

A leap into the
RECURB

FROM DESERTED SHORES TO VOLCANIC SUMMITS, ROWING IN THE RAINFOREST TO CLIMBING THE RIG; THIS ISN'T YOUR USUAL CARIBBEAN CRUISE. FIRST-TIMER **ANTONIA WILSON** BOARDS **SEA CLOUD II** FOR AN INTIMATE TALL SHIP ADVENTURE





Standing at the edge of the deck, the world slows to a sigh as I peer down into the sea, sunlight fracturing across the surface. It's a hypnotic, infinite, deep ultramarine blue – like the colour artist Yves Klein dreamed into existence. For a moment, the world slips away. I stand there, teetering between air and water, lost in the colour – before pinching my nose and jumping in for a swim.

It's my first time on a cruise ship, and my first time in the Caribbean Sea. And this is no floating city. It's a tall ship: the Sea Cloud II, all glossy wood and billowing white sails, carrying a maximum of just 94 guests (and 65 crew) around the Lesser Antilles for a week. It's small enough to feel the movement of the ocean, to walk the perimeter in minutes. Yet, I'm not a boat person, and life on board has a dreamlike quality, as if time is gently loosened from its usual grip.

Some days, we drift. "This is not your typical trade wind in the Caribbean today," Captain Kathryn Whittaker says. At this time of year, December through to April, the easterly winds should reliably clock in at 15 to 20 knots, she says. "But we're moving at about one and a half knots, and that's mostly the current, not the wind."

Climate change has made even these famously dependable waters less predictable, she adds. Other days, the wind picks up, from a whisper of one knot to a lively 14. Still, she reassures us, this is one of the safest sailing areas in the world: deep waters, wide passages, abundant sunshine. "The only problem we have with ice here," she grins, "is that it melts too fast in your glass."

I'd come prepared, having stocked up on every brand of anti-seasickness remedy available, just in case. But they aren't needed. Sea Cloud II is small enough (117 metres long) to move with the swell, and I can feel it at times, particularly in the early hours of the first night, when the ocean makes its presence known around 5am. But there's something soothing about it eventually, albeit a gentle reminder that you're very much out at sea.

On a windier day – though still warm enough to sunbathe on the wooden loungers on the deck, champagne in hand, – we watch as the sails are set. It isn't like a choreographed dance, as the cliché goes. It's more like being backstage: watching the set change, the backdrop shift, the crew working with calm efficiency, officers relaying commands.

There are 23 sails of 2,700 square metres in total – the largest weighing half a tonne – hoisted up masts

Left: It's not only the crew that climb the rigging – guests have the opportunity to don a harness and make the ascent

Right: This trip was the first time all 23 sails had been set together



that stretch 56 metres into the sky. The lines alone run to about 10km, with another 7km of steel wire, each with a different function and name. The whole process takes about an hour, some tasks by hand, others by motorised winches, all interconnected through chains, rollers, traps and channels. Once the sails are up, the main engine is switched off, leaving only the auxiliary running for electricity.

It's systematic, precise and quietly elegant. As the first officer explains the process – from the flying jib, to the main topgallant and the mizzen spanker boom – it doesn't matter that I don't understand every term. It's a bit like tuning into the shipping forecast on BBC Radio 4: poetic and soothing.

Later in the trip, we have the chance to don a safety harness and climb the rigging to the first crow's nest (about 14 metres up), for a unique view of the boat.

A tour of the bridge (also known as the command deck) offers a glimpse into the ship's inner life. Navigation onboard straddles centuries. "We still use paper charts," the officer of the watch (OOW) tells us, gesturing to several enormous maps spread across one side, routes carefully plotted and corrected by hand. Wind speeds, distances, conditions and operations are logged meticulously in a separate book, he adds. Electronic charts, updated with a couple of clicks and showing nearby ships via AI systems, are increasingly dominant – though they, too, are only as reliable as the humans who programme them. →

“Radar is the most trustworthy tool of all,” he says, which uses echo to show what’s above the water. Smaller objects aren’t visible until they float past. Maritime law still dictates that whatever you find at sea, you may keep – though they rarely spot treasure, he winks.

The deepest part of the Atlantic, crossed annually by the ship on its journey to Europe for the summer months, is about 8 kilometres. Here in the Caribbean, it’s closer to 3,000 metres – still more than enough to inspire awe at the sheer vastness and power of the sea.

The ship uses high-frequency radios, satellite connections for weather warnings and distress signals, GPS systems, and instruments now rarely used, like a beautifully antiquated brass sextant for measuring angles. A periscope can be pulled down to take readings from the magnetic compass above the bridge (too low down, and the ship’s metal would confuse it).

“Steering is on autopilot, but we keep an eye on it and can move to hand steering by joystick or wheel, which is hydraulic,” the OOW says. “The one that actually moves the rudder is in the crew area for emergencies and takes two or three people to manually steer.”

At night, the OOW relies on a “dead man’s alarm”. Every 12 minutes it sounds; if the button isn’t pressed within 12 seconds, the captain is alerted. Another 12 seconds, the crew. Another 12, the entire ship. It’s reassuring, in its own way.

Courtesy flags flutter from the mast – hoisted for each country or territory visited. Forget to fly one in some places, we’re told, and the police or the army may pay the ship a visit. Signal flags spell out messages too: Alpha means a diver is in the water; Bravo, dangerous cargo; Quebec declares a ship healthy and requesting safe passage – a legacy sharpened during Covid. Lights signal everything from vessel size to hazardous materials, while a small sign reading “Man in Fridge” marks an alarm button from inside the cold store, just in case.



Clockwise from left: Tet Paul Nature Trail offers views of both Petit Piton and Gros Piton, two volcanic “plugs” on St Lucia; courtesy flags; the ship’s bridge; a junior suite with bath, shower and walk-in wardrobe

IMAGES: (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) CAVAN – STOCK.ADOBE.COM; ANTONIA WILSON; SEACLOUD II.

On land, the Caribbean reveals itself in vivid fragments. On Saint Lucia, the Tet Paul Nature Trail winds gently uphill past peanut trees, fragrant herbs and tiny pink pineapple plants. Twenty minutes later, the reward is a sweeping view of the Pitons and a cold Piton beer, sipped from a hammock. Back on Sugar Beach, we laze on loungers looking up at the same view but now from between the twin volcanic peaks. Blaze, the charismatic owner of a floating bar on a boat, serves us frozen mango daiquiris and fresh coconuts.

Dominica feels wilder still. A local guide rows us upriver through warm cinematic rain, jungle pressing close on all sides, until we reach a tiny rum shack hidden among the trees. Known as the “Nature Island”, it’s easy to see why scenes from *Pirates of the Caribbean* were filmed here. The island’s mountainous interior is accessible only on foot, while the east coast is home to about 3,000 Kalinago people – the last surviving indigenous community in the Caribbean – who help protect its forests.

In St Barts, we skip the designer boutiques and head straight for Shell Beach, where crushed pink shells carpet the shore. We wander through town, past brightly painted houses and churches, sipping iced coffee in the sun. Union Island, still scarred by a devastating hurricane in 2024, remains achingly beautiful; a new jetty and restaurant provide a hopeful backdrop for lunch, accompanied by a steel band.

And then there’s Petit Bateau, one of the uninhabited islands of the Tobago Cays. White sand, perfect palms, nothing else. I’d happily be shipwrecked here. Nearby, a catamaran takes us snorkelling among turtles, rays and little shoals of brightly coloured fish.

Each year the Sea Cloud II routes change slightly, but the atmosphere remains intimate. Our fellow passengers are a mix of Austrian, American, German and British travellers and span generations, with several 30-somethings travelling alongside parents.

Back on board, indulgence is effortless. Cabins are quietly luxurious, with marble bathrooms and solid wood furniture. Food is abundant and beautifully presented, often prepared fresh on deck. Lunch might mean pasta stations, salads and barbecues; afternoon tea brings delicate cakes; evenings end with a generous cheese table. One day, a whole tuna is sliced into sashimi. Another evening, Caribbean-inspired dishes dominate.

On the final morning, I return to the edge, looking down into that same deep blue that first stopped me in my tracks – a colour Klein believed could dissolve time. And somewhere along the way I’d let it. **A**

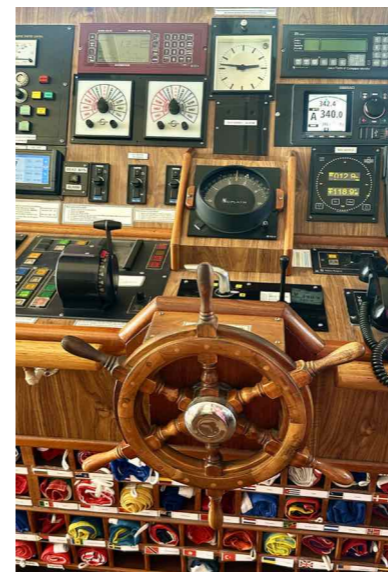
Sun, Sea and Serenity on the Sea Cloud II starts at £6,529pp booked via Elegant Resorts, including flights from London to Saint Martin, UK airport lounge access and private transfers to hotel, and from cruise terminal to airport. elegantresorts.co.uk

SEAS THE DAY

- The best cruise insurance is getting to your island of departure the day before setting sail. We stayed at **Hotel Esmeralda Resort, Saint Martin**, a tranquil, laidback hotel with an incredible beachfront location. Pretty pastel villas in tropical grounds have private pools and sit seconds from the white sands of Orient Bay (from £183 per night, esmeralda-resort.com).
- For pre-flight ease we recommend **Blacklane** for a reliable, ultra-comfortable chauffeured airport transfer (price on request, blacklane.com).
- We had a little celebration at **SMX Festival** on Saint Martin, which takes place across several beaches, 18-22 March. Beautiful light installations are built on the sand, and several small stages host live music and DJs (day tickets £109, sxfestival.com).



Arrival 70



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