

CRUISING

It's easy to find serenity at sea

European luxury voyage company Crystal Cruises is many cuts above the usual ship offerings

MARK SISSONS
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Luxury cruising is for the newly wed and nearly dead.

Just one of the long-held clichés I'd heard before embarking from Dover, England aboard the good ship Crystal Serenity.

As one of the world's top mid-sized cruise liners eases into the English Channel and Vera Lynn's fabled white cliffs fade from view, I ponder the next eight days at sea.

Will it feel like a floating retirement home? Will there be long buffet lineups, rampant gluttony, cheesy on-board entertainment and cattle-like shore excursions? Will I have to take up bridge or needlepoint to pass the time on so-called "sea-days" between ports of call?

Turns out, my first ultra-elegant sea voyage is a delightful surprise. As we sail for Barcelona on Crystal Cruise's European Embrace tour, with stops in Guernsey, Bordeaux, Lisbon and Cadiz, I begin to appreciate

this oft-maligned form of travel. If you remember to pack an open mind, luxury cruising (if you can afford it) can be a fascinating way to experience the modern world through the lens of yesteryear, an era of serenity at sea when elegance, impeccable service and a more relaxed, reflective pace of travel were the only way to go.

Comprising just two ships, the Serenity and the Symphony, Crystal Cruises is an award-winning boutique line globally recognized for its unparalleled service, spacious quarters and huge array of top-notch on-board entertainment, culinary and cultural choices. Nothing like starting at the top.

Service, second to none

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Sissons. I'll be taking care of you during our voyage," says Kivanc Dalgic, my jovial Turkish butler. As he unpacks my suitcase, I take in my sumptuous penthouse stateroom with its full sofa, walk-in closet, queen-size bed, Jacuzzi tub, spacious veranda and most importantly,



A stateroom aboard the Symphony, one of two ships operated by Crystal Cruises.

a fridge stocked with complimentary premium spirits, fine wines and Cristal Champagne.

Impeccable service is a hallmark of Crystal Cruises, and the entire staff — from concierges and butlers to waiters and maids — is trained to

greet every guest by name and remember even the most trivial of details; how you take your coffee, your favourite wines and spirits, even how you like your pillows fluffed. And their aim to impress is not to curry higher tips — Crystal's all-inclusive policy includes gratuities.

Having the best staff in the business won't keep you afloat if the on-board cuisine and entertainment is just average. Seafaring foodies are spoiled for choice aboard the Crystal Serenity. The opulent Crystal Dining Room offers elaborate multi-course menus featuring international cuisine and regionally-inspired dishes based on the itinerary. And it never repeats a menu.

Intimate Prego, offering fine Italian cuisine created under the direction of famed restaurateur Piero Selvaggio, and ultra stylish Silk Road, serving up superstar chef Nobu Matsuhisa's creations, keep luring

me back, as do poolside grilled salmon burgers and every passenger's guilty pleasure, the Ben & Jerry's stocked Ice Cream Bar. All of it, all-inclusive, along with over 50 different wines served in various restaurants and bars, including some premium brand spirits.

Post-dinner entertainment doesn't disappoint, either. Acts include a charming Broadway musical song and dance show, a medley of the Rocket Man's greatest hits sung by a brilliant Elton John impersonator, and a mesmerizing acrobatic show by aerial artists and Guinness World Record holders Rebecca and Donovan, among others.

Shore leave bonanza

They say the average cruise passenger gains about 10 pounds. The Crystal Serenity's five full-day shore excursions, which include biking, hiking and plenty of time to get

If you go

For a similar nine-day Dover to Lisbon cruise beginning on Aug. 1, fares start at \$4,500 pp/dbl occupancy. Penthouses start at \$9,300 pp/dbl.

On-board amenities include grand lounges, full-service fitness facility, the Crystal casino, a salon/spa, two pools, Jacuzzi tubs, award-winning cuisine and entertainment.

Most exquisitely appointed staterooms offer private verandas. Visit www.crystalcruises.com or 800-337-9568.

out and stretch those sea legs, certainly help burn off those calories.

On the English Channel island of Guernsey, I cycle along beaches still dotted with Second World War German bunkers. In Bordeaux, I visit the Romanesque churches and ruins of Saint-Émilion, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, then peddle through vineyards to a winery for lunch.

Hopping into a jeep in Lisbon, I drive out of town along the coast to Europe's most westerly point, Cape Roca, then ride across a dramatic landscape of Sintra National Park to Sintra, where I explore its famous fairy tale palaces and extravagant villas on foot.

My guided walking tour of photogenic Cadiz, Western Europe's oldest continuously inhabited town, is a shutterbug's dream, and cycling through Barcelona's labyrinthine city centre and along beaches built for the 1992 Summer Olympics is the perfect culmination to a fascinating (and invigorating) series of shore adventures.

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On a shore excursion, Crystal Serenity guests can explore Saint-Émilion, with its fascinating Romanesque churches and ruins hidden along steep and narrow streets.

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