

ALL ABOARD!



A nautical adventure with Sea Cloud Cruises is a once-in-a-lifetime experience and the perfect backdrop for landmark celebrations, writes Domhnall O'Donoghue.



Supporting the floral swimming trunks I purchased in Naples earlier in the week, I peer over a platform to admire the Mediterranean Sea before debating what word best describes the water's quality. Translucent? Azure-blue? Hypnotic?

"Are you going to jump?" someone behind me asks encouragingly. "How can you say no? It looks really..."

"Seductive," I reply, finally settling on the best description. And so, unable to resist its call any longer, I take a deep breath and plunge in.

Moments later, I resurface, breathless — not from the shock to the system that's synonymous with those initial flirtations with sea swimming, but because towering

above me is the vessel from which I've just jumped: the *Sea Cloud Spirit*, looking particularly majestic from this unique angle.

I outstretch my body across the surface of the warm water and take a beat to marvel at the ship's craftsmanship and beauty, notably the three masts standing sentinel on the deck. Resembling origami, their brilliant white colour beautifully mirrors the hull below and the clouds above.

Three days earlier, our week-long route began in Naples, a city as explosive as nearby Vesuvius, thanks to its symphony of market vendors, mopeds, car horns and animated conversations. Our destination is Genoa,



Italy's largest port and, fittingly, home to the world's most famous navigator, Christopher Columbus. In between, there are scheduled stops in luxurious towns, villages and islands like Amalfi, Capri and Cinque Terre — along with here, many nautical miles from anywhere, for a dip in the sea.

Gulls circling overhead are doubtlessly curious about our presence in waters usually reserved for them alone as the nearest body of land, Monte Cristo, immortalised in Alexandre Dumas' iconic novel about a mysterious count, is barely visible on the horizon. Ignoring the birds' gaze, I splash about the enclosed pool and



Sea Cloud Spirit - Lido lounge



Captain Vukota Stojanovic



Buffet lunch



Guests enjoying a drink

greet fellow passengers, all giddy over this surreal experience.

"This is the life," I remark to one.

"You can say that again."

"This is the life."

AN HISTORIC JOURNEY

Just three years old, the *Sea Cloud Spirit* is the latest in a trio of ships that travel myriad routes worldwide, including Europe, North Africa and North America. The first, *Sea Cloud*, was built in Kiel, Germany, in 1931 and belonged to the family of coffee and frozen-food tycoon Marjorie Merriweather Post. Once America's wealthiest woman, she was also the former owner of Florida's now-infamous Mar-a-Lago resort, currently in the hands of former US president Donald Trump.

Before becoming a luxury yacht in the '70s, that square-rigger enjoyed connections to the US Navy, a former Dominican Republic dictator and A-list Hollywood stars like Greta Garbo, famed for uttering the iconic line, 'I want to be alone'.

Blessedly, I'm far from alone on this sailing,

as I'm surrounded by over 60 gregarious passengers, mainly from America and Germany, and an international crew, some of whom have been a part of the Sea Cloud family for over 30 years.

IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

"The three *Sea Cloud* ships are special for many reasons, but we're one of the few companies that are truly passionate about using a traditional approach," says Captain Vukota Stojanovic, welcoming me into the bridge later that week.

"The sails are still all set by hand," he adds, the exclusive candy-coloured Portofino cutting a fine figure in the distance. "Our sailors don't push buttons; instead, using harnesses, they climb the rigging, loosen the heavy cloth and then haul the lines in from the deck. It's wonderful for passengers to watch the process."

Elsewhere, rather than fighting the sea with engine power, the ships use the wind whenever possible when travelling from port to port.

Captain Stojanovic adds: "As often as we can, we sail. We may change the route occasionally if the weather conditions demand it. The journey is our goal, and time is a secondary consideration."

I'm happy to discover that these are just some of the many ways in which Sea Cloud Cruises is nurturing the concept of sustainable and low-impact tourism, proving that unique experiences and treating the environment with respect don't have to be mutually exclusive.

Owing to the three ships' manoeuvrability and eco-friendly practices, the captain also mentions that they can venture into places where other larger vessels cannot, like smaller, more individual ports or near protected national parks.

SAILING CLOSE TO THE WIND

Incidentally, over the week, I take much pride in telling anyone who will listen that the Beaufort Scale — used by sailors around the world today to measure wind speed — was created by a fellow Navan man, Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort, nearly 200 years ago.

This nugget of information results in Captain Stojanovic discussing his own background. He began his career on container

Continued overleaf >>



Sea Cloud stateroom



Capri - Arch of Lovers

ships, but once he joined Sea Cloud on a trip from the Canaries to the Caribbean, he found his calling. Hailing from Montenegro, his favourite sailing is, understandably, along the Adriatic Sea, allowing him to wave at his motherland, but he insists that every route offered is exciting.

Before sleeping, Captain Stojanovic mentions he can often be found on deck, a blanket draped over him, savouring the nocturnal delights of the starry skies, enhanced by the peaceful sounds of the wind and waves dancing in tandem.

Regarding bedtime, passengers are treated to comfortable staterooms in six categories. Along with a double bed, sofa and an en suite bathroom, my charming cabin is equipped with a balcony from where I sip morning coffee or enjoy a nightcap. By modern ship standards, overall, this space might be considered compact, but it's elegantly decorated in bright nautical colours, complemented by high-quality mahogany furnishings, meaning it never feels confined.

FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

During our conversation, Captain Stojanovic also lists the many other reasons passengers enjoy a Sea Cloud sailing – "swimming in the open sea, snorkelling, the spa, photography opportunities and the many activities and, of course, the five-star food."

As a result of the delicious and generous daily meals, along with the many irresistible refreshments in between, the only scale



Fine dining

that should be uttered on board is the aforementioned apparatus created by Admiral Beaufort – the one pertaining to weight should be banned completely.

On the Lido deck, where friendships between passengers and crew members prosper, chefs wow us with buffets ranging from freshly caught tuna, swordfish and scorpion fish to kangaroo, buffalo and Fiorentina steak while wine and champagne flow freely. The itinerary also schedules more formal meals in the restaurant, including welcome and farewell gala dinners.

During our sailing, Raúl Capello, a talented musician, entertains passengers with live music and DJ sets. He receives a reprieve one evening when the crew members, dressed in traditional sailor outfits, belt out a fine selection of well-

known sea shanties like Irish favourite *The Wild Rover* – appropriate, seeing as no, nay, never, no, nay, never no more, will I forget this magical experience, no, never, no more.

ONSHORE DAY TRIPS

During cocktail hour one evening, I chat with my fellow passengers about why they chose this sailing as a holiday. Elizabeth Pitts, a captivating and successful art agent from North Carolina, explains that she and her husband had many milestones to celebrate recently, including a landmark wedding anniversary and her husband's retirement. The cruise's varied itineraries suited their contrasting needs, from relaxing on the deck to pursuing more active day trips.

This point cannot be overstated: travelling with Sea Cloud Cruises isn't just about unwinding or indulging onboard – alongside this traditional sailing experience are opportunities to make exciting discoveries along the Italian Riviera. As an added bonus, informative talks from historians and archaeologists like Juliane Muderlak and Yvonne Schmidt deftly bring our various stops to life throughout the week.

My fascination with saints was instilled in me as a young altar boy, so I'm delighted to visit Amalfi, where some of the relics of Jesus' first disciple, St Andrew, are kept in the striped marble- and-stone cathedral. But not all the figures I meet this week are worthy of sainthood.

French military commander Napoléon



Naples - Mount Vesuvius
in the distance



Porto Venere - Doria Castle

Bonaparte was exiled to Elba in 1814, and even though he only stayed for 10 months, his presence is felt everywhere today, especially across the island's infrastructure, agriculture, and education and legal systems. If only the Little Corporal had decided to remain and enjoy the lush landscape and silky beaches, he wouldn't have met his Waterloo a few months later. (Although then, ABBA might never have won the Eurovision.)

After surrendering to the many charms of the 'five lands' of Cinque Terre dotted across the dramatic coastline, we spend the day in Porto Venere, aptly named after Venus, the goddess of love and beauty. Over the centuries, the town, with its famous church clinging to the rocks, has welcomed some of the world's greatest writers, including Lord Byron, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Mary Shelley and her husband, Percy Bysshe, who was sadly a victim of Italy's fatal gift of beauty after being killed in a boating accident nearby in 1822.

ARCH OF LOVE

When my parents honeymooned in Rome in 1973, they planned to visit some of these dreamy destinations along the country's west coast but could not, thanks in part to a wave of cholera breaking out in Naples. They vowed to return, and exactly 25 years

"My charming cabin is equipped with a balcony from where I sip morning coffee or enjoy a nightcap"



Portofino - Luxury shops

later, the lovebirds celebrated their silver anniversary in Capri.

The week following my sailing marks 50 years since my parents first made their vows, and while they're currently enjoying travel itineraries closer to home, I gladly stop by their beloved Capri on their behalf, even passing under the Arch of Love, where I make a wish to emulate their successful, long-lasting relationship.

Suppose I celebrate my golden anniversary in the future, I might return here on a Sea Cloud cruise — I can't think of a more magical way of ushering in life's most important milestones. WW



Amalfi Cathedral



Genoa

Fact box

- Domhnall was a guest of Sea Cloud Cruises. Rates for this seven-night sailing from Naples to Genoa range from €4,865 to €9,165 per person sharing and include all meals and selected wines and beer to complement lunch and dinner. Transport to and from ports is not included. Excursions entail additional costs.

For more information on routes and fares, visit seacloud.com