

TRAVEL



Edited by Mal Rogers

The Mediterranean at three knots

Classical trios replace karaoke, cadets climb the shrouds, and you soon discover that slow travel is the finest luxury. **MAL ROGERS** reports from the port side of the Sea Cloud Spirit



The sundeck

NO KARAOKE on board the Sea Cloud Spirit, a three-masted windjammer plying the Mediterranean. Instead, while you're enjoying your champagne and strawberries (as good as it sounds) what you can expect, live, is a classical trio playing a selection of airs and arias from Schumann, Rossini, Verdi and of course Puccini.

After all, Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Tuscany. The town overlooks the Gulf of Genoa where our ship was lying at anchor. Its sails were furled, and the waters of the Ligurian Sea lapped the hull. All that broke the silence was the sound of the soprano, violin and piano wafting over the waves.

Yeah, no karaoke. To be honest

there are few diversions aboard the ship, although the occasional local act does come aboard to give an evening recital. But what the ship does offer is an undisturbed cruise under full sail, heading along at a stately two-and-a-half to three knots speed. Even with a fair wind, the ship would struggle to reach more than 10 knots. But all the better for that.

The crew also provide some entertainment for the passengers, and one evening regaled us with sea shanties. Plenty of "heave aways" and "haul aways" and the one that finished "...and we're bound for Valparaiso round the Horn".

But of course we weren't going near the treacherous Cape Horn; we were bound for St Tropez via

Portofino and Viareggio. The windjammer is built so that it can access harbours that the large cruise behemoths can't get near. And instead of grog and hard tack as per the sea shanty Heave Away, My Johnnies, (no. 3 in the crew's repertoire), we were sipping glasses of an elegant white wine, Sicilia bianco D.O.C. La Segreta, produced by the Planeta family winery.

Fine wine (a great deal of it local and dangerously drinkable), along with unapologetically top-drawer cuisine, are among the cruise's truly persuasive selling points. Each lunchtime, out on the open Lido Deck, an array of wines appeared as if by magic — all included in the cost of your voyage, though, as you might

imagine, magic of this calibre doesn't come cheap.

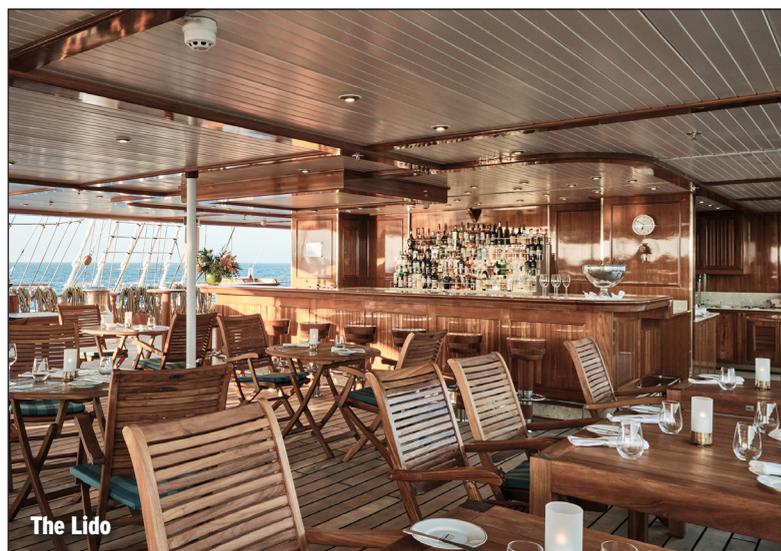
There was drama at the grill station to rival the lure of the vine. The buffet lunches might offer whole tunas served seared or sashimi-style. Or high-quality meat drenched in syrups and farm-fresh fats fetched from the farms on the coast. A full panoply of accompaniments completed this work of art. I grew particularly fond of the fresh truffle shaved over cheese-sprinkled handmade pasta.

AFTER lunch, as the sun began its journey towards the horizon, snacks were available: huitres à la Mignonette (marinated oysters) maybe with a few grilled pineapples.

But not too many, mind. Dinner is served at around seven, in the elegant dining room on the lower deck.

I mean: Noix de Saint-Jacques poêlées, purée de topinambour et écume de champagne (scallops, artichokes, champagne). Or a centrepiece worthy of a grand salon — tender beef, reduced Bordelaise sauce, and thinly layered vegetables baked to caramelised perfection. Come on; you don't want to spoil that because of stuffing your face with oysters in the middle of the afternoon... on the other hand, they were done to perfection...

The on-board sommelier Nils Lackner is from the island of Sylt off the coast of northern Germany. He reckoned the Frisian spoken there



The Lido



Cocktail time



Nautical but nice - one of the passengers relaxes on the starboard balcony

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TRAVEL



The grill station



Room with a sea view

was the closest European language to English, and he could be right. Terrific wine? Translates as "Dit is in trefflike wyn." The craic was ninety? "De grap wie njoggentich." I mean, I could pick that up in a couple of weeks.

As well as linguistics, Nils knew his grapes. He said the most expensive wine on board was probably an Australian number retailing

at €750 (not included in the cost of your voyage). To be fair, most of the bottles of wine served to us were in the €40 to €50 mark (which are included).

Nils also conducts tours of local wineries on the Mediterranean cruises. At St Tropez you could go on a group trip to the Domaine Fondugues Pradugues, but I declined. Because the thing you can depend on for diversion on the Sea Cloud, greatly helped by the copious quantities of wine, is conversation. Out of our 90 or so passengers, a good proportion were German — the ship and its owners are from Hamburg, the crew of diverse seafaring nationalities.

The next cohort was a large contingent of Americans, followed by

one Irish citizen (me), one Welsh person, and two French ladies who were in the travel business. Conversation rarely, if ever, faltered. One of the French ladies, Ségolène, enjoyed a café corretto most afternoons. The few drops of brandy or liqueur added to the coffee were called in French "teardrops" — "larmes en gouttes". That's an elegant sweep of language.

A few souls on board were there to study and admire the sailing and the sails, and there was certainly much to absorb.

From an incumbent position on a deck-chair I found myself chatting with Rick from Boulder, Colorado.

"That's the yards being braced," he said and I watched spellbound as about twenty ratings climbed the shrouds (the ratlines) scaling the three masts in perfect synch, up to the dizzying 189ft off the main mast.

Many of the crew — German, Filipino, Polish and Italian — are cadets from an international maritime academy, and this manoeuvre forms part of their practical sail-training.

Rick again: "Yeah, the mainsails are being set — look: they're easing the

shrouds out to bring the yards round, then they'll sheet home the" *something about a lower painting strap, maybe* "and the [*something something belaying thing*] See: the upper topsail is starting to billow? Once that fills, they'll unfurl the topgallant..."

I sort of tuned out at the upper topgallant sail, took another sip of my Frescobaldi Leonia Brut Rosé 2016 from Tuscany (I'd moved onto the rosé) and nodded.

One day trip I might have been tempted on was the Giardini Botanici Hanbury, formal gardens. More than 150 years of hoeing and digging, sowing and nourishing has resulted in 6,000 plant species growing in the Mediterranean sunshine. Enough to bewitch any botanist. Perched above the coast west of Menton, the Gardens are a lush 45-acre horticultural paradise created in 1867 by Englishman Sir Thomas Hanbury. Exotic plants from five continents thrive in terraces overlooking the sea — rare palms, perfumed citrus groves, South African proteas. That kind of thing.

But I cried off, realising that sitting on the Lido deck would probably be

even more tranquil than an Italian formal garden. "Anyway," I said to Rick from Colorado, "I'm going to Mount Stewart when I get back to Ireland."

Rick: "And he's OK with that?"

I LOVED those afternoons on the Lido Deck. You could chat with the other passengers, or lie in a quiet corner and write poetry, although to be honest I only managed a couple of lines (of poetry). Entertainment, apart from visiting troubadours, is restricted to a single pianist. He did play The Fields of Athenry when he heard my nationality. I told him to cut it out.

There are no 'toys' — no jet skis, no water skis, no speedboats. But on occasion the ship will anchor up and you're allowed to swim in the sea.

I spent a little time on the bridge, hearing about how green was our ship (very) as it happens, and how computerised sails are even now being deployed on cargo ships.

OK full disclosure — we did have engines. If we found ourselves totally becalmed, "a painted ship upon a painted ocean" as per Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, where the sea is so

flat that it seems static, then motorised help was at hand. The low-sulphur marine diesel — with minimal harmful emissions — can be started up.

Plastic is avoided (for example via reusable drinking bottles), and freshwater consumption is reduced through efficient systems.

So for once on a cruise you can just about find yourself on the right side of history.

Travel details

Seven-night Mediterranean sailings aboard the Sea Cloud Spirit start from around £5,000-£7,000 per person, depending on season and cabin category, including meals and drinks (mostly) inclusive
For itineraries and dates: www.seacloud.com

MAL ROGERS travelled as a guest of Sea Cloud Cruises
Flights arranged in partnership with British Airways



Street food and a friendly wave in old Napoli



Full speed ahead! (2mph) Heading for Corsica