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SCOTTSDALE ARIZONA

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Spirit of ADVENTURE

A LUXURY CRUISE ALONG SPAIN'S MOST CAPTIVATING COAST
ABOARD SEA CLOUD SPIRIT, A SHIP LIKE NO OTHER.



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PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Sea Cloud Spirit in
open water.

LEFT FROM THE TOP:
Sea Cloud Spirit docked
in Bilbao; James
climbing up to the mast
The sails of the ship
fully open.

ABOVE:
Guests getting ready to
board Zodiacs.



I

t looks like a doddle. The web of rigging leading up to the first platform of *Sea Cloud Spirit's* 190ft main mast feels sturdier than

a worn Dr Martens boot, while 1st Officer Anatoly Maslov wraps me in a cacophony of clips and hooks. But the higher I climb, the more the ropes narrow. Footing has

to be more precise and locking down suddenly becomes a sweat-inducing proposition. With the crew barking out helpful instructions from above, I hang back at an unnatural angle and heave up the futtock shrouds to the safety of the solid platform.

Distant faces on the deck below crane their necks skywards and break out in applause. Given that this was the merely lowest of the mast's perches, I feel a little

like a child who's just completed his ten-metre swimming badge. There's little time to soak in the moment, but that minute or two amid a mass of white sails high above the Cantabrian Sea is remarkable. But then again, nothing about *Sea Cloud Spirit* is ordinary.

Spain's northern coast isn't an obvious choice for a luxury cruise. Exposed to the wild Atlantic, this is a rugged wind-sculpted landscape studded



with proud cities, while its interior is a lush canvas of dense forest and misty mountains. It's also arguably Spain's most fascinating corner.

The capital of the fiercely independent Basque Country, Bilbao was once an industrial metropolis of smoking chimneys and howling factories until a devastating flood in 1983 forced the city to rethink itself. Fast forward 40 years and the reinvented city is a nirvana of food and art, the pièce de résistance being Frank Gehry's iconic Guggenheim Museum.

The Guggenheim unfurls like a radiant golden flower and is *Seo Cloud Spirit's* first onshore excursion. It's an inspired choice to begin our journey, though my mind constantly drifts to the ship waiting quietly to depart. I've never been on a cruise before and have always been a little dismissive of them, perhaps owing to some free-spirited travel habits.

Flanking a lonely harbour arm at Bilbao's vast Gexco port, *Seo Cloud Spirit* looks nothing like the other ships docked

A bright white three-masted windjammer with a sleek gold-accented bow, its elegance is arresting and looks like it may have once ferried around Roaring Twenties-era glitterati. But appearances can be deceiving. Only constructed in 2021, *Seo Cloud Spirit* is essentially a larger modern version of the original *Seo Cloud*, an elaborate private yacht launched in 2001 by Marjorie Meriweather Post, once the wealthiest woman in the United States.

With space for around 120 passengers, its four decks are a blur of brass and mahogany and are manned by an 85-strong international crew hailing from Denmark, Canada, South Africa, the Philippines and beyond. There's a bottle of champagne sitting inside an ice bucket in my splendid cabin, its fresh condensation trails slowly tapering down the glass. I pop the cork on my personal balcony, feeling faintly ridiculous. Engine and bridge tours are on the itinerary, as well as a host of well-heeled dinner receptions. There's also a spa, gym, library and a lounge with



a Steinway Grand Piano, where onboard lecturers host talks and tastings revolving around our upcoming destinations.

This six-day jaunt takes us along Spain's Cantabrian Sea before lurching south around Galicia and into Portugal, stopping at Gijón, A Coruña and Vigo and finishing in Porto.

Night falls and the ship's diesel engines gently power up, slipping us out of Gijón and into the warm Atlantic evening. My balcony softly rocks from bow to stern, and a soapy wake forms as the boat pierces the ink-black sea below. Distant lights flicker from the shore like flames around an altar and my first cruise is underway.

The next day, *Sea Cloud Spirit* glides into Gijón's industrial port like a ballerina dancing into a Brooklyn dive bar. Gijón is the largest city in the Asturias region and, five miles from the gloomy port, its charming old town fans out around a mast-strewn harbour. Glasses clink around jovial tables while a man plays an



OPPOSITE PAGE FROM THE TOP: The *Cluggemarin*. The crew of the ship climbing to open the coils (one of the duties of the ship).

RIGHT FROM THE TOP: Gijón seaport. Sea Cloud Spirit in Gijón. One of the officers in the bridge.

organ on the Plaza del Marques, behind which is a warden of narrow streets. But it's on the Parque Santa Catalina's wind-blasted headland where I see why they call this northern strip of Spain the Costa Verde ('Green Coast'). Clutching my hat in strong gusts, the ragged hills north of San Lorenzo beach could be Cornwall or Normandy. I take refuge inside Casa Oscar, a traditional Asturian sidrería where drinking anything other than cider would be sacrilege. Faded photos line the yellowing walls and, at a cramped table, a metallic contraption holding a green cider bottle upside down is placed in front of me. Angle your glass below and push the button to pour. It's low-key theatrical, but wonderfully quirky. No English is spoken here, which only makes me like it more.

There are no cider machines back on Seo Cloud Spirit, and I'm ok with that. Instead, I take a stool at the Lido bar and order a beer from bar manager Anton.



**I SEE WHY
THEY CALL THIS
NORTHERN STRIP
OF SPAIN THE
COSTA VERDE
(‘GREEN COAST’)**





Compos, an affable Filipino who's been with the company for over 25 years.

"I started on the old *Sea Cloud* – the 'old lady' – and then *Sea Cloud 2*, and now I'm here," he says, handing me a glass. "It's like a family. When you come back you see the same people on board. It's very important."

Anton has had a front-row seat on this extraordinary trio of ships for a generation and he can see why the re-bookings keep coming. "Some of the guests I've known for many years," he tells me. "Some I met 18 years ago, and now they return with two grown children."

Thus far, the sails have been curled up around the skeletal masts, but the following morning they're in full bloom. It's mesmerising watching the cat-like crew shimmy up the rigging to alarming heights and slowly unfurl all 32 sails. From the angular jib sails above the bow to the high



LEFT FROM THE TOP:
The hill north of San Lorenzo beach. The view from the top of the hill. A sculpture on top of the hill.

RIGHT FROM THE TOP:
The main outdoor deck and bar on *Sea Cloud Spirit*. Anton Compos.



FROM HERE I CAN
 APPRECIATE EVERY
 CONTOUR, EVERY
 ROCKY PROMONTORY,
 EVERY FLASH OF
 WILDLIFE



mizzen mast above the stern. *Sea Cloud Spirit* quickly becomes complete.

With the sails out and the wind in our favour, Captain Vukota Stojanovic cuts the engines. The silence is glorious. Only the mellifluous ruffle of the sails after a gust and the gentle waves lapping below penetrate the calm. The captain explains that he can pass closer to the coast when sailing with wind, saving around 30 miles while offering better views of the land. *Sea Cloud Spirit* looks like it could have been sailing 100 years ago, but this is the moment it feels like we're sailing in another time period.

It's also around now that I begin to appreciate how little of a hurry we're in, that seductive, transitory element of a cruise that goes beyond any frivolous, luxurious furnishings. From an aircraft window, the views are fleeting, but from here I can appreciate every contour, every rocky promontory, every flash of wildlife. As someone in a perpetual rush, it's somewhat liberating.

Overnight we slip quietly beyond Asturias and into the orbit of Galicia, Spain's westernmost region. A Coruña's port is far more integrated into the city than Gijón's and though we ease into the city before 8am, a scattering of people stop, gawp and grab photos of *Sea Cloud Spirit*.

This is one of Spain's rainiest cities but there's a soft light over the harbour this morning and we exit to take an excursion 37 miles south to the pilgrimage town of Santiago de Compostela. One hour later our coach is passing backpack-straddling hikers with regularity as we wind our way through the city's leafy suburbs.

The Camino de Santiago (in English, the "Way of St. James") is the famous Christian pilgrimage route that originated in the Middle Ages but has only taken on modern popularity since the 1980s. In the '70s, a mere handful of travellers made the grueling 500-mile journey from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port on the French border to Santiago de Compostela, but now over 400,000 pilgrims make the trek every year.

The ornate Santiago de Compostela Cathedral is the Camino's terminus and as we walk into the widescreen Plaza do Obradoiro we're greeted by an eccentric scene. Soundtracked by a relentless bagpipe player, multicoloured backpacks and skinny trekking poles are scattered across the square and every pilgrim group seems to be in a different state of reverie. Some look tired and lie down staring at the cathedral in contemplation, while others take ecstatic selfies and whoop and holler and hug. There's chanting and dancing, and a general heartwarming exuberance.

The city itself is pretty but also a



**OPPOSITE PAGE
CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT:**
Captain Vukob
Stojanovic. Crew
opening the sails. Crew
bring sail ropes on the
deck. Sea Cloud Spirit
with all the sails open.

THIS PAGE:
A Coruña waterfront.
Plaza María Filipa in
A Coruña Old Town.

tourist-heavy slog. It's something of a relief to return to *Sea Cloud Spirit* as the afternoon heat cranks up.

"I love that the ship is authentic and that people come for the real maritime experience," says Nils Lachner, a gregarious freelance sommelier and lecturer from Germany who joins the ship frequently throughout the season. "I feel that a lot of people who choose to go on a sailing ship usually have a story themselves, and they're really interested, which makes it easy for us lecturers."

We chat on the sun-drenched Lido deck while gliding into Vigo, Galicia's largest city and where *Sea Cloud Spirit* was built three years previously. Later this evening, Nils is leading an outdoor tasting session here on Portuguese wine.

"To me, it's important to teach every person something they didn't know before," he says. "And to show them

regional specialties, like there's a special way to pour a Basque wine. So the coolest thing is to show them on the ship and then the next day they step off, go to a local wine bar and see it poured exactly the same way. That's authentic cultural heritage they're seeing."

Nils' wine lectures are entertaining affairs. Multilingual and often involving audience participation (to my self-conscious horror, I was hauled up in front of the class during one), they're also informative while fostering a convivial atmosphere between multinational guests.

Vigo sits barely 17 miles north of the Portuguese border and is sheltered by the high green hills fringing the Ría de Vigo estuary. With such hefty natural infrastructure, it's little surprise that it is

Spain's largest port.

The city centre is a hilly web of tight streets, which brings merciful coverings of shade on this 30+ degree day. But with the 17th-century hilltop Fortress of El Castro being Vigo's main sight, the sun is inescapable. The site of several battles against British, Dutch and French forces, the fortress is a local symbol of pride showcasing some of Europe's most widescreen views from its 460ft-high summit. The entire region seems to unfold from the port's hulking cranes in the east to distant Cies Islands to the west. It's astonishing and Vigo is worth a visit just for this.

We leave the city under a blanket of shimmering stars but awake the following morning to a ghostly fog. Horns are





sounded at regular intervals to make other ships aware of our presence while a milky sun tries its hardest to push through the haze. My phone can't find signal but finally flickers into life as we roll into a mist-shrouded Porto, the final stop.

Shafts of light form over the murky barrels inside Niepoort Cellars, highlighting spindly cobwebs and scratched numbers. This famous old port house began in 1842 but its musky warehouse dates from 1837 and looks (and smells) virtually unchanged. Porto's Vila Nova de Gaia waterfront is lined by busy tourist-friendly port cellars, but Niepoort is different and visiting is another privilege of travelling with *Sea-Cloud Spirit*.

"We only do tours by appointment as we don't want to lose the essence or soul of this place," explains Marcela Lebl, Niepoort's tourism coordinator. "It means a lot to us."

The tasting cellar is like a mini-

medieval banquet hall, with its tiled arch, suit of armour and expertly carved wooden chairs. The genial tasting gets progressively more spectacular, as an easy-going 2022 ruby port gives way to intense 20- and 30-year-old tawnies. Bottlings from 1968 and 1948 are the extraordinary crescendo, and I stumble out into the golden light of a Porto sunset, with the Dom Luis I Bridge looking resplendent.

Tomorrow a new set of passengers fill up *Sea-Cloud Spirit* and sail for Portugal's remote Azores islands. And yes, I desperately wish I could join them.

OPPOSITE PAGE
CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT:
Marcelo Leite
Niepoort Cellars
A view across Vila

THIS PAGE
FROM TOP LEFT:
Alo Lachner, *Sea-Cloud Spirit*, fortress of El Castelo

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

London Gatwick, Manchester and Bristol all offer direct flights to Bilbao, taking just over two hours. Getxo Cruise Port is around a 20-minute taxi from central Bilbao and 60 minutes by metro.

GETTING AROUND

Each cruise stop offers around four to five hours of exploring in the respective destinations, with the possibility of guided excursions at an extra cost (you'll ideally need to choose these before the boat departs).

BEST TIME TO GO

Northern Spain's unpredictable Atlantic-facing climate means summer is the best time to travel – especially if you want to enjoy *Sea-Cloud Spirit*'s languid sun deck.

WHERE TO EAT

Sea-Cloud Spirit's onboard meals are magnificent but do make the most of the port stops as this part of the Iberian Peninsula is home to some iconic dishes. Sample pintos in Bilbao, cider and tortilla in Gijón and port and pastel de nata in Porto.

WHERE TO STAY

Even the starting cabins on *Sea-Cloud Spirit* are immaculate, though for this journey it's best to select one on the port (left) side of the ship: it's land-facing most of the way and you'll enjoy some fine views.

FURTHER INFORMATION

seacloud.com