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DEPARTURES

**THE
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The New Grand Tour

On a cruise from England to Spain, a seasoned landlubber finds a way to make Europe feel new again.

by Marcia DeSanctis

St.-Malo, France, has the swiftest and most dangerous tides in Europe, and on the first morning of my first cruise, impatient to get back on land after crossing the English Channel, I slipped on a rock on my way to a tidal island fortress built during Louis XIV's reign. An hour earlier I had skipped down the gangway into a yellow tender bound for shore, and peeled off alone while others left for group tours. I hurried through town for a buckwheat galette with salted caramel, then I skirted the medieval ramparts and descended to the beach, where I twisted my ankle and jammed my foot into a narrow crevice full of seawater. "Hurry up," a woman cried as she passed, sweeping her hand to indicate the onrushing ocean. I knew about the



CORIUS PHOTO

From left: Fort National off St.-Malo, France; Plage de l'écluse in nearby Dinard.



tides, yet here I was, risking life, limb, and a sublime Breton crepe just to prove that no cruise could hem in this militantly independent traveler.

A cruise, I was certain, could never suit me. Solitude, detours, and improv are more my style, not stem-to-stern tourists on the same rigid itinerary. Lately, though, I'd heard that we are in a new golden age of ocean travel. That some ships are sophisticated luxury resorts, can offer all the privacy one desires, and can be restorative and even spiritual. So I boarded Regent's *Seven Seas Explorer* in Southampton, ready to see if it might convert a committed skeptic and vagabond.

We would sail along three coastlines, calling on ports in France, Spain, and Portugal. I was eager to see how Bordeaux, Bilbao, Porto, and other places might differ when visiting by water. The last time I'd arrived in Bordeaux, it was still dark at 7 A.M. I carted my luggage to the hotel, where I was met by the dreaded, "Unfortunately your room will not be ready until three o'clock." This time, when our Italian captain, Serena Melani—one of seven women in the cruise industry of that rank—docked at Quai Louis XVIII, I was scrubbed, fresh, and ready to

walk unfettered into the city's gleaming heart. Breakfast was a *canelé*—Bordeaux's crusty, custardy local pastry—followed by a climb up the 217-foot Pey-Berland bell tower (in an Ace bandage). I was surprised by the twinge of comfort when, from the top, I spied the great white hulk of a ship. My glamorous cabin with a walk-in closet, marble bathroom, and breezy veranda waited patiently and was floating in tandem with me, and not once would I need to repack my bags or navigate a car through tight European streets.

Our second day in Bordeaux, I joined a sojourn to a château in St.-Émilion. We sipped Villemaurine Grand Cru Classé on a terrace overlooking acres of Merlot grapes, surging September-ripe from the region's chalky terroir. It was a revelation to learn that most people, like me, enjoyed the occasional off-piste exploration. Such is the nature of ultraluxury sailing, Regent style, where there are hundreds of choices and plenty of structure but the well-traveled guests are encouraged to live the cruise on their own terms. "We don't make announcements. We never herd people around like they do on other ships," says Andy Heath, who is the *Explorer's* cruise

The Owner's Suite on the *Silver Cloud Expedition*.



Tried and True Fleets Get a Thoroughly Modern Makeover

✦ OCEANIA CRUISES' REGATTA CLASS

As part of OceaniaNext, a sweeping set of enhancements, all four of this line's older vessels will go through a refurb by Florida-based Studio Dado. Public spaces will be lighter and brighter, and all 342 suites on each ship will have new bathrooms and sea-and-sky-inspired colors. *Insignia* debuted at the end of last year, to be followed by *Sirena* in May, *Regatta* in September, and *Nautica* in June of 2020. oceaniacruises.com

✦ UNIWORLD BOUTIQUE RIVER CRUISE COLLECTION'S SS BEATRICE

With its Murano chandelier, grand staircase, and sumptuous fabrics, the remodeled *Beatrice* is now part of the line's Super class of the most luxurious ships in the fleet. There are also more connecting cabins—ideal for families—and two new restaurants: Schubert's, an 18-seat café serving hearty

Austrian fare, and Max's, which offers cooking classes. uniworld.com

✦ CRYSTAL SERENITY

This recently retrofitted vessel has notable dining options, including Silk, a Chinese restaurant serving family-style dishes, and Marketplace, a café by day and Brazilian churrascaria at night. The ship also features 36 new Penthouses and two Penthouse suites. crystalcruises.com

✦ SILVER CLOUD EXPEDITION

After a \$40 million overhaul, the *Cloud*, one of Silversea's original vessels, now has an ice-strengthened hull for travel to Antarctica. More visible are the design upgrades: an airy, beige-inflected palette and contemporary suites with black-and-white vintage photos of polar explorers. Passengers can also head to the new Photo Studio for a workshop. silversea.com

► director and who, some nights, performs music for the guests. "For the independent traveler, that's the last thing they want."

I began to subtly socialize my way into the ship. My resistance slackened, and kind people responded. It was boring to always eat alone like a new kid in the dining hall. I met a group of Australian women on my corridor who invited me to lunch as we left Bordeaux. Hundreds of us gathered on the pool deck as we passed under the Pont Jacques Chaban-Delmas, a statuesque marvel that spans the Garonne River. Sometimes, I could not help riffling through my storehouse of nautical clichés, and "all in the same boat" sprang to mind. There were sun hats, champagne, and a feverish buzz for the next leg of the journey as we set out for open sea.

To be fair, sailing on the *Explorer* was baptism by milk and honey. The \$450 million vessel was christened in 2016 as the "most luxurious ship ever built."

FROM LEFT, COURTESY SILVERSEA; CHRIS CLOR/GETTY IMAGES



The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

Although there are 158 chandeliers, some made from Bohemian handblown glass, a gleaming Canyon Ranch spa, and countless edgy twists on formal, old-school ocean liners, other extravagances are barely visible. The 552-member crew is friendly, subtle about it, and trained to recall details about all 750 guests, 500 of whom are on their second, or tenth, Regent cruise. “The crew and the culture is really different here,” says Andy Heath. “Even in the depths of the ship, people look you in the eye and smile. It’s genuine.” The barista at the Coffee Connection knew how I liked my latte from Day 1: “Iced, with half-and-half and cocoa, Miss De Sanctis?”

When weather changed our plans, the crew and (most) passengers stayed upbeat. After we left Southampton, a hurricane churned across Britain, sending dangerous swells to the Bay of Biscay. It was deemed too risky to land in Hendaye, France, where tenders were necessary to get to shore, so Captain Serena ▶



Kayakers disembark from the *Seabourn Sojourn*.

Cruising for Adventure, Whether You Have Three Days or Five Months

146 DAYS

For the traveler who dreads the last day of vacation, **Seabourn** is offering a cruise aboard the *Sojourn* calling at a staggering 62 ports in 36 countries on five continents (✂ from \$66,999; seabourn.com). The epic, globe-circling voyage, Seabourn’s first world cruise in six years, departs Miami and concludes in San Francisco five months later, with stops in Colombia, Mozambique, and the Seychelles, among many, many, many other places.

77 DAYS

The “Grand Spice Route Quest” (✂ from \$45,999; rssc.com) on the **Regent Seven Seas Explorer** ships out from Barcelona and finally drops anchor in Auckland 76 days later, having plied a cross-hemispheric journey through the Mediterranean, Arabian, Andaman, and Coral Seas, among others.

118 DAYS

This 30-country pilgrimage aboard the **Regent Seven Seas Mariner** (✂ from \$61,999; rssc.com) features an

itinerary packed with UNESCO World Heritage sites—56 in all, from pyramids and medieval cities to coral reefs.

3-4 DAYS

By contrast, on its ultra-exclusive cruises between Chiang Rai, Thailand, and northern Laos (from \$5,450; mekongkingdoms.com), **Mekong Kingdoms** includes only one: the ancient city of Luang Prabang. For the 197-mile trip, the luxury operator offers both a three-day and a four-day version. However you do it, the glory of old Indochina will be on full display as the artfully bedecked two-cabin *Gypsy* glides through the Mekong River Valley, disembarking for temple visits, elephant encounters, and excursions to caves decorated with centuries-old statues of the Buddha left by pilgrims.

6 DAYS

Also on the shorter side: **Disney Cruise Line** offers a quick cruise from New York to Bermuda (from \$1,213; disneycruise.com) that gives guests time to enjoy the ship and the island’s beautiful beaches.



Chef Jacques Pépin aboard an Oceania cruise.

Raising the Stakes on Cruise Cuisine

David Thompson, one of Thailand's most celebrated chefs, recently left Bangkok's Michelin-starred Nahm to embark on new ventures, but he'll still find time to join **Aqua Expeditions** on two sailings of its four-night Aqua Mekong itinerary (✂ from \$5,400; aquaexpeditions.com). The chef will join guests on market tours, teach classes, and bring signature dishes like Thai river prawns and Cambodian catfish curry to the onboard bill of fare. On **Oceania's** Vineyards &

Castles voyage, a 12-night sail from Amsterdam to Lisbon (✂ from \$3,199; oceaniacruises.com), expect menus and demonstrations from Jacques Pépin, and don't be surprised if the chef joins in for a game of ping-pong or participates in shore excursions.

There's no better way to experience a new place than through its food markets, which is why **Celebrity Cruises** offers chef-guided trips on each of its itineraries (✂ nine nights from \$819; excursions from \$209; celebritycruises.com), from meeting vendors at Barcelona's Boqueria Market to sampling local pastries at French bakeries in Nouméa, New Caledonia. Several of **Uniworld's** river-cruise ship restaurants offer cooking classes based on the port's local recipes, like learning how to make Wiener schnitzel and goulash at Max's restaurant on the newly renovated SS *Beatrice* or perfecting Provençal-style lamb on the SS *Joie de Vivre* (✂ eight nights from \$3,199; uniworld.com) at La Cave du Vin.

- ▶ and Regent made the difficult decision to proceed directly to Bilbao, where the ship could dock. "People think that with modern technology we can do whatever we want," she explained over tea in her office. "Hurricanes are showing us that this is wrong, and we still need to respect Mother Nature."

With an extra day in Bilbao, I could go rogue one day and join up the next. I rented a bike, whirred along the Nervión River to the Guggenheim and



Calatrava's bridge, then back to Plaza Nueva, where I rested a spell under the palms for *pintxos* and a cool glass of Txakoli. I know of no sweeter pleasure than a solo spin through a gorgeous city, but the following day came close. A group of us hiked along the Basque coast, past Gilded Age mansions and along jagged limestone cliffs, fields of flowering honeysuckle, and groves of heavenly-smelling figs. After, dazed by the wind and sun, I was delighted to repair to the elegant confines of my cocoon.

Each time we shipped out, I retreated to the infinity pool, heated by the sun, which thrust right over the ocean in the sternmost part of the vessel. I got a primal thrill from watching the wake ripple right in front of me like an unfurled bolt of linen. It was the realm of sea and sky, painted every shade of blue and green, aqua, indigo, mint, emerald, and turquoise. There was no feeling in the world but stillness and wind. This contemplative ritual sealed my desired solitude, but I also knew I could find dinner and conversation with one of my shipmates, or Andy's wife, Tammy, the *Explorer's* social hostess. I could now balance the need for company with the need to be solo.

✂ **American Express Platinum Card Members** have access to the Cruise Privileges Program, which offers exclusive benefits and complimentary amenities from select cruise line partners. To learn more, visit americanexpress.com/cruiseprivileges.



Regent's *Seven Seas Explorer* off Sorrento, Italy.

In Porto, pilot boats guided us out of the smallest parking spot imaginable, through a charming pair of lighthouses and fortress walls. It had been a great day, with a boat ride along the Douro River, the fresh smell of early autumn, and lively new friends from Houston who invited me for Italian food that evening. It was too chilly for the pool, so I sat on a lounge chair and wrapped myself in a big towel. There was one other passenger on deck, and we chatted about Captain Serena's expert maneuvers.

"It's a tight squeeze," I said.

"This wind is fierce," my acquaintance said.

We approached Cádiz on a sparkling morning and the sun washed the city with an orange glow. From my veranda, marveling at the panoramic sweep of the Tavira watchtower and the great cathedral, I was jarred by a sense of history. Christopher Columbus sailed here; so did Elizabeth I's warships. Until recently, water was all that connected the people on earth. When we left, I stayed awake munching almond toffee from a shop in town. The lights of Morocco twinkled to the south as we crossed the Strait of Gibraltar toward Barcelona. At the very least, this cruise had been an idyllic respite and revelatory new way to explore in perfect, partial freedom. At most, it was a reminder of where I came from and a reset on the way I look at the world. Best of all, and to my surprise, my wayfinding heart is full...and intact.

✦ From \$12,799; rsc.com.

COURTESY VIKING

Love in a Cold Climate

On **Windstar's** weeklong circumnavigation of Iceland (✦ from \$4,899; windstarcruises.com), dramatic landscapes are guaranteed, but rather than icebergs or auroras the highlights may well be sampling the extensive local cuisine on land, such as halibut soup with green apple, dried fruit, and parsley oil, or deep-fried lamb hot dogs. Dining options aboard Windstar's 106-suite *Star Breeze* are just as pleasing: Meals frequently come with a view of lava fields and fjords. **Viking** also goes beyond the typical Nordic cruise with "In Search of the Northern Lights," a 13-day expedition from London to Bergen, Norway (from \$4,999; vikingcruises.com) that includes visits with the indigenous Sami and tours of mysterious prehistoric rock carvings in Alta, Norway. On the other side of the Arctic, **Cunard** is sending the *Queen Elizabeth* on its first-ever voyage from Tokyo to Vancouver (✦ from \$3,999;

cunard.com), a 27-day extravaganza of northern Pacific culture and scenery, from the volcanic *onsens* of Hokkaido to Alaska's indigenous fishing villages. The trip marks Cunard's first foray to Alaska in more than 20 years. **Norwegian Cruise Line's** newest luxury liner, *Norwegian Bliss*, was designed for the Great White North, with floor-to-ceiling windows in its observation lounge. "Awe of Alaska," a seven-day voyage from Seattle through the Inside Passage and back (✦ from \$899; ncl.com), includes plenty of wide-angle glacier views. **Ponant** features a trip to the opposite pole aboard *L'Austral*, leaving from Ushuaia, Argentina, and returning 15 days later after stops at South Georgia Island and the Antarctic Peninsula (from \$19,885; ponant.com). Expect close encounters with wildlife such as penguins, leopard seals, and orcas.



Aurora borealis viewed near Alta, Norway, aboard Viking's "In Search of the Northern Lights" cruise.