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Granite & Steele

Dawn's back, celebrating 25 years in the business with a starring role in Aberdeen-based crime drama, Granite City



Aidan Smith's TV picks of the week

Gaby Soutar on Cardinal's 16-course tasting menu

Scottish property





A tour of beauty in Sicily

With the amenities of a modern liner and the romance of a tall ship, a week on Sea Cloud II is unforgettable, writes Rachel Roberts

Ba-doom, ba-doom... the collective sound of hearts beating loudly against chests can be heard as we watch the limber Philippine crew clamber up the sky-grazing rigging of the Sea Cloud II. In an exquisitely choreographed drill, they're setting the series of 23 sails, unfurling the right ones to harness the gentle breeze on our first day out in sea after embarking at Valletta, Malta.

It's the perfect scene-setter for the seven-night Sicily's Rich Cultural Heritage cruise, calling to mind the maritime adventurers through the centuries who have explored Sicily in this way.

Well, not quite this way. Described as combining the amenities of a modern cruise ship with the atmosphere of a romantic tall ship, Sea Cloud II

is quite possibly one of the most luxurious cruising crafts I've ever boarded. She's quite the knockout beauty, too. Though built in 2001, the 47 cabins, lido deck and bar, restaurant and lounge, hark back to the golden age of sailing. My home for the week onboard the 117m-long vessel is cabin 314, a category B Junior Suite that gives mini-stateroom vibes with its gold and burgundy furnishings, complete with a compact marble bath and solid gold taps.

A passenger-to-crew ratio of 96:65 means the service is first-rate, too, and offers as near to a private yacht experience as you can get. That's not to say that the well-heeled clientele – including wealthy American property magnates and stylish Germans (the cruise company is German-owned) – can't afford to charter or even have their own yachts. Rather, I glean



Sea Cloud II with all its sails unfurled, main; a junior suite, above, offers 'mini-stateroom vibes'

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It offers as near to a private yacht experience as you can get

from conversations throughout the coming days that they love the easy camaraderie to be found in this kind of setting.

Quite honestly, it's a daily wrench to leave for shore excursions, but our excellent onboard lecturer/guide, Dr Anita Bestler, whets our appetite to discover more with her highly engaging daily presentations.

We're sailing clockwise around Sicily, with options to experience the island's standout cities, sights and culture. The first highlight is the medieval city of Erice, an exhilarating

30-minute drive via switch-backed roads from Trapani. Here, an almost perfectly preserved Norman castle and monastery reveal an early French bid to take control, while the many date palm trees symbolise a further historical rewind to the ninth century when the Emirate of Sicily was ruled by the Arabic Empire for more than 200 years.

The Norman theme continues in the capital city of Palermo, where we visit the Palazzo Reale, also known as the Palazzo dei Normanni. Once the seat of the Kings of Sicily during Norman domination, the slightly austere exterior belies the jaw-dropping Palatine Chapel within and its Byzantine golden mosaic-ed ceiling that delivers a 'wow' factor to rival that of the Sistine Chapel.

Returning to our floating home following a day of full-on sightseeing is a delight. Evenings begin with sundowner cocktails on the lido deck, accompanied by the expert tinkling of pianist Eduardo. We're further entertained on one

unforgettable occasion by a pod of playful dolphins arcing in and out of the ocean alongside the ship.

And I'm glad I've packed 'forgiving' clothes because the buffet-style lunches and dinners are consistently fantastic. My willpower goes overboard in the face of temptations which include freshly caught yellowfin tuna (we see it coming straight off a fishing boat), handmade pastas and desserts to die for, all accompanied by ever-flowing local wines. The Gala dinners, held in the dining room with à la carte menus and the Captain and crew all impeccably turned out in their crisp sailing whites, take the experience up a notch.

As a solo traveller, it's not long before I make friends with a fun German group, but I also relish the chance to enjoy the quiet moments in the many nooks around the ship. These include the colonial-style deck chairs placed for gorgeous views of the ocean and the cute library, equipped with a selection of German and English books.

There's an open bridge policy for guests who want to take a deeper dive into the nuts and bolts of sailing. I venture up one morning to be greeted by the Second Captain who explains how they navigate using a combination of modern GPS and old-school maritime maps. Thankfully, his skills mean we are avoiding potential hazard zones bearing doom-laden names such as 'Terrible Ridge'.

The days fall into an easy rhythm, but there are surprises too. One afternoon, I'm roused from a lunch-induced nap by an announcement over the PA system that the Captain has ordered the swim deck

to be lowered. Grabbing my swimming costume, I join my fellow passengers diving joyfully into the Mediterranean's glittering waters.

Of course, for many, a visit to Sicily wouldn't be complete without a glimpse of Mount Etna, Europe's largest volcano, and after dropping anchor at Naxos, many of my fellow passengers join a day's excursion from the nearby town of Taormina to get a closer look. However, we've already had a pre-dawn cruise-by of nearby Stromboli, another of Italy's four active volcanoes, so I opt instead to spend a day at Taormina's rocky beach.

A final port of call to the city of Syracuse sees us visiting the famous Ear of Dionysius, a limestone cave named by Renaissance master Caravaggio after the Greek tyrant Dionysius I who ruled Syracuse from 432 to 367 B.C.

Legend has it that Dionysius used the cave as a prison, listening to the amplified whispers of his captives from the small opening at the top of the cave.

Today, visitors go to experience the incredible acoustics for themselves.

As we watch the sails being folded up one last time, I commit the sights, sounds and sensations of the past few days to memory. The experience has ignited a thirst to return to the high seas as soon as possible.

And perhaps, if she'll have me, I'll be fortunate enough to embark on Sea Cloud II once more.

Prices for 2024 Sicily cruises start at 4,195€. Visit seacloud.com



The rigging and wooden deck of Sea Cloud II



Murder on the British Pullman

Step back to the 1950s for a whodunnit theatre experience on the iconic Belmond train. All the evidence points to a wonderful time, writes Kate Wickers

She would be my prime suspect. A possessive, controlling harpy isn't going to let her husband Eddie run off with another woman without putting up a fight first..." says flame-haired Angela Lucille, a secretary, who has just confessed undying love to her boss, Ivan Perseus, a spiv who's done good, with a dubious war record. It's just past midday on the British Pullman, a Belmond train and sister to the famous Venice Simplon-Orient Express, and a Moving Murder Mystery is unfolding.

Although, my sleuth-skills might already be a little hampered by the free-flowing champagne. It would be hard to imagine a more quintessential British day out than rolling through the Kent countryside

on Britain's most lavish train (although construction of the train began in 1938, it wasn't completed until 1951 due to war), with its marquetry interiors, and gleaming Art Deco fixtures and fittings. Each of the 11 carriages is unique, with sumptuous armchairs to sink into while enjoying a five-course lunch. However, before we travel further, let me pull on the emergency cord and reverse up the train tracks a little.

I arrive to Victoria at 10:30am and check in at the Belmond departure lounge, where 1950s songs are being crooned by a coiled-haired singer in a slinky dress on the platform. The advice is to dress up for the occasion and many of my fellow passengers have gone all out; the guys looking dapper in penny loafers, skinny ties, and pleated trousers and the

ladies in voluminous skirts and fox furs. The day doesn't come cheap, and most are here to celebrate special birthdays or anniversaries so there's a buzz of excitement as the Pullman arrives, and the actors hop out to peacock along the platform in extravagant '50s costume.

The brown and mustard-coloured Pullman is a raving beauty and stepping into one is a moment of bygone glamour. In 1972, the Cygnus carriage was featured in the film *Agatha with Dustin Hoffman and Vanessa Redgrave*. Two years ago, Cygnus was given a makeover by film director Wes Anderson. Featuring candy-floss-coloured ceiling, and rich upholstery in bottle green and lime tones, the carriage's mahogany wood panelled walls are a joy, decorated with waves, stars, clouds, and sunbeams, and settling down to enjoy a glass of champers in one of Anderson's ample armchairs feels like the most indulgent treat.

Five hours on a train might sound a little long but I'm soon so embroiled in the plot, delivered at regular intervals by a host of larger-than-life characters, that the hours, like the countryside we're travelling through, flies by.

"He wouldn't last five minutes in fisty-cuffs with

me, I can assure you," bellows philanthropist Gordon Vera (an excitable chap with a curled moustache and bright green plus fours), while I'm tucking into my cannon of Kent lamb with potato and thyme cake.

As the wine flows, the competition heats up between fellow passengers. It's game on to discover clues and work out 'whodunnit', and there are those who are taking things quite seriously (full credit to the Russian lady sitting near me who whips out a magnifying glass from her Chanel handbag). Masters of improv, the actors bat away every question or challenge thrown at them by us amateur detectives.

"Have you seen Jealous Eyes, my new film, darlings?" asks legendary actress, Julie Ibis. When someone quips back that he watched it on Netflix, she responds, "Oh darling. Isn't that the wonderful new picture house in Clapham?"

During a lull, I nip along the corridor to check out the tiny kitchen, from which fine-dining creations are being whisked away by dashing stewards, and, in between skits, there's ample time to gaze out of the window. We pass fields of hops and vineyards, and in keeping with the surroundings, you'll find a good selection

The Cygnus carriage, renovated to a design by director Wes Anderson

of Kent's finest wine on the Carriage Wine List, including a Simpsons Canterbury Rosé. As we depart from Dover Priory Station, the Channel laps just a pebble throw away from the tracks, and by the time we're on the outskirts of London, we're enjoying a 'Great British cheeseboard' and glorious views to the City. It's as we're crossing the River Thames back to Victoria that the identity of the murderer is revealed. Of course, I mustn't divulge any secrets but can tell you I was wrong in my choice of villain. I might just leave you with one piece of advice: that no one is quite who they seem.

The Moving Murder Mystery experience aboard the British Pullman, A Belmond Train from £485pp, to include champagne, immersive theatre experience, five-course lunch, sommelier's selection of wines, coffee, tea and petit fours. Visit Belmond.com.

Want to make an indulgent night of it? Doubles at The Cadogan, A Belmond Hotel in Chelsea start at £680 per night (based on two sharing).

Paris is getting ready for its Olympics party

There are lots of cultural attractions alongside iconic sporting venues, writes Rebecca Blake

Hidden behind closed doors not far from the Eiffel Tower, two of the world's best breakdancers have drawn a crowd.

In the very shadow of that landmark is the Spot 24 centre, where Polish-born Paulina Starus and Colombian Jordan Silva Medina are among the athletes getting ready for the forthcoming Olympic Games. Adding to the excitement is the fact their sport, breakdancing, will be showcased for the first time.

Other 'new' sports to feature in the Olympics – include freestyle BMX, skateboarding, sport climbing and surfing, the latter of which will take place in Tahiti.

This year, exactly a century after they last hosted the Olympics, France will hold aloft the world famous torch once again. The French capital is set to be a host city along with Lyon, Saint-Etienne, Nice, Bordeaux, Nantes and Marseille, and organisers are promising a spectacular show with an opening ceremony outside along the banks of the Seine.

Even in the run-up to events, there are plenty of reasons to visit the city.

I'm reminded that Paris is at heart a classic beauty as I check into the sumptuous Le Meurice Hotel on Rue de Rivoli within sight of the Tuileries Garden and the Louvre.

The hotel opened in 1835 as a comfortable home from home for many British tourists travelling across the Channel, before later becoming the favoured haunt of artists such as Salvador Dali.

I feel like I have been transported back to the city of Marie Antoinette at breakfast



The Ducasse Sur Seine experience

in a stunning room inspired by Versailles. Sampling the Alain Ducasse pastries increases my bliss as I bite into a crisp sweet pain au chocolat.

A short distance away, I enjoy a dinner cruise with Ducasse Sur Seine, smoothly gliding through the water by electric propulsion, where the incredible scenery is only matched by the gastronomy. The sparkling lights of the Eiffel Tower lit up at night seem to ignite bubbles in my flute of champagne.

For every sporting venue featuring in the Olympics, there are scores of cultural attractions nearby to add to the visitor experience during the Olympics.

For example, the Olympic tennis and the boxing finals are set to take place at the Roland Garros stadium.

The equestrian events are to be hosted at Versailles where those attending can also visit the historic home of French Royals, while the beach volleyball will take place under the Eiffel Tower and the Obelisk at the Concorde will witness skateboarding, breakdancing and BMX.

There may have been a 100-year break from when Paris last hosted the Olympic Games in 1924, but the events of this summer promise to set the standard of an incredible all-round experience for decades to come.

For further information and to plan your visit to France, visit parisjetaime.com/eng/