accompaniment of some excellent performers, words from the Captain, Dino Sagani, and senior executives from MSC. Later in the evening, guests enjoyed an incredible pyro-drones show (think fireworks without the fire) over Miami followed by a performance from the iconic Gloria Estefan. The festivities were a suitable send-off for a ship that is the

Above: Ocean Cay.
Clockwise from top:
Pool Deck.

Drew Barrymore and
Orlando Bloom.

Facing page (clockwise from top):
MSC World America.
Fizz Champagne Bar.
Cliffhanger.
Eataly Restaurant.



COURTESY MSC CRUISES



COURTESY MSC CRUISES



CREDIT: ANTHONY DUVIN / GETTY IMAGES FOR MSC CRUISES

second in the World Class series after MSC World Europa, with two more to come, including the MSC World Atlantic arriving in 2027 and sailing from Port Canaveral.

This clever tagline, 'Let's Holiday,' has caught on – due, in part, to the very watchable video featuring Drew and Orlando and their superb chemistry, featuring numerous ship locations, with the ship herself also a dazzling star, designed with European style and sensibility and thoughtfully offering guests North American comfort. This is the first ship from MSC Cruises (they have 23 now), which was expressly built with the Canadian and American client in mind – and I can assure you, she's a winner!

The MSC World America made her historic debut in PortMiami, where MSC Cruises had just opened their state-of-the-art cruise terminal, which looks much like an airport – massive and full of whizz-bang features, including facial recognition, to ensure cruise guests board their ships seamlessly. Including facial recognition. The terminal is big enough to allow three MSC Cruises ships to dock simultaneously and when you arrive on board this revolutionary ship – with its seven distinct districts, 19 dining venues, 18 bars and lounges, six spectacular pools, an MSC Formula Racer, a Sportplex, and so much more – you will be wowed! Each of the seven districts has a unique atmosphere, facilities and experiences, expertly designed to enhance the onboard experience and ensure guests of all ages can create their one-of-a-kind holiday, whether family-oriented, multi-generational, for couples or singles.

The seven districts include the Zen area on Deck 18 Aft, which, as you might imagine, is an adults-only exclusive oasis with panoramic ocean views designed as a haven of relaxation and rejuvenation for swimming,



IVAN SARFATTI

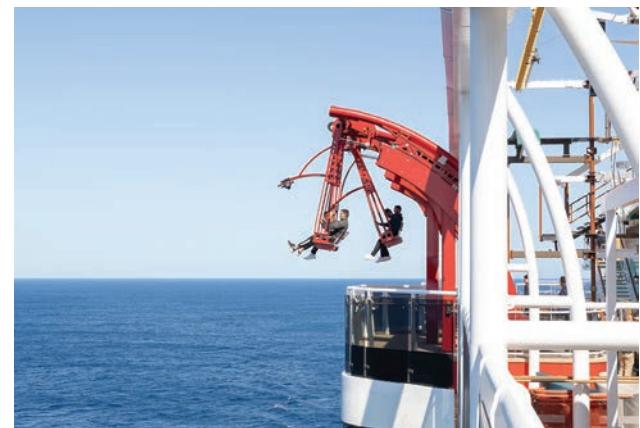
sunning and unwinding in peace. On Decks 19 and 20, you find the Family Aventura, a place packed with adventure where families enjoy entertaining activities and delicious bites as they, too, soak up the sun. Moving midship on Decks 18 and 19 we discovered the ultimate leisure spot of the Aqua Deck and the main pool with upbeat music, activities and more drinks and tasty snack options.

Moving inside the ship, there are many venues to discover, especially on Decks 6, 7 and 8, the heartbeat of MSC World America, where you can enjoy the Galleria and a host of bars, restaurants, and shopping opportunities. The Terraces on Decks 7 and 8 offer sophisticated entertainment options from DJ sets, karaoke, and dueling pianos to live comedy and the first Eataly At Sea offering a menu that covers the icons of Italian gastronomy, from some of the brand's best-loved dishes to items only available onboard. On the Promenade on Deck 8 (one of my favourite places) with great ocean views, the new Greek restaurant Paxos was a big hit, as was the All-Stars Sports Bar. And that's where the thrilling 11-deck dry slide arrives, pumping out thrill-seekers who jumped on the slide on Deck 19. I asked the young man working the Jaw Drop @ The Spiral slide how he knew when people were coming down – "I can hear the screams," he jokingly said!

And there's more – so much more that I think you need to sail this ship and see for yourselves. The Cliffhanger on Deck 20 is an over-



COURTESY MSC CRUISES



IVAN SARFATTI



COURTESY MSC CRUISES

water swing ride at sea, featuring a four-seat swing towering 50 metres above the ocean. Try it for a one-of-a-kind, edge-of-your-seat ride! There's a whole kid's area with seven rooms in which Lego® is a big feature, as is The Harbour family area with an Aquapark and four slides, bumper cars and roller skating, and a high trail ropes course. There's just so much more than you can imagine!

The entertainment on the ship was fabulous, with a fantastic show in the World Theatre, "Dirty Dancing in Concert," as well as three other shows debuting, including "Hall of Fame" and "Odyssey". The stunning Panorama Lounge features two shows – "Queen Symphonic", showcasing Queen's greatest hits, and "Cinesonic". The spectacular entertainment options on this ship are incredible and included in your fare.

Other highlights for me were the four smaller main restaurants, The Butcher's Cut, Fizz, the Champagne

Bar, Elixir, a mixology bar, and the delicious Chocolatier, Jean-Philippe Maury. The MSC Aurea Spa and the spacious accommodations with an unrivalled choice of suites and staterooms to suit every guest were also key elements of this exciting new ship.

Endless fun around the clock is yours for the taking as you discover a new world of cruising, sailing seven and 14-day itineraries roundtrip from Miami to the Caribbean and their lovely private island, Ocean Cay Marine Reserve in the Bahamas. The MSC World America has arrived, and everyone has taken notice! This incredible ship offers a superb vacation for every Canadian, in Canadian pricing with many inclusions available and a new air program to come. There's something for everyone, including the marvellous Yacht Club, a ship-within-a-ship, a luxurious option for guests who want more discerning service.

What are we waiting for? Let's Holiday! ■



Yacht Club
Top Sail Lounge

IVAN SARFATTI



Yacht Club
Owners Suite

COURTESY MSC CRUISES

MSC World America in Miami



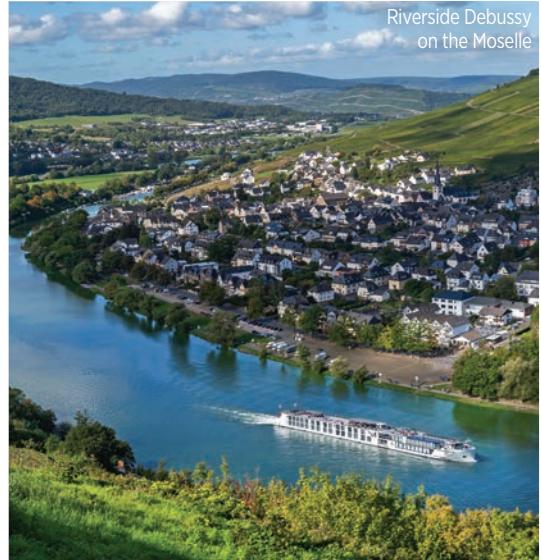
COURTESY MSC CRUISES

WHERE PRIVACY MEETS LUXURY

One of the best aspects of the new MSC World America is the exclusive Yacht Club and the privileged feel of a ship-within-a-ship concept on all MSC vessels. On this ship, the Yacht Club has reached new heights as the largest in the fleet, offering 152 spacious suites with excellent amenities to ensure you are well-pampered. Ensconced in the lap of luxury, guests in the Yacht Club enjoy a private 208-seat restaurant, the spacious and lovely Top Sail Lounge, direct access to the Aurea Spa, and an expansive private pool area, secluded sun deck and a Grill Restaurant and Bar. New to the MSC World America Yacht Club experience is an additional complimentary casual dining option at La Brasserie. Special shore excursions are offered; there's an exclusive Yacht Club area on Ocean Cay, MSC's private island, 24-hour butler service and a dedicated concierge, included Wi-Fi and unlimited drinks and wine throughout the ship. Guests enjoy priority Yacht Club check-in, are greeted by butlers, and are personally escorted on the ship, where special key card access opens up this haven of calm with an inviting atmosphere suited to the most discerning guests. It's well worth the extra cost for this rarified experience.

Riverside waives single supplement

Solo travel is an important and growing trend, and **Riverside Luxury Cruises** is committed to creating a welcoming environment for their single guests by waiving the single supplement on select cruises across their entire fleet, making river cruising more accessible to solo travellers, especially women looking to explore Europe independently, travelling alone or with a group of friends. Riverside's single supplement waiver is available on select Harmony Suites on the **Riverside Mozart** (162 guests) sailing the Danube River, and Melody Suites on the **Riverside Debussy** (110), cruising the Rhine, Main, Moselle and Danube, and **Riverside Ravel** (110), sailing the Rhône and Saône rivers. These all-suite ships offer the highest staff-to-guest ratio, active tours from a menu of Riverside Choice excursions in every port, bikes for self-guided exploration, butler service in every suite; gourmet cuisine made with high-quality, fresh ingredients in up to five dining venues, premium wines and spirits, StarLink broadband Wi-Fi; prepaid gratuities for crew and guides/drivers on land, and included ground transfers. The ships stay late or overnight in some of Europe's most captivating towns and cities so guests can immerse themselves in authentic cultures and the destination's social life. Every member of Riverside's exceptional staff and crew delivers intuitive and personalized service for an all-inclusive and luxurious experience. Riverside Luxury Cruises is a winner in Travel + Leisure's World's Best Awards for 2024 and Cruise Critic's 2023 and 2024 Editors' Pick Award for Best Dining in the River Category. The single supplement waiver is subject to availability, and quantities are limited. Guests are encouraged to book early.



COURTESY RIVERSIDE LUXURY CRUISES



COURTESY SCENIC LUXURY CRUISES

Unwrap the spirit of the holidays with Scenic

Europe transforms into a magical wonderland during the festive season, with the scent of glühwein and roasted chestnuts filling the air and timeless traditions bringing each town to life. Evoke the nostalgia, romance, and joy of Christmas on a truly all-inclusive, 5-star ultra-luxury river cruise aboard **Scenic**'s Space-Ships. Experience the charm of Christmas markets, where the aroma of freshly baked gingerbread fills the air, and charming stalls sparkle with hand-blown ornaments, and you enjoy centuries-old customs in a whole new way, capturing the true spirit of the holidays to the gentle soundtrack of traditional carols. These markets embody the heart of the season: community, tradition, and authentic holiday cheer. For the ultimate in holiday travel indulgence, celebrate both Christmas and New Year with Scenic Luxury Cruises and sail on an iconic 15-day voyage from Budapest, Hungary to Amsterdam, Netherlands along the Danube and Rhine rivers. Enjoy a private Viennese classical concert at the majestic Palais Liechtenstein, Celebrate Christmas Day with 160 newfound friends as you cruise between Passau and Nuremberg and ring in the New Year in Cologne while enjoying fireworks over the city's famous Gothic cathedral. Along the way, tailor your journey with a variety of Scenic Freechoice excursions, ranging from active, to cultural as well as interactive encounters, discovering the captivating waterways and magnificent sights of Europe during the most magical time of the year.

AmaWaterways launches first-ever river ship in Colombia

AmaWaterways has welcomed its first guests and opened new horizons for tourism and river cruising on the Magdalena River in Colombia. The **AmaMagdalena** set sail on April 12, marking a significant milestone for the company expanding their portfolio by introducing a new region to its offerings beyond Europe, Asia and Africa. Carrying just 60 guests, the **AmaMagdalena** was custom-designed in collaboration with local craftspeople and woodwork specialists to bring the heart and soul of the region to life onboard. The locally designed staterooms, which range from 237 to 516 square feet, feature AmaWaterways' popular signature twin balconies with a look that reflects the region. Onboard amenities include a Sun Deck pool, spacious fitness room, a Main Restaurant offering regionally inspired Latin America cuisine paired with Western favourites, and an intimate al fresco specialty venue. The ship sails on two immersive seven-night itineraries, the Magic of Colombia and the Wonders of Colombia between Cartagena and Barranquilla and include valuable cultural highlights and traditions, biodiversity, heritage tours and more. Later this year, AmaWaterways will launch **AmaMelodia**, its second ship on the delightful Magdalena River, further expanding its presence in Colombia.



COURTESY AMAWATERWAYS

Vanessa Lee asked **Jennifer Halboth**, CEO of Riverside Collection Americas, about the luxury ships in their European river fleet sailing on the Rhine, Moselle, Danube, Saône and Rhône Rivers.



Your first ship, *Riverside Mozart*, launched in early 2023, followed by *Riverside Ravel* and *Debussy*. As a relatively new player in the river cruise space, how is Riverside setting itself apart?

When we launched the brand, we were fortunate to have the power of a beautiful, well-known and beloved fleet behind us. Yet to truly stand out as the luxury river cruise line, we needed to ensure the experience was also on point. Our culinary program really put us on the map—guests and travel advisors alike raved about it, and we were proud to win several industry awards for our dining in the very first year. As you know, great food is a make-or-break moment for river cruise lines, especially for the luxury traveller, and we're so pleased to hear again and again from our guests that their dining experiences were exceptional. This didn't happen by accident—our owners understand what it takes to create an outstanding culinary program, which meant spending double the amount on food per person as the other lines. And it's worth it.

Can you talk more about what makes dining on Riverside so exceptional? I have experienced this on the *Riverside Ravel*, and I know our readers would like to learn more.

Our ships were designed with culinary excellence in mind. All our galleys are oversized, which means we can prepare all meals à la minute, just like in any five-star restaurant on land. Because we're a small company, each ship's menu is crafted by its chef and team, so dining feels fresh and location-inspired. Because we sail through so many storied wine regions, we put a sommelier on every ship to help guests with wine selections and host tastings. Guests love the Atelier space—an intimate café with all-day eats, handcrafted coffee drinks, bubble waffles, ice cream and even house-made pretzels. On sunny days, we fire up the Big Green Eggs on the top deck for grilled prawns and filet mignon. And our Vintage Room? That's our signature wine-paired, multi-course experience, where the chef and sommelier team up to wow our foodie guests. We've heard "this is the best meal I've had all year" from countless guests, which keeps us pushing the envelope.

Jen, tell us more about Riverside's approach to luxury and how you are appealing to luxury travellers who haven't river cruised before.

Luxury means something different to everyone. For us, it starts with a beautifully designed river ship, impeccably maintained spaces and service that feels high-touch and personal. Every suite comes with butler service, and while that may sound "old-school," the true luxury here is how it allows guests to decide what pampering looks like to them. A feeling of intimacy also plays a big role in luxury. *Riverside Ravel* and *Debussy* carry just 110 guests, while *Mozart* carries a maximum of 162. Guests who have sailed on other river lines will immediately notice the amount of space allotted to suites and public spaces on Riverside ships. Our suites are the largest on the river, with king beds, walk-in closets, and double vanities in most categories. There's this magical

moment when a guest walks into their suite and says, 'Wow, I wasn't expecting this much space.' That's when we know we're delivering luxury that surpasses expectations.

What role does personalization play in the guest experience aboard Riverside's ships?

This is a great question, because personalization is a key component in the Riverside experience—this isn't necessarily the case with other river lines. Our online guest portal allows the crew to learn their preferences and gives them the opportunity to surprise and delight from day one. We also know that not everyone wants the standard seven-night itinerary. That's why we offer trips from three to 21 nights, and guests can combine itineraries to build their ideal journey. We offer a nice range of choices for excursions in each port, but we're also very happy to help a guest book a private tour, make a reservation or get tickets to a museum, or even plot a cycling route through the port city, made possible by our fleet of bikes, both electric and traditional, onboard and always ready to go. For guests who want to forgo tours and treat the ship like a true floating hotel, we offer pricing options without bundled excursions.

What's ahead for Riverside?

We have some exciting things on the horizon! Over the next few years, we will expand our fleet—*Riverside Bach* will join us in 2027, followed by *Riverside Mahler* in 2028. We have some cool special sailings coming up this year, executed in a way that is uniquely Riverside. In June, our Solstice in the Wachau with Danube Fireworks sailing celebrates the longest day of the year with a musical fireworks spectacular. This fall, we will offer the Danube New Wine Celebration sailing, timed to celebrate the season's grape harvest during St. Martin's festivities, when the new wine is blessed and served for the first time. We're dreaming big but staying focused on the small things that make Riverside special—thoughtful details, authentic experiences, and a little bit of wow. ■

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