



Every cloud has a silver lining

... and this elegant five-star tall-ship experience has many

IT'S hard to say that looks don't count when you see the remarkable Sea Cloud Spirit. When it sails into a harbour, heads turn.

It offers an authentic tall-ship sailing experience with all the amenities of an intimate, sustainably-focused, five-star cruise that can take you off the well-worn tourism path.

This three-masted, full-rigged ship epitomises vintage glamour and majestic beauty. While it may lack some of the extensive amenities of larger cruise ships — there's no pool or activities on board — it more than compensates with its classic elegance and charm.

The entire length of the top sailing deck is dedicated to relaxation, sunbathing, and watching the busy crew raise and lower the impressive sails. Champagne in hand, you can watch them casually walking around the rigging, which is over 200 feet above the waterline.

There are comfortable loungers and clamshell beds dotted around the deck, and while towels and bottled water are available, there's no bar service, so you carry your own drinks from the Lido Bar on the deck below. The upside of this is that there's no hard upselling.

There isn't a drink package included as such, other than all drinks at mealtimes. There is face recognition at embarking only, but most of the staff know you by name when you order drinks throughout the cruise, which is a nice touch.

If the big luxury lines are digital, then this 450ft ship is the stylish analogue version. Sea Cloud has wooden decks, vintage Art



BY
SARA COLOHAN

Smooth waters: From top, Sara with crew members; The beautiful ship; The Lido deck; A spacious cabin; and the spa

Deco-themed interiors, luxurious, spacious cabins with five-star details, and just enough room on board for 135 guests.

As with most analogue versions, you might hear more outside noise, or maybe some creaking of wood beams and boat panning. You will definitely feel the sway and groan of the mechanics of the boat at night, powering away to keep this ship moving at an impressive 40kmph.

It is a boat lover's dream

cruise. All cabins on Spirit are stylish, but the junior suites on deck 3 have private outdoor balconies, rare for a sailing ship.

These suites also have walk-in closets, bathrooms with a full Jacuzzi tub and showers.

There's a mini-fridge with drinks, a coffee maker and an integrated flat-screen TV. There are 69 cabins in total, with the most exclusive suites at the Lido restaurant. They have full-length windows, allowing lots of natural light to stream in.

There is very little organised entertainment on the ship. Usually there are a couple of lectures — Harald 'Toni' Schumacher, the controversial former German goalkeeper, was the guest speaker on our trip — and there is a grand piano in the lounge and a very private and sunny library with English and German books.

Unlike a lot of larger cruises, the cabins are so large and inviting, with extremely comfortable bedding, that it's a pleasure to just spend time there.

There are three Sea Cloud ships in the fleet — Sea Cloud I, built in 1931, Sea Cloud II in 1990, and Sea Cloud Spirit in 2021. I travelled on Sea Cloud Spirit for a short four-night cruise from Malaga to Cadiz, flying home from Lisbon.

We had one full day at sea, up the Straits of Gibraltar, which was gloriously sunny during the day with a bit of extra sway at night.

As the Gibraltar Strait is a narrow passage connecting the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, it can be particularly vulnerable to the effects of the 'gota fria', which translates as 'cold drop', which can result in intense rainfall and some harsh weather.

If you are someone who

loves listening to a storm outside while you are snuggled up in luxury and warmth, you will find Sea Cloud Spirit a romantic experience, hearing the waves crash against the boat and feeling the movement of the ship as it heads for sunny Lisbon.

Some hardy guests barely noticed the increased movement, but my delicate sea legs felt a few wobbles. So, if you want more than the steady, even keel of a sturdy cruise liner and crave a more authentic experience, then this is the boat for you. Sea Cloud also does a transatlantic crossing with no dock days and several Caribbean routes for those who want calm waters and guaranteed weather.

SEA Cloud is a German company, so you will have lots of German neighbours, and all the on-board announcements are in German first, then English. We met Americans and Irish on the trip, so there was certainly a mix.

Excursions are a great way to get to know fellow cruisers too, and there are several, like a walking tour of Cadiz, a Lisbon food tour by tuk tuk, and a chance to visit an exclusive beach club. Wi-fi is speedy but expensive on board, and if you are constantly on your phone, you could pay almost €20 a day extra.

Deck 2 has a decent-sized spa, with a pre-treatment relaxation room, a good-sized sauna and steam room, treatment rooms, and a salon for hair and nail services. The sauna runs 'textile-free' hours, which is a German tradition and means the sauna will offer mixed company and no bathing suits during certain hours, though plenty of

towels are available for the modest.

Sea Cloud Spirit excelled in its daily selection of fresh fish at both lunch and dinner. On day one, we had sea bream grilled fresh on the deck, salmon another night, and for the main gala dinner, we were offered fresh sashimi carved from a huge whole tuna. There was also the option to choose your hefty tuna steaks and cook them on the grill.

Breakfast was a moderate affair, with the usual fare you would expect from a decent hotel.

There was no room service menu in the cabin, so again, it felt very relaxed with no pressure to upsell. You just call reception, and they will take your order.

The other highlight is when guests are invited to board an inflatable boat as the Sea Cloud is mid-cruise, all sails billowing.

You can circle the ship, allowing everyone to really take in her beauty and capture memorable photos.

While there is an elevator onboard, Sea Cloud Spirit is not well suited for those with mobility issues, as the gangway requires steep steps and the top sun deck is not accessible by anything other than stairs. Several hallways were also inaccessible for wheelchairs.

Sea Cloud Spirit isn't really suited to small children, but there was one young German family on board for my trip, and they seemed perfectly happy being the only children, getting lots of attention through the journey from crew and fellow passengers alike.

TRAVEL FACTS

Sailings on Sea Cloud Spirit are priced from €2,895, see seacloud.com.