

It's just plain sailing when high seas with the super

PAUL HARRIS sails the Caribbean in style, on a cruise with a difference

FROM a distance, looming large against the sky, *Sea Cloud Spirit* looks magnificent, even sans raised sails, resembling a gigantic tree in winter devoid of foliage.

I'm in Willemstad, Curacao, preparing to embark on a cruise with a difference, I'm assured.

Previous experiences on the high seas had tended to be either of the Crystal Serenity ilk or the middle market Star Clippers.

If either of those are your preference, *Sea Cloud Spirit* is not for you.

Initially, when asked to review the ship, I approached my son and asked if he fancied joining me on a cruise.

He was reluctant, feeling that fellow passengers would all be in their dotage and that the entire experience would be too staid.

How wrong he was eventually proved to be!

Obvious this is not your usual cruise

From embarkation, it soon becomes obvious that this is not your usual cruise.

There is an immediate connection with crew members — of whom there are 85, looking after 136 passengers.

For regulars on the giant liners, where passengers can number four figures, establishing relationships with the crew is more than likely to extend to little more than a nodding acquaintance or some polite exchanges.



AL FRESCO: Lunch is served on the Lido deck



POWERFUL: Sea Cloud Spirit in all her glory sailing under windpower

On *Sea Cloud Spirit*, it's very different. At all levels, the staff are encouraged to fraternise with passengers without becoming intrusive — it's the passengers' choice, but most seem delighted to pass the time of day (or night) chatting.

Montenegro-born Captain Vukota Stujanovic, 38, the youngest person to hold that position in the history of Sea Cloud, describes the experience on his ship as "informal luxury" — and that was my conclusion.

There is an informality that differs from luxury cruise liners, where diners might feel somewhat out of place if they didn't dress for dinner.

Smart casual is the order of the day, although some prefer to be

suitably suited and booted.

Captain Stujanovic explained also that because of its size, *Sea Cloud Spirit* can sail where larger ships cannot.

Nevertheless, it's 452-feet long, and at 5,431 tonnes, the world's largest passenger sailing vessel on which the sails are raised by hand and the first to boast a lift.

Nearly four years into the job, Captain Stujanovic added that

'It's a challenge running this ship'

being in charge of a three-masted windjammer, as this type of vessel is known, carries considerable responsibility.

"It's a challenge running this ship," he told me. "It's not like other big ships, where every officer can do manoeuvres.

"It's still old school navigation — and new navigation."

We soon see what he means. After setting sail from Willemstad, *Sea Cloud Spirit* progresses to its first port of call, Aruba, under its own windpower.

And what a sight to behold. Captain Stujanovic first announced, "Let's set the sails!" as he cut off the engines, all the time ensuring that the angle of the ship is right for his 18 deck-hands to climb the vertiginous masts and unfurl the 44,132 square feet of sails by hand.

Like something more akin to a circus big top, the crew scurry

The effort required must surely mean that none of the crew ever needs to see the inside of a gym.

Three-mast vessels have been built since the 15th century.

The fitter among the passengers were given the opportunity to prove their capability to climb the masts.

Those who passed muster — and it really is the fittest — got to emulate the crew's manoeuvres, albeit they make it look so easy, which patently it's not.

Sea Cloud Spirit is the youngest of the Sea Cloud Cruises fleet, built in 2020 and having made its maiden voyage in 2021.

For marine anoraks, she is the largest sailing ship in the world, weighs 5,431 tonnes and measures 138 metres in length.

As mentioned previously, if you're looking for a cruise with a vast theatre and lavish nightly entertainment, *Sea Cloud Spirit* is

Vast tuna like a prehistoric monster

not for you.

There's a lounge with a Steinway piano, where a musician sometimes entertains in the evening.

There is also an elegant well-stocked library, providing a quiet, air-conditioned relaxing spot.

I've left arguably the best till last . . . the cuisine onboard.

Starting with breakfast, a leisurely affair complete with very decent Champagne and Bloody Marys.

Lunch is always served al fresco in the Lido Restaurant where dinner is also served.

The former is an informal affair, always accompanied by at least two good wines.



COMFORT: The author's superbly appointed cabin on Sea Cloud Spirit

you take to the Sea Cloud Spirit



MUSCLE POWER: The vast effort required to raise the sails

Dinner is invariably a barbecue — but what a barbecue. There is always plentiful fish, but on one evening a vast tuna, resembling some prehistoric creature, such as its size, was the fish of the day, cooked to perfection in full view of diners.

Again, limitless quality wines accompany dinner.

On one night, there was a gala dinner at the indoor restaurant —

Take the plunge into the sea on a slide

a rather smarter affair with premium wines. Other evening meals are also sometimes served there in a more formal setting.

The general informality of *Sea Cloud Spirit* though means that passengers table-hop at mealtimes, offering the opportunity

dinner, particularly, guests congregate round the rather well-stocked bar on the Lido deck, more than happy to engage with each other and with the extremely personable bar staff whose mixology expertise is all too evident.

For some, a drawback might be the lack of a swimming pool, but this is well compensated for by the vast deck space for relaxing and the chance sometimes to take the plunge in the sea via an inflatable slide in clearly defined areas off the swimming deck when the ship is anchored.

For the more energetic, there is also a well-equipped fitness room and a spa complete with sauna and steam room in which to relax.

There are daily fitness activities, including walking on deck, yoga, pilates and meditation.

Our cabin was spacious. Like all 69 others, it had its own balcony and a king-size bed that could be divided into two singles.

Our well-appointed bathroom had a deep tub and integral shower. Service and housekeeping were both impeccable.

When sailing was not possible under windpower, *Sea Cloud Spirit* has two diesel-electric engines that run on low-sulphur marine diesel fuel and it is strange becoming aware of the engines after the lulling sensation of windpower.

There were excursions to the various ports of call, including initially in Willemstad, Oranjestad, Aruba and Cartagena, Panama before terminating in Colon, Panama, although we opted to make our own arrangements, which included an extensive walk around Willemstad, a visit to the wonderful butterfly farm in Aruba and cycling round Cartagena.

Most passengers though seemed to take advantage of the excursions which can be booked onboard.

And as a footnote . . . *Sea Cloud Spirit* is one ship on which the wifi actually works consistently — and well!

■ To book future cruises or for further information, visit seacloud.com/en/cruise-search



IN COMMAND: Captain Vukota Stujanovic on the bridge



Rabbi Refoel is spreading the word in Curacao

BEFORE sailing from Willemstad, I took the opportunity to visit the attractive Chabad-run Shaarei Tsedek Synagogue.

Heading it since 2017 is its first permanent minister, Belgian-born Rabbi Refoel Silver who, although Curacao-based, oversees the nearby islands, too, spreading Judaism, and distributing mezzuzot and books.

Sephardim first arrived on the island in the mid-17th century, although Shaarei Tsedek is actually Ashkenazi.

Some 220 Jews identify with the religion, but many have married out.

Friday nights see a congregation of around 15 to 20, but that can reach as many as 60 on a Shabbat morning, or 80 over the High Holydays.

Depending upon the number of tourists, there can even be a daily minyan.

In January, the congregation was thrilled to celebrate the barmitzva of a boy whose father wasn't Jewish — a particularly happy outcome for Rabbi Silver since the family began to identify more.

He keeps nine freezers full of kosher food to enable him to supply the community, which he insists will grow.

"I've discovered Jews who were born and living here," he told me. One, a 66-year-old son of a Holocaust survivor had never been barmitzva.

Rabbi Silver also reflects his pride in having entertained some 5,000 tourists in his own home since arriving in Curacao.

There was also the opportunity to visit the Jewish museum, which is part of the historic Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Synagogue complex in



RABBI Refoel Silver and the beautifully dressed Sifrei Torah in his synagogue

Willemstad the oldest shul in the Americas.

Its beautifully carved mahogany interior and brass chandeliers were shipped from Amsterdam before 1732.

It features interactive exhibits, curated collections, and restored 17th-century buildings that bring Curaçao's Jewish story to life.

Our guide, Harlan Cohen, recalled how former Manchester Reform Synagogue minister Rabbi Reuven Silverman had actually studied in Curacao in his youth.

The first Jew to arrive in Curacao in 1634 was Samuel Coheno (Cohen), an interpreter for the Dutch West India Company.

And behind Landhuis Chobolobo, the Curacao Liqueur Distillery is a fascinating story.

The famous local orange liqueur was the brainchild of Amsterdam-born Mordechai Senior, who discovered that he could use the dried peel of inedible bitter oranges planted years earlier by Spanish settlers.

Scharloo is a former residential district lined with colourful, stately buildings, formerly the homes of Curaçao's wealthy Jewish merchants in the 1800s.

Today it is a rainbow of pastels. Notable is the Wedding Cake House, a wedding gift to a Jewish bride.



INTERIOR of the Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue in Willemstad