Vol. 21 NO 1 WINTER/SPRING 2023

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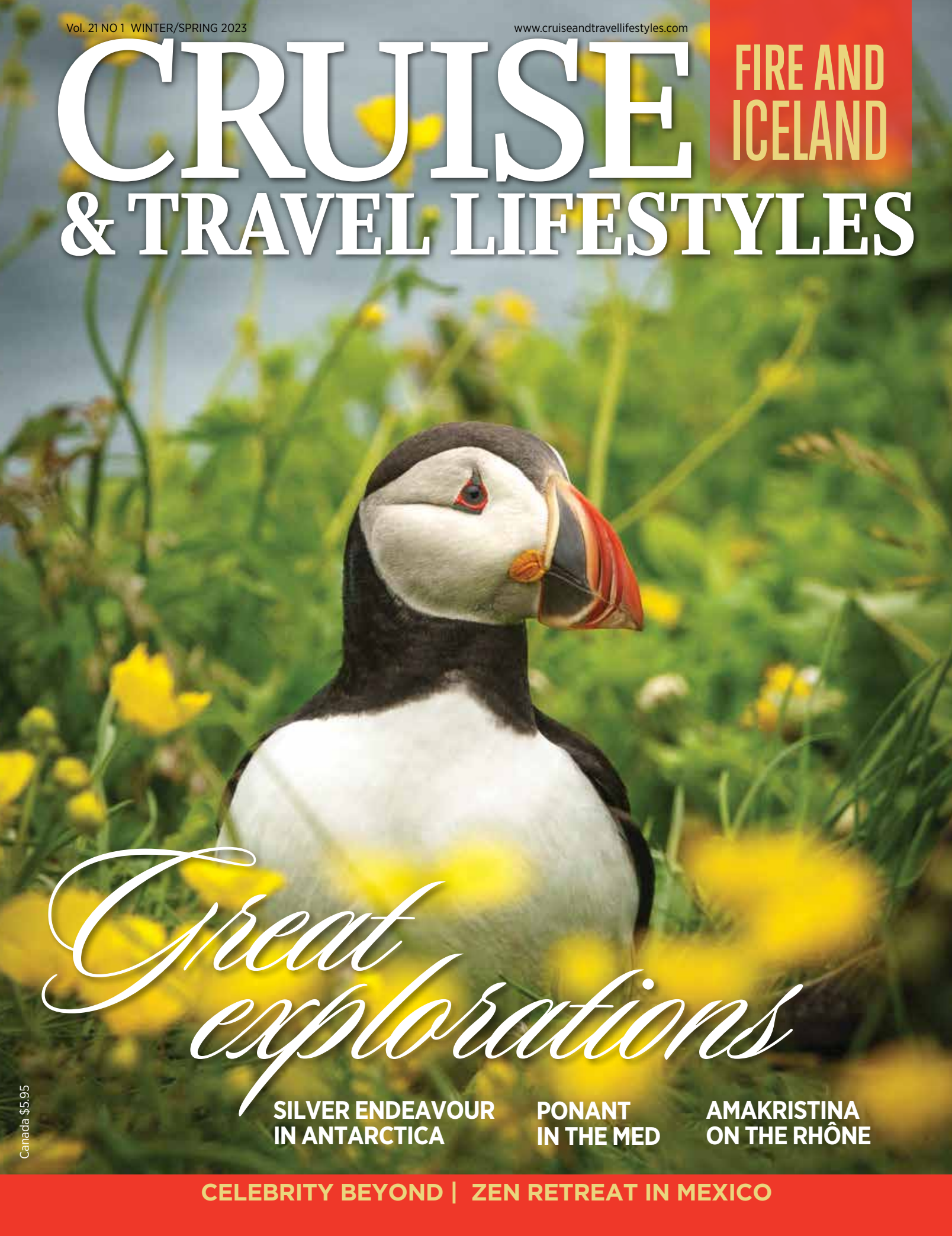
CRUISE & TRAVEL LIFESTYLES

FIRE AND ICELAND



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Anticipating a return to travel

Vanessa Lee on a Caribbean snorkelling excursion with Seabourn Ovation

IN OUR LAST ISSUE, I wrote about life hitting the pause button due to an illness I was undergoing. Thankfully, I am at the end of my treatment, so much so that I can book travel again. And what fun I am having! It's reminding me of how important it is for all of us to get away, recharge and spend quality time with loved ones while also seeing some of the most incredible places in our world. I know all too well how life can send unexpected moments that change our plans, turn us upside down and sideways and bring real challenges.

Anticipation is one of my favourite words, mostly used in the context of travel and cruising but generally... without anticipation in our lives, where would we be? It would be a very dull world indeed without all the feel-good moments that punctuate our lives. Whether it's the expectation of a special event or occasion, a longed-for reunion with loved ones and, particularly – in my world – the joy of boarding a cruise ship to sail away on yet another magical sea-going adventure to places far and wide.

At least half the fun of going on a vacation is the anticipation. And when we return from our trip, we tend to look back at it mainly through rose-coloured glasses. I suspect that's because we want to congratulate ourselves on a well-planned vacation, thoroughly enjoyed.

As we book our vacation, we can bring our holiday plans to life by exploring online or in magazines, at travel events, with our travel advisors, and in glossy brochures. We conjure up days of excitement and picture some of the places we might be heading. Whether it's a land or sea journey or a combination of both, we weave ourselves into these places and become storytellers - and that's a fantastic experience.

There is still a lot of pent-up demand left from the last few years of travel scarcity. It's a big wide world out there, and we need to explore it! Our understanding of other cultures and foreign places will genuinely reflect what we hope and expect to see as we ensure our world continues to thrive.

Bearing in mind, we want to offer you a wide range of articles about a variety of destinations as well as cruises, my team and I are working on some fantastic articles for the next two issues this year – and we are also working on 2024 content. Look for Seabourn Ovation in the Caribbean, Regent Seven Seas in Japan, Variety Cruises in Tahiti, a few articles on Canada including a unique BC Ferries trip, a barge cruise in France, a sailing on Star Clippers, our summer issue chock-full of articles on Europe including Austria and Madeira. There's a 100-guest ocean yacht sailing from Dubrovnik to Rome, Costa Rica, Africa and the inaugurals of several stunning new ships. It's a veritable feast for you.

I hope you can plan more travel for this year and next. Yes, many people are booking their 2024 vacations now, especially to their bucket-list destinations, so don't wait! I have experienced the disappointment of cancelling great, much-anticipated trips that I simply couldn't take, so I'm ready now – more than ready, in fact – and full of...anticipation!

Sincerely,

Vanessa Lee

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features

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The stunning *Celebrity Beyond* made her debut last Fall. She is the third Edge-class ship from Celebrity Cruises and is a striking example of style, flair and elegance at sea. With fantastic entertainment, excellent dining choices and terrific itineraries, this is a ship you must check out.

22 RIVER CRUISING AT ITS FINEST
The *AmaKristina* makes her way along the Rhône river from Provence, France. The itinerary is full of Gallic charm, history, and gastronomic delights, with small villages and wineries abounding. AmaWaterways continues to shine with its range of cruises on Europe's rivers.

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The land of fire and ice, puffins and ponies, is a remarkable destination. In this article, you will read about dramatic landscapes, old churches, lofty peaks, and stunning waterfalls and marvel at our creative director's fabulous photographs.

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Our writer escapes to the sun for a soul-soothing yoga retreat at Mar de Jade on Mexico's pacific coast. She is inspired in many ways, some unexpected, and is delighted with her stay and the restorative calm she experienced.

PHOTO COURTESY SILVERSEA

Cruising Antarctica with Silversea

At breakfast in a swanky hotel in Johannesburg one morning, I noticed a woman whose face was swathed in gauze bandages. Poor thing, I thought, how awful to be on holiday and have a terrible accident.

The hotel manager soon set me straight. That woman was one of many guests who came to South Africa for cosmetic surgery at the world class Christian Barnard Memorial Hospital, then followed their recovery with a week or two on safari. When their vacations were finished, unsuspecting friends and family couldn't get over the wrinkle-banishing, uplifting transformative effects of the safari!

While not all vacation transformations are quite so dramatic, travel does change us. Air Transat, for example, recently launched an entire advertising campaign, highlighting the rejuvenating effects of changing our lives and our surroundings, if only for a few weeks at a time.

Perhaps a week spent on a quiet Caribbean beach might offer the thinking time needed to decide on a career shift or maybe a wellness retreat will encourage cutting back on alcohol and ramping up exercise routines. At the very least, eating something we've not had before can expand our at-home cuisine. Who knew tomatoes, watermelon, feta cheese and balsamic vinegar could be so delicious? The chef at Boston's Fairmont Copley Square did, and he showed me!

While changing personal habits and adding to menu lineups is important, the most significant travel transformations are those that make us see the world in a different way. If we never left our homes, it would be all too easy to become geo-centric and to believe that we have all the answers.

Travel shows that it's possible to approach daily life in very different, but equally valid ways. North Americans, for example, don't typically live with their extended family members but that's certainly not the case in many parts of the world, where grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren and even great grandchildren may all share the same home. Neither system is necessarily right or wrong – just different.

As we explore other countries and meet new people, we see the role that religion and other cultural norms play and while we may not share our hosts' beliefs, we can learn to respect them.

If we're lucky, we may find an opportunity to share our resources or our labour to help make some part of our planet a little healthier for those who live there, and it's important to seize those moments. Such travel transformations make us grateful, not only to be part of something so positive, but also for the lives we live at home and for the way in which travel allows us to appreciate the world in its varied, imperfect, wonderful entirety.

Happy travels,

Liz Fleming

Liz Fleming
Editor-in-Chief

CRUISE & TRAVEL LIFESTYLES

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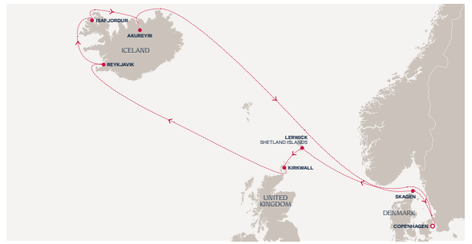

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EMBARKATION	DISEMBARKATION
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EMBARKATION	DISEMBARKATION
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EMBARKATION	DISEMBARKATION
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COURTESY ATLAS OCEAN VOYAGES

Visiting Vintners & Gastronomic Guests – Atlas Ocean Voyages' delicious new offerings

Atlas Ocean Voyages has announced that it will now feature year-round expeditions aboard its 198-guest, luxury yachts. And that's not all! In addition to visiting remote, fascinating polar destinations such as the Arctic and Antarctica, beginning in April 2023 Atlas will offer a lineup of new Epicurean Expeditions to iconic, marquee ports in Europe. Onboard enrichment will feature a Visiting Vintner, who'll offer lectures and/or tastings designed to explain the nuances of regional wines, from an aged Nebbiolo to a Beaujolais nouveau. Every expedition will also include a Gastronomic Guest – who might be a renowned Michelin-starred chef or perhaps a local culinary rock star skilled in the preparation of authentic, regional delicacies. Guests will also participate, along with the ship's executive or sous chef, in the Yachtsman Cookoff – the Atlas version of a culinary "ironman" competition and will take part in complimentary Cultural Immersion shore excursions to sample local delicacies; explore farmer's markets or shop for treats to enjoy back on board.

Explore with Ponant

If you're an adventurer in search of a luxury icebreaker that's well-equipped to explore both poles and a few fascinating spots in between, **Ponant** has the answer. Sailing on state-of-the-art environmentally friendly ships, manned by experienced Expedition teams, Ponant guests experience the excitement of finding themselves in the middle of the Arctic Far North or on the chilling edge of Antarctica, where they watch seabirds swooping and diving from the ship's deck, and feel the breath of a humpback whale swimming past as they splash along on a thrilling Zodiac boat excursion. Perhaps a polar bear will happen to cross their path or maybe they will find themselves surrounded by a flock of curious Emperor penguins on the sea ice. There is almost no limit to the adventures possible and every day is an exciting surprise when you explore the wildest and most remote regions of the globe with Ponant. Whether you explore the rugged fjords and glaciers of Spitsbergen, wander Northeast Greenland's unexplored sea ice, or choose any one of 46 other great itineraries, you'll see the wilderness in ways you'd never thought possible and in a luxurious inclusive onboard lifestyle with a dash of French panache. Traveling alone? In 2023, Ponant is offering free single supplement cruises on many of its Arctic and Antarctic itineraries.

COURTESY PONANT

Immersive and enriching sailings from Seabourn

Launched last year, the **Seabourn Venture** is the first purpose-built expedition vessel for the award-winning luxury cruise line. She will be joined by sister ship, **Seabourn Pursuit** this year and the ships will sail to both poles and many places in between, such as Greenland, Norway and Iceland, offering guests a remarkable experience at sea. Each ship houses 132 luxuriously appointed oceanfront veranda suites for up to 264 guests. There are Zodiacs for exploration, knowledgeable Expedition leaders sharing their expertise ashore and through fascinating lectures in the Discovery Center and amazing wildlife at every turn whether it's penguins, polar bears, seals and whales and of course, amazing icy sea and landscapes all around. A new era of exploration combines exhilarating adventures to the world's most remote destinations with the uncompromising and sophisticated amenities of these remarkable ships.

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Antarctic Peninsula – Photo by Steve McCurry

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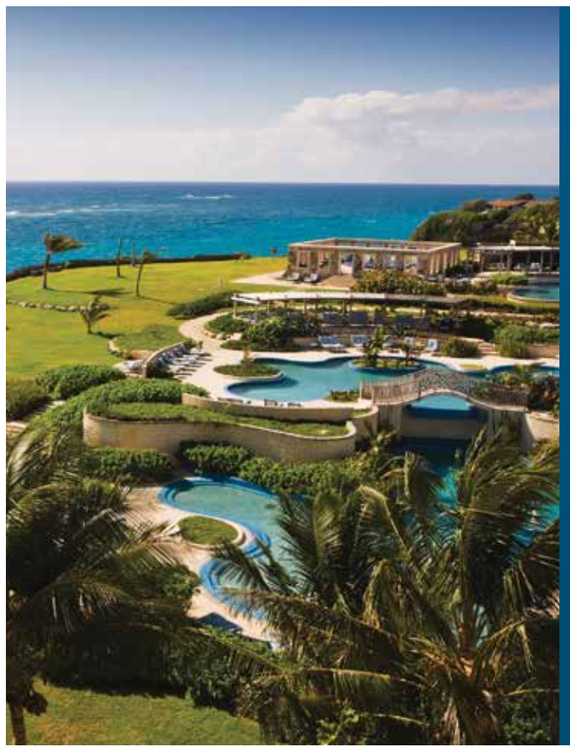
COURTESY EXPLORA JOURNEYS

Explora Journeys bringing a dash of soul to the sea

When **Explora Journeys'** two beautiful new ships, **EXPLORA I** and **EXPLORA II**, the first and second of six luxury best-in-class ships planned for the cruise line, set sail in 2023, they will offer an outstanding new level of luxury. Featuring 461 elegant ocean-front suites, 82 of which will have multi-generation-friendly connecting designs, the staterooms will have private terraces that will be among the largest in the category. Both ships will be ready to treat guests to a delicious lineup of 18 restaurants, bars and lounges. Culinary artists will eagerly share their signature dishes at the five complimentary restaurants on offer: Emporium Marketplace, Fil Rouge, Marble & Co. Grill, Med Yacht Club, and Sakura. Food loving guests will enjoy 11 culinary experiences across these vibrant restaurants in addition to wonderfully indulgent in-suite dining. Working on the belief that variety is the spice of life, guests will also be treated to 12 bars and lounges, where they can discover exciting and diverse flavours from around the globe. This is a culinary atmosphere that will truly bring a dash of soul to the sea. Explora Journeys' ships will sail itineraries in Alaska, the Arabian Peninsula and India to Caribbean, the Mediterranean, Iceland and more. *Explora I* arrives this July.



COURTESY CUNARD

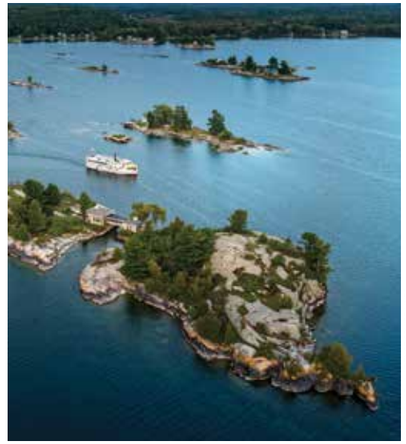
Bright Lights Society

Anticipating Queen Anne – an elevated travel experience

Lovers of the **Cunard** line will be delighted to know that a new cruise liner, **Queen Anne**, will soon set the benchmark for luxury ocean travel. Designers from David Collins Studio, Richmond International and Sybille de Margerie who worked with Creative Director Adam D. Tihany have been the inspiration behind *Queen Anne's* luxe look. Having immersed themselves in the Cunard archives, these talented designers, whose portfolios include luxury hotels, bars, restaurants, high end yachts, and private grand residences, have ensured that *Queen Anne* will exude classic Cunard style while showcasing many exquisite new touches. *Queen Anne's* breathtaking interiors will take their inspiration from Cunard's past, celebrating beautiful art deco style finishes while defining a striking new design direction for the future. With more than 4,300 pieces of artwork, many created by up-and-coming young contemporary artists, *Queen Anne* will showcase works from well-known artists such as Pei Chi Lee, John Biggs and Tommy Camerno. A portrait of Queen Anne herself, painted by Camerno, will be displayed in the Queens Room. Guests will be dazzled by Bright Lights Society – an intimate venue, designed by the renowned Richmond International, which will offer hosted experiences and a fascinating whirlwind of entertainment. No two nights will ever be the same. The name, Bright Lights Society honours Cunard's heritage as the world's first ocean liner to use electric lights. There are currently three Cunard ships: *Queen Mary 2, Queen Elizabeth* and *Queen Victoria*. *Queen Anne* will join her sisters in spring 2024.

St. Lawrence Cruise Lines expands 2023 schedule

One of Canada's beloved travel brands is **St. Lawrence Cruise Lines**, based in Kingston, Ontario, offering small ship cruising on the mighty St. Lawrence River. As demand increases and small-ship cruising becomes even more popular, the company has responded with an additional cruise date. The Seaway Discovery Cruise is a seven-day voyage departing on August 19, 2023, from Kingston to Montreal and return, focusing on the historic ports and locks of the St. Lawrence Seaway. The charming **Canadian Empress** features 32 staterooms with twin fixed beds, private bathrooms, and a river view. The company also takes its health and safety measures very seriously, ensuring every guest can enjoy a relaxing and safe voyage in the heart of beautiful and majestic scenery.



COURTESY ST LAWRENCE CRUISE LINES

You can go ALL-IN with MSC

MSC Cruises' fleet is growing quickly, and there are many options to choose from with their ships sailing from North American ports and in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Northern Europe – to name just a few itineraries. The cruise line also has terrific promotional offers such as their "All-In" with drinks, Wi-Fi and taxes included in their excellent fares. Ask about Family Break offers too. Choose to depart from Miami on the new **MSC Seascape**, Orlando and Port Canaveral on the lovely **Seashore** or from New York City on the **Meraviglia**. Their newest ship, the **Euribia**, will launch this spring and sail in Northern Europe. MSC holds sustainability in high regard and is focused on steering a course toward a sustainable future by promoting responsible travel. They have introduced cleaner fuels and focus on recycling, reusing and reducing emissions and plastics.

COURTESY MSC

Here comes the Sun!

Princess Cruises has revealed the first new looks at their stunning contemporary ship, the **Sun Princess**, scheduled to debut in early 2024. With bright designs inspired by rays of sunlight and next-level expanded spaces, guests will be delighted with their cruise experience when they sail on her. In a first for Princess, the Horizons Dining Room will be a fabulous three-story dining venue that is open and flexible, featuring dining options to suit every mood and taste. Each of the three decks will have its personality, offering different experiences and various formality levels. There's also a showstopping Princess Arena Theater – an evolution and most technologically advanced Princess theatre design. The ship will accommodate 4,000 guests and embrace Italian heritage and design in the largest and most innovative ship ever to join its award-winning fleet. Additional signature favourites from Princess include the always-popular Alfredo's Pizzeria, the Crown Grill, which has a classic steakhouse feel with modern touches, and Sabatini's Italian Trattoria offering an elegant Italian dining experience.

COURTESY PRINCESS CRUISES

COURTESY AMAWATERWAYS

AmaWaterways builds on success

When you launch a program, and you have a big hit, you build on it! "When we first announced the complimentary pre-or-post land packages in October, we received amazing feedback from our guests," said Kristin Kart, executive vice president and co-founder of **AmaWaterways**. The company has therefore announced the extension of those popular, complimentary pre-or-post-cruise land package add-ons for select Europe and Egypt cruises for groups and individual travellers in 2023. This allows guests to add a complimentary two, three or four-night land package to explore fascinating destinations where their river cruises begin or end. The outstanding Cruise Managers who accompany guests throughout their entire journey ensure that guests can explore remarkable cities and experience world-class hotels. Fifteen complimentary packages are offered on select sailings and include such cities as Prague, Paris, Budapest, Vienna, Amsterdam, Nice, Barcelona, Lisbon and more. Each land program includes convenient transfers, porterage service between the ship and hotel, daily breakfast, and fascinating city tours.

COURTESY FRENCH COUNTRY WATERWAYS

Barge Cruises in France

French Country Waterways operates four beautiful and luxuriously- appointed barges sailing the canals of France through the renowned Champagne region, Alsace-Lorraine, Burgundy and the Upper Loire. Ranging from 8 to 12 guests, these charming vessels, with their antique furnishings, slowly meander through some of the gorgeous scenery in France. With a special limited-time offer for the 12-guest Nenuphar sailings in Champagne this July and August, guests can save 25 percent on new bookings. The bi-lingual crew offers terrific service and fabulous cuisine as you glide through old villages, bike alongside the canals, or chat with fellow guests on the open deck. The region's history includes Napoleon, Joan of Arc and vineyards dating back to Roman times. You will visit some of the most famous wineries in the area and dine ashore at a renowned Michelin-starred restaurant.

Muir celebrates the spirit of Halifax's historic waterfront

My 'favourite-hotels-around-the-world' list has a new member. The minute I walked into the intimate, stunningly modern lobby of Muir (Gaelic for sea), and was received with a warm, Nova Scotia welcome, I felt at home.

Halifax's first five-star hotel opened in December 2021. The 109-room property, part of Queen's Marque, a $200 million, six-acre multi-use development represents an integral part of the transformation of the city's historic waterfront. It's thrilling to see how planners, architects and designers captured the spirit and culture of traditional Nova Scotia with a modern spin on design, art, amenities and even the cuisine.

Muir is affiliated with the Marriot Bonvoy Autograph Collection – 200 hotels around the world, each with its own story to tell. Muir's story combines an authentic 'born of this place' vibe with a nautical motif.

The work of Nova Scotia artists and artisans plays a prominent role, starting in the lobby with a statement, handwoven tapestry by Allison Pincent Baker and continuing throughout the halls and guest rooms. Salt-and-pepper granite, sandstone, Muntz, (the ship-building metal), and the warm wood and muted tones used throughout are traditional and of-the-moment. The long corridors on guest room floors give you the sense that you are on a luxury cruise ship. Guest rooms feature curved nautical white oak walls and plank flooring topped with a delightful surprise – a hand-braided rug.

In addition to the top-notch amenities, you would expect at a five-star hotel, the wall-to-wall draperies open and close with touch pad controls, on the desk is a book from the Muir collection to enjoy, there's a well-stocked bar, and a soft, Muir tartan blanket.

Drift, the upscale restaurant, describes itself as "a culinary ode to Nova Scotia's land, people and history." Celebrity chef Anthony Walsh, the Creative Culinary lead, was given the nod to redefine Maritime cuisine. And he did. Take for example, the homey hodgepodge vegetable stew he's made even more appealing with Digby scallops and haddock.

And not to be overlooked – a 5,000 sq. ft. fitness centre and BKS, the oh-so-secret speakeasy. It's no wonder this hotel has an important new place on my list of favourites! — ANNA HOBBS

Drift

The Crane Resort
A gorgeous resort on a tranquil, expansive property on Barbados' unspoiled east coast

Zen

STEEPED IN HISTORY, The Crane offers guests old-world charm and incredible natural beauty. The resort is perched on a cliff above spectacular Crane Beach, renowned as one of the world's finest. Cascading pools are scattered throughout the lush grounds, as are the various buildings accommodating the spacious, luxuriously furnished suites and residences, boasting ocean views. Some have private pools and others, rooftop terraces.

The Crane was the first hotel in Barbados, and much of the design and furnishings preserve the 19th Century architecture and the colonial feel. Coral stone walls, louvred doors, and timber tray high ceilings are reminders of days gone by. With ample living space featuring large bedrooms with king-size four-poster beds, large bathrooms, a washer and dryer, a kitchenette, and a terrace or balcony, your suite quickly becomes a home. You may choose from one, two or three-bedroom suites.

Modern-day conveniences include a charming resort village at the property's heart, five restaurants, two bars, a day spa, floodlit tennis courts, a fitness centre, a Kids Club, a boutique and a few small stores. For dining, choose from Italian at D'Onofrio's, casual food and drink at the 1887 pub, or Asian-influenced Zen with its authentic Japanese and Thai cuisine, and a Sushi Bar overlooking a glass wall with the sea 50 feet below. L'Azure offers traditional fare and is open all day with stunning views of Crane Beach and the ocean. The original adults-only pool is located nearby – a relaxing spot with sweeping views and its iconic windswept tree. Find a sun lounger on one of the various terraces around the main pool, have a casual lunch at the delightfully restored Carriage House – formerly the stables – or wander down to the beach and swim in the exhilarating surf.

The Crane also offers exquisitely designed and furnished Residences in a series of new buildings. The property fondly calls its guests "Crane people" as they genuinely love the resort's style, quiet elegance and tranquil, romantic surroundings. Many repeat guests love the property so much that they buy residences to allow them to enjoy the resort whenever possible. No matter what style of accommodation or time of year you visit The Crane, the warm smiles and attentive service of the staff will offer a lovely welcome. — VANESSA LEE

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PHOTOS COURTESY CELEBRITY

ABOVE AND *BEYOND*

Celebrity sets a new standard

LIZ FLEMING

IT WAS SHAKESPEARE'S JULIET who asked "What's in a name?"

She would never have asked that question had she been aboard *Celebrity Beyond*, a ship whose name describes her guests' experiences perfectly.

Take for example, her magic carpet. Until Celebrity introduced their own version, only Aladdin could lay claim to having such a magical device. Now, guests aboard Celebrity's three Edge Class ships can soar from deck to deck on a glorious orange creation that is both an elegant lounge and restaurant and an ultra-convenient means of moving to and from the tendering level of the ship. Disembarking for shore excursions has never been so easily and elegantly achieved, nor could you find a more beautiful lounge option, cantilevered over the sea.

And that's just the beginning. *Celebrity Beyond* pushes the boundaries in every way, beginning with that most important element of all cruises – cuisine. With 32 food and beverage venues, including the Rooftop Garden Grill, Fine Cut Steakhouse, Raw on Five, Le Grand Bistro, Cosmopolitan, the main dining room and specialty restaurants including Cyprus, Tuscan, and Normandie, as well as the chic and intimate Le Voyage the first fine-dining restaurant at sea by famed chef, Daniel Boulud. Breakfast at the Market Garden was a pleasure as we basked in the sunshine at an outdoor table.

Every bite on *Beyond* was a joy, but it was the clever blending of food and fantasy at the innovative Le Petite Chef that truly captivated us. Our beautifully appointed table featured white dinner plates glowing with rings of light that quickly burst into life as a tiny chef appeared. As we watched, amazed, the table became an animated stage on which the little chef and a host of other characters introduced the history and culture of each course. The animation was stellar – look out Disney! – but produced with an adult audience in mind.

Infinite Veranda stateroom

Martini Bar

Eden

Animated dining is only the beginning of the surprises on *Beyond*, a ship that vibrates with entertainment, music, and art. In the Grand Plaza, a stunning glass chandelier above the Martini Bar regularly shimmers to life with sound and light – and that's not all. Keeping time with the lights and music, a troupe of talented bar tenders transform into a juggling show. Tossing cocktail shakers high in the air, balancing sparkling martini glasses on their foreheads, they still manage to serve drinks to the dazzled crowd gathered at the bar. The energy is electric and the venue is one of the most popular on the ship.

The whimsical tone is threaded throughout the ship. Artists suddenly appear in unexpected spaces, set up easels, produce gorgeously costumed models and begin furious assaults on their canvases. Paint brushes flash, a crowd quickly gathers, and a portrait appears – sometimes painted upside down, just for fun! A piece of original art has been created in minutes, ready to be showcased. Not that there are many empty spaces – every area on *Celebrity Beyond* has original art, from arresting sculptures like the massive elephant balanced so delicately by the pool, to the vivid photography of people, birds, animals, fish and more that fill the walls of the ship.

Celebrity Beyond has also injected enormous energy into performance entertainment. Clever, award-winning main theatre shows incorporate a 20-foot-tall 4K LED screen comprised of 17 million pixels that curves 110 feet around the stage, integrating with floor projection technology to completely immerse audiences in sound, light and movement. In Wonder at Eden, a three-storey, multi-media venue that magically morphs from dining area to performance space, another live performance cast boggles your mind with everything from tap dancing to super-human feats of strength, all in a theatre-in-the-round style that culminates in an everyone-out-of-your-seat dance party.

Le Voyage

The Jazz Joint is yet another live performance area that draws you into the fun of a 1920's style speakeasy, while all around the ship, live musicians entertain in the lounges.

If evenings are electrifying on *Beyond*, days are fun and blissfully relaxing, whether you choose a shore excursion or stay aboard to enjoy a luxurious treatment at The Spa. Some will find comfy lounge chairs amongst the lush greenery on the park-like upper deck or loll by the sparkling outdoor pool or in the equally beautiful Solarium, which offers its own pool, completely sheltered from the elements.

We loved the newly imagined Sunset Bar with its stunning décor by celebrated designer Nate Berkus. This bar on the *Beyond* is a new version of an old favourite and it is twice as large now. With its Moroccan-inspired design, cascading terraces, and conversation niches it offers a fabulous Beach Club ambiance and spectacular views from its aft location. It's the place to be!

Our stateroom on *Celebrity Beyond* was well-appointed, comfortable, and sleekly minimalist, in a palette of soft greys with an enormous electric window that slid down to open to the winds and the sun, negating the need for a balcony. Guests interested in more privacy and an added level of luxury chose ultra-elegant suites and villas in The Retreat, where they enjoyed not only premium dining at Blu and the exquisite Luminae at The Retreat but also their private sundeck, pool, and lounge with services of a Retreat concierge and drinks and wine included through the day and evening.

Retreat Lounge

For my part, I was most impressed by the friendly staff and crew and the forward-looking attitude Celebrity takes towards women in its organization. Not only is the cruise line led by president and CEO Lisa Lutoff-Perlo, but the ship herself, their newest and most innovative, is captained by Kate McCue, an accomplished mariner who embodies the barrier-breaking spirit of *Celebrity Beyond*. And she was christened by Olympian, Simone Biles – one of the greatest gymnasts of all time. ■

PHOTOS COURTESY CELEBRITY

Splendour in the heart of Provence

On the idyllic Rhône River, sailing through the south of France, AmaWaterways delivers history, artistic charm, and gastronomic delight at every turn.

MING TAPPIN

TENLOOO / SHUTTERSTOCK

Avignon

PHOTO COURTESY AMAWATERWAYS

Chef's Table

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE springtime in Provence, where vibrant bougainvillea explodes over wrought iron balconies, and the mistral winds usher in fresh air and clear skies.

I have come to the marvellous Provençal town of Avignon to embark on the *AmaKristina,* a sleek vessel of white and blue operated by the award-winning river line, AmaWaterways. After spending the past few days in Nice, an early TGV train brought me to the ship before 11 am. Check-in isn't until 3 pm, but my concern about being turned away quickly evaporates when I am warmly welcomed onboard by Head Waiter André, who proudly shows me around the vessel. After enjoying a light lunch in the lounge (a choice every day) and a stroll along the river bank, I return to find André ready to escort me to my room, with a glass of Champagne at the ready.

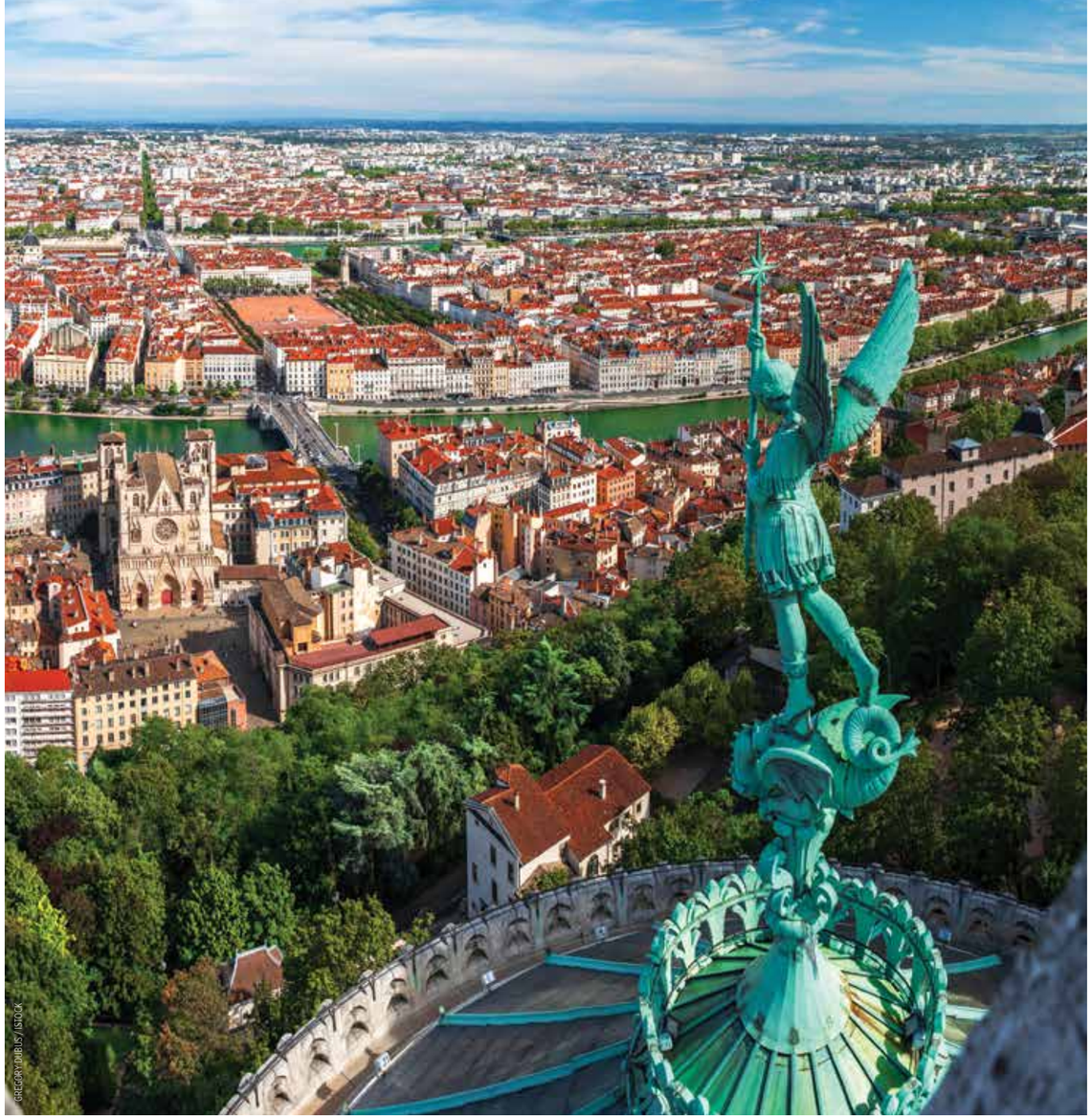
My home for the next seven days is beautifully appointed with a large, river-facing bed, a writing desk, a spacious bath with double sinks, and a roomy rain shower. There's not one but two balconies – one allows me to sit outside to admire the river, while the other is Juliet-style with a sliding glass door to offer views and fresh air in case of inclement weather.

Although I take advantage of my spacious abode, one of my favourite river cruising pastimes is sitting up on deck to admire the passing scenery. On the Rhône, it is idyllic as ever, with hardly another vessel in sight. We sail mainly near the shore, within earshot of laughing children, barking dogs, and cyclists' bells. Electric trains whizz alongside, whistling as they pass through tile-roofed villages and disappear into tunnels. Rolling hills are terraced with vineyards, and the occasional castle ruin peers through the forest. This is the glorious French countryside at its best, and I, along with the other guests, am in my element as we absorb all the sights and sounds of France.

But the real reason I've come is to savour the enchanting Provençal towns and indulge in the gastronomy along the Côtes du Rhône. Sailing from Avignon, we make port in Arles, Viviers, Tournon, and Vienne before arriving in Lyon. History abounds here, as the river naturally served as a conduit for exploration, colonization, and commerce. The stone walls of lovely Avignon lead to the grounds of the Palais des Papes, the 14th-century palace that played as important a role in the Catholic Church as the Vatican does today. Castles and ruins are here, too, in medieval Tarascon and Roman-occupied Vienne.

PHOTO COURTESY AMAWATERWAYS

PHOTO COURTESY AMAWATERWAYS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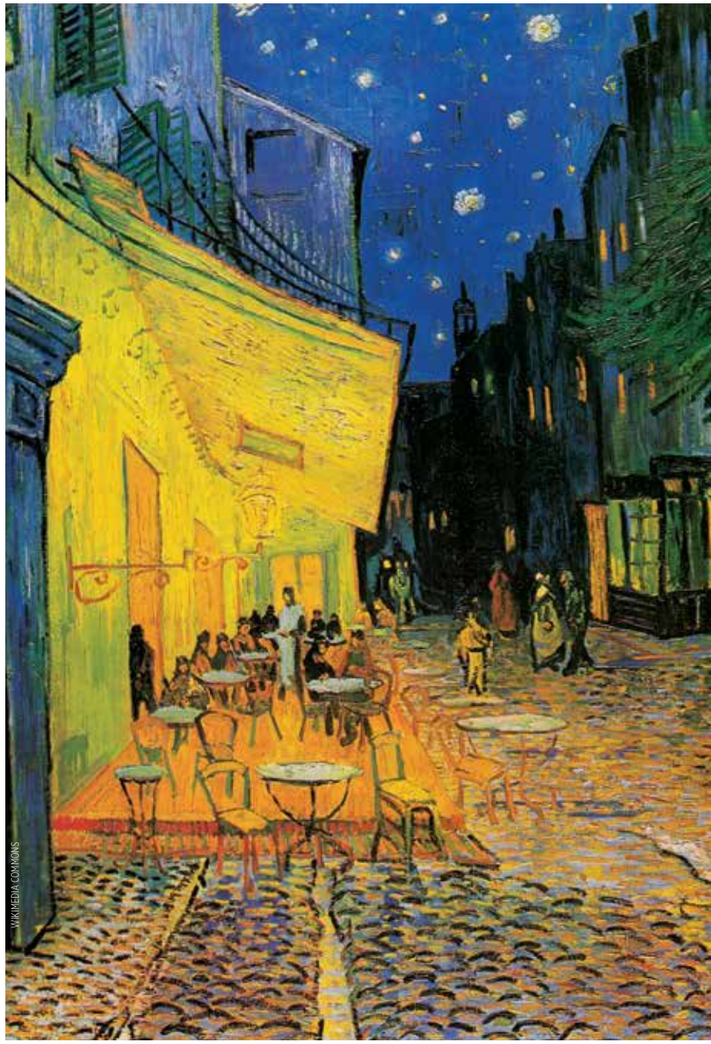

VINCENT VAN GOGH / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Above:
Lounge and stateroom on AmaKristina.
A view of Lyon.

Café Terrace at Night by Vincent Van Gogh, 1888. A modern café on the same site in Arles' Place du Forum recreates the scene depicted in the painting.

Arles, which Vincent Van Gogh called home for over a year, also houses a treasured past. The Rhône river bank, the yellow house he rented, the arena where he watched bullfights, and the Café du Forum – now Café La Nuit but still sporting its signature yellow awning – all became subjects of Vincent's masterpieces and a significant chapter of his storied life.

Beyond the academics, there is fun too. On the outskirts of Grignan, we go hunting for the prized "black diamond" truffles, led by an adorable Lagotto Romagnolo pup with a curly white coat and floppy ears. There is a steam train excursion through the Doux Valley and a light projection show inside a limestone quarry in Les Baux. In between are a smattering of market tours, wine tastings, hiking and biking adventures.

As with all cruising, food and drink are plentiful but with AmaWaterways, menus are curated to highlight regional cuisine. They are an esteemed member of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, a prestigious International culinary society. As such, we feast on river-caught fish, locally farmed meats, artisan cheeses, and vegetables in season. A treat one evening is the seven-course Chef's Table dinner served in a cozy restaurant tucked at the back of the ship. With an open kitchen, we can watch the Chef prepare our meals before André delivers each course, explaining its origin and creation. On the menu are fresh walleye, Argentinean beef striploin, and grilled tiger shrimp, complemented with heirloom tomatoes, wild broccoli, and root vegetables sourced from the Rhône valley. The wines, of course, are delightful. Rhône valley vintages and blends created from Syrah, Viognier, Marsanne, and Rousanne grapes are carefully chosen to pair with every meal, complemented with varietals hailing from nearby Bordeaux and Beaujolais.

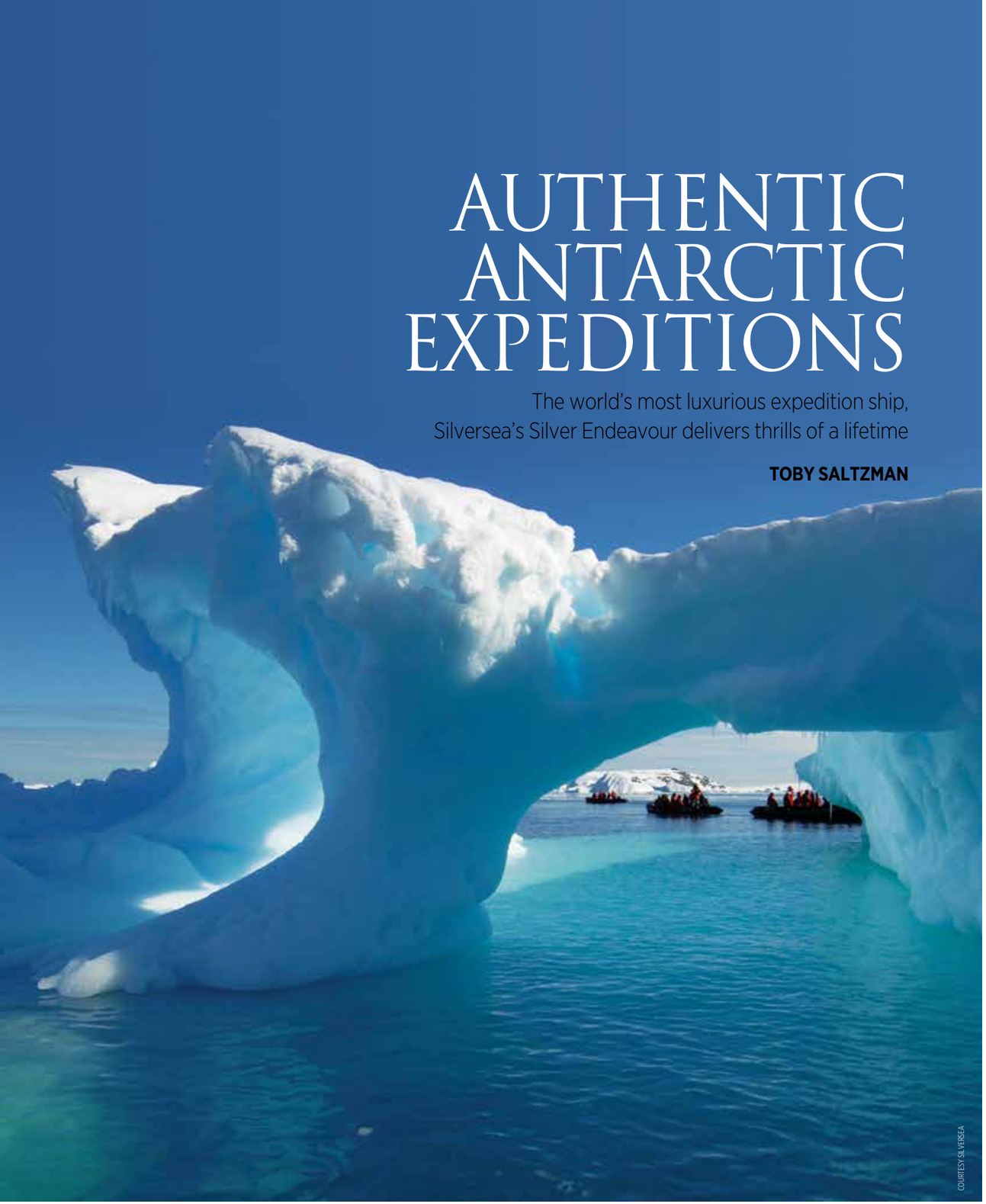
All that good eating could spell danger for the waistline, so it's good that all our walking tours feature an "active" option, taking a longer route with more steps and at a faster pace. (There are also options for those who prefer a more relaxed exploration). Erni, the ship's Wellness Coach, also runs an impressive roster of fitness classes every morning, before lunch, and in the afternoon. Alas, there are too many distractions (or perhaps, excuses) to prevent me from attending any. I do, however, manage to take two fantastic cycling excursions. In Avignon, we bike around the quiet Île de la Barthelasse, strewn with farmers' fields and fruit orchards. In Lyon, our guide leads us through the scenic Parc de la Tête d'Or before crossing over to meander along the adjoining Saône River. And in Tournon, I pride myself on eschewing the red wine and chocolate pairing tour for the Tain L'Hermitage hike. Although it does end with wine tasting, the reward feels justified after a vigorous climb on the vineyard slopes.

As I disembark in Lyon at the week's end, I feel like I accomplished what I came for. I've sailed nearly 150 miles upriver, immersed myself in history, and walked in the footsteps of Van Gogh. The Mistral winds refreshed my mind; my body is sated by the extraordinary flavours and vintages of the Côtes du Rhône and the excellent service and delightful onboard atmosphere created by the staff and crew of AmaWaterways. Now onward, to tackle those fitness classes and make Erni proud. ■

AUTHENTIC ANTARCTIC EXPEDITIONS

The world's most luxurious expedition ship, Silversea's Silver Endeavour delivers thrills of a lifetime

TOBY SALTZMAN



COURTESY SILVERSEA

TOBY SALTZMAN

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TOBY SALTZMAN

Facing page:

Silver Endeavour guests explore dramatic ice formations in Antarctica.

This page (clockwise from above):

Silver Endeavour in Antarctica.

Gentoo penguin.

The Restaurant, Silver Endeavour.

Superb dining in the ship's four signature restaurants.

WHEN NATURE CHILLS your plans, forcing a spontaneous change of course, your journey can turn more spectacular than anticipated. That was the scene, south of the Antarctic Circle, when *Silver Endeavour* delivered experiences beyond its guests' dreams. By then, on the maiden Antarctic voyage of Silversea's newest expedition ship, we had seen how expedition leader Marieke Egan's instinctive decisions and Captain Niklas Peterstamm's skillful maneuvers of the highest-rated PC6, ICE-1A-Class polar vessel would enable landings on the White Continent for thrilling encounters with penguins, seals, and other sea life.

From the start, Silver Endeavour's Antarctica expedition program emphasizes the value of every day to maximize experiences. Guests fast-track two days by flying the two-hour "Antarctica Bridge" from Punta Arenas over the typically turbulent Drake Passage to King George Island. Upon arrival – already attired in Silversea's complimentary, pre-delivered, waterproof gear – we boarded Zodiacs for a quick jaunt to the ship.

It was immediately evident the world's most luxurious expedition ship – this 200-guest, 200-crew vessel built in 2021 – is designed for a sumptuous cruising lifestyle.

Elegant lounges are perfect for après-adventure camaraderie. The cushy Observation Lounge offers panoramic views of glacial landscapes while the long fireplace in the Arts Café evokes the atmosphere of a grand ski resort. Popular places include the glassed-in solarium where The Grill eatery surrounds its indoor pool, an outdoor whirlpool, state-of-the art gym, and Otivm Spa.

The all-balcony-suites are indulgent sanctuaries of calm, featuring personal butler service and luxe details including a bar stocked with fresh water, choice spirits and liquors.

As on all Silversea ships, the line's four signature restaurants offer superb dining experiences with fresh produce, cheeses, meats, wines, and chocolates sourced from Chile's Puerto Williams. La Dame serves classic French cuisine; Il Terrazzino, Italian dishes; The Grill, steakhouse fare and The Restaurant prepares continental favourites plus Chilean-inspired delicacies.

The first morning, the Explorer Lounge buzzed with excitement as we cruised past gleaming snow-clad mountains toward Danco Island. Said Silversea executive Conrad Combrink: "*Silver Endeavour* is a game changer in Antarctica and her beauty is more than skin deep." The hull's shape makes it stable and swift up to 20 knots. With dynamic positioning, the ship can linger in place or quickly turn.

Marieke explained the need to be flexible with spontaneous changes in case of unpredictable weather, winds or ice shifting at the landing sites. "In Antarctica," she said, "Mother Nature dictates, and humans obey." Detailing the expedition team's experience and skills, she noted that daily briefings would include lectures on the region's wildlife, science, geology, or history. Marieke gave strict rules to distance from animals and avoid penguin paths as she jokingly predicted that we might catch "Polar Fever" – an unabashed love for Antarctica.

COURTESY SILVERSEA

TOBY SALTZMAN

COURTESY SILVERSEA

This page (clockwise from above):

Silver Endeavour Observation Lounge.

Personal butler service in all suites.

Classic Veranda Suite.

Facing page:

Guests and penguins mingle on Petermann Island, Antarctica.

Adélie Penguins returning from the sea.

Deep in the heart of the Antarctic Peninsula, Danco Island is home to a huge colony of Gentoo Penguins. By the time our Zodiacs reached the rocky landing, the team had marked safe walking routes right up to the summit. As the first humans to arrive so early in the spring, we attracted the fearless penguins, many of whom threw their heads back to emit loud, trumpeting sounds, as if announcing our presence. Notable for the white stripe on their head, their orange-red bill, and pink feet, the Gentoos waddled carefree, their long, spikey tails sashaying side-to-side. Watching their antics as they flirted, chased, fought, and cuddled, we quickly realized that mating season was in full swing.

They waddled in line, as if in a vertical parade up the snowy hill, their quest seeming incredible, until we learned these smart birds knew the peak melts first, creating optimum rookeries for nests, far from predator seals and whales.

Enroute back to the ship, our guide deftly navigated the Zodiac around mammoth icebergs to show how various surfaces suggest their age and state of melt. He explained that chunky flat surfaces show where they calved from a glacier while smooth or pebbled surfaces mean the iceberg rolled over in the ocean. Nearing the icebergs' sapphire grottos, we heard the gurgling sounds of air bubbles popping as ice melted. Along the way, we laughed at four penguins leaping like porpoises in and out of the water as they swam to shore.

Back in my suite, relaxing over Champagne and caviar delivered by my butler, I felt the first surge of "Polar Fever."

Misty skies greeted the morning as *Silver Endeavour* reached Cuverville Island. Brilliant white after a fresh snowfall, the massive mountain has Antarctica Peninsula's largest breeding colony of Gentoo species. With 6500 penguins, it is a haven for seabirds, particularly predator Southern Giant Petrels who devour eggs and chicks.

After deciding mist would hamper safe landings, Captain Peterstamm repositioned, passing icebergs towering like floating cathedrals, heading to the breathtaking enclave of Orne Harbour. Surrounded by a semi-circle of peaked mountains reflecting blue skies and sunshine, this area is populated by Chinstrap Penguins, recognizable by a white stripe under the chin. After the team cleared a path through knee-deep snow, some guests hiked to the peak for views. I preferred mingling with the wildlife.

COURTESY SILVERSEA

COURTESY SILVERSEA

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COURTESY SILVERSEA

COURTESY SILVERSEA

TOBY SALTZMAN

This page (clockwise from above):

A Weddell Seal snoozing on the Antarctic coast.

Still waters along the coast of Antarctica.

Guests watch a pair of penguins leaping in and out of the water like porpoises.

Marieke Egan, Expedition leader.

Facing page:

View of Cuverville Island at night, Antarctica.

Like Gentoos, Chinstraps approached us curiously, though – judging by their flirting, chasing, cooing, and pecking – most were intent on courting mates. Calm waters gave kayakers the chance to explore Orne's shoreline and see sunbathing seals.

The next day brimmed with nature delights. At Petermann Island, sightings of humpback whales, seals, seabirds, and thousands of penguins, including spunky Adélies, enthralled each guest whether they kayaked, hiked, or lingered ashore. In Pleneau Bay – dubbed Iceberg Graveyard for its colossal formations – waters teemed with seabirds diving for food.

On deck early next morning, we cheered as we crossed the Antarctic Circle. Upon arriving at Detaille Island, a crucial British outpost during WWII, the expedition team cleared a landing, but soon declared it unsafe after winds blew in. Marieke said: "This is true expedition cruising. We will sail further south to Marguerite Bay, to a place where few people have been."

The agile Silver Endeavour sailed into Marguerite Bay, where we experienced the authentic suspense and joy of expedition cruising. When moving ice made the first-choice landing at Jenny Island impossible, Captain Peterstamm quickly changed course to Pourquoi Pas.

> "In Antarctica, Mother Nature dictates, and humans obey."
>
> — MARIEKE EGAN, EXPEDITION LEADER

On this protected island, Adélie penguins scurried forward, extending flippers as if in fond embrace. Later that afternoon, when waters calmed, we returned to Jenny Island. After the team pushed ice aside, guests climbed to a ridge for close views of elephant seals lounging on the shore.

Later that evening, as we sailed north through scenic Lemaire Channel, we gathered on deck to watch humpback whales spraying and breaching near glacier walls.

The next day was even more exhilarating. While *Silver Endeavour* drifted in Neko Harbour – declared a crucial bird and biodiversity area – many guests kayaked or rode Zodiacs around ice floes, watching huge Weddell Seals bask on ice and penguins swim in groups. When a Southern Giant Petrel suddenly swooped down, it scared smaller sea birds away. The biggest thrills, however, for the captain and crew came when we approached Wilhelmina Bay. Finding the entrance blocked with massive sea ice twice as wide as the ship, Captain Peterstamm was able to test *Silver Endeavour's* ice-breaking capabilities. After great success, ultimately cutting through to create a wide pocket of calm water, he invited guests to take the polar plunge. Sixty people dared to jump for this Antarctic bragging rite. Not I.

On the last night of the voyage, after the captain thanked us for our flexibility and cheerful adventurous spirits, Marieke added, "The Antarctic never ceases to amaze. You never know what you are going to get, but whatever you get is fantastic." Her words rang true for our authentic Antarctic expedition. ■

COURTESY SILVERSEA

GREAT EXPLORERS

PONANT'S LE CHAMPLAIN

A petite yacht with a chic French atmosphere, designed to explore the world.

TIM JOHNSON

PHOTOS COURTESY PONANT

RELAXING IN MY stateroom, post-lunch, during a long, lazy sea day, teetering on the edge of a nap, the realization comes all at once. We had made good, fast progress since our departure from the tiny, lovely Spanish island of Minorca, steaming steadily west toward Sicily. But now, looking out the window of my stateroom, it's unmistakable – and highly unusual.

The ship is no longer moving. At all. Rising from my cushy king bed, I stride outside the glass slider onto the balcony to confirm it. The waves are calm, the sea, just an endless expanse of blue. Pulling on a pair of jeans, I head to reception to see what's up when an announcement stops me short and turns me around for a costume change. "*On va se baigner*," Claire, the cruise director, announces, in part. My French is definitely rusty, but I recognize enough words to realize the main message before she repeats it in English. Which is: get ready, folks, because it's time for a swim.

I'M ON BOARD Ponant's *Le Champlain* for seven nights, sailing from Barcelona to Malta. Built to be small and intimate, this Explorer yacht is also equipped for adventure. Everything is overlaid with French flair. And while we call at some traditional cruise ports, the vessel's relatively tiny size means it can navigate into equally small, shallow, unlikely harbours.

And, we can also, of course, pause mid-voyage for a little dip. The ship features a unique retractable marina that crew can lower to three different positions to launch Zodiacs to explore wild and beautiful places. Today the marina doubles as our waterfront deck and diving board. Staff line up to hand out pool noodles and guests leap into the gentle swell. Even the captain gets a little time to enjoy this vast, natural piscine, emerging finally to supervise the crew, with a wet swimsuit on the bottom, and formal epaulettes on top.

This page:
(clockwise from top)
Panoramic Restaurant.
Stateroom.
Guests enjoy an impromptu swim from the marina.
Facing page:
(clockwise from top)
The Blue Eye underwater lounge.
Freshly prepared tuna tartar.
Superb onboard cuisine.
Le Champlain Lounge.

PHOTO: TIM JOHNSON

It's a fitting look for a trip that brings together fancy and fanciful, and *Le Champlain* is the perfect craft to deliver both. The second of Ponant's six Explorer Class ships, it's named for Samuel de Champlain, the "father of New France" who travelled to the New World, creating an accurate coastal map, establishing settlements in modern-day Canada, and crossing the Atlantic more than 20 times.

But he presumably didn't do so in the comfort and class available on the ship that bears his name. The culinary experiences are top-notch, supervised by Michelin-starred chef Alain Ducasse. The 92 staterooms are snug but perfectly appointed, making you feel as if you're sleeping on a luxury yacht. Evening shows in the 188-seat theatre are unmistakably French, with touches of the Moulin Rouge.

Public spaces are gracious and perfectly sized, with an upscale design aesthetic that's never too fussy. The elegant yet relaxed onboard lifestyle includes Champagne, wine, beer and cocktails, and gratuities, all included in the fare.

The pool deck on the stern opens to the ocean on two levels, perfect for an open-air lunch or a late-afternoon Spritz. A forward lounge offers direct access to an outside deck for wildlife viewing – it's the place to settle in for a quiet afternoon with a book, or with a Scotch or digestif after dinner. And the subaquatic Blue Eye Lounge is a marvel. Inspired by Jacques Cousteau and Jules Verne, it is the world's first undersea lounge on a ship. Sip a martini while the boundless depths of the sea appear outside the windows, clearly visible, but held back by eighteen panels of glass.

PHOTOS COURTESY PONANT

PHOTO: TIM JOHNSON

"We go where nobody else is going," the captain tells me during a bridge visit. "We're mainly focusing on the small places." While our voyage calls at larger ports like Mallorca and Palermo, we manage to see much tinier, less-visited places, including Trapani (Sicily) and Minorca.

The latter, which literally means "smaller island," has a legendary harbour – one rarely seen by cruise ships. Using a scheduling flexibility that would be unimaginable on a larger ship, the captain delays our early morning arrival so more guests can experience it. I'm enjoying my first cup of coffee on the aft deck when I realize what's going on.

We roll softly into one of the longest deep-water harbours in the Mediterranean, slender but almost six kilometres in length. Soft light bathes the scene – colourful homes in pinks, and oranges, climbing the hillsides. White sailboats, sails puffed, are out for an early spin. The old fortifications, still look formidable, despite their obvious obsolescence. The beauty of the scene keeps unfolding as we dock in the capital, Mahon, and meet a guide for a trip across the small island.

"We don't get any of the bigger ships here," she explains, as we coast in a coach across verdant fields. "They have to be small enough to enter, turn around, and sail back out." Mahon's deep-water harbour has long been legendary, she notes, a famous place for refuge when weather gets rough at sea. If the wind and the waves are too much, sailors used to say, then make a run for Mahon.

We pass tiny, whitewashed towns with Moorish names, some of them dating back to the Arab arrival in the 10th century. This is a place where many civilizations blew through on the trade winds, each one leaving their mark on the language, people, culture, and culinary traditions. Phoenicians, Romans – and, of course, the Ottomans.

PHOTO: WALLA / SHUTTERSTOCK

"We go where nobody else is going," the captain tells me. "We're mainly focusing on the small places."

PHOTO: TIM JOHNSON

The picturesque harbour at Ciutadella, Minorca and the local fresh fish market.

We arrive on the far side of the island to tour the old capital of Ciutadella. Walking down the cobblestones between ostentatious palaces owned by rich shipping families, each one trying to out-do each other, we arrive at the Cathedral. Once a 14th century mosque, it was converted, the former minaret now a bell tower. In the friendly little fish market, a young woman tells me that the waters here are deep, and rich with sea life.

"Everything here comes from this port – we can even tell you the boat that caught it," she says. On ice, all around, I see prawns and cuttlefish and squid and monkfish. Some will be used for that Spanish classic, paella.

But when I get back on board and head to the pool deck, the sous-chef is preparing and serving a French favourite instead. Beef or tuna tartare, made right in front of you. I settle back as the ship readies to sail, back out that long, deep harbour.

Will we swim again? That's anyone's guess here on *Le Champlain*. But I'll certainly keep my swimsuit handy for the rest of the voyage, just in case.

Ponant's Explorer Class ships are built to provide class, luxury, and adventure. Voyages range from the Mediterranean to East Asia, Canada to the Caribbean. The cruise line also has vessels which sail to both Polar regions and many places in between. My sailing was seven days from Barcelona, calling at Valencia, Mallorca, Minorca, Trapani, Palermo and Valletta (Malta). ■

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CHASING THE LIGHT

IN THE LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN

A summer photography tour of Iceland's Ring Road is a fascinating and unique way to explore the best of this diverse and spectacular country.

LINDA CRAWLEY

PHOTOGRAPHERS CALL IT golden hour – the warm soft light that occurs briefly after sunrise or before sunset. So imagine, then, a place where that sweet golden light of sunset lasts for hours.

Here in Iceland, in July, three weeks after the summer solstice, we have found that place. Midnight Sun at this time of year means that the sun does not set until, well, midnight. Then for the next three or four hours it lurks just below the horizon, creating a bright twilight that lasts until sunrise.

We have come to photograph the wonders of Iceland under the Midnight Sun. Our small group of photographers is travelling with Iceland Photo Tours, a well-known local company specializing in photography holidays. Professional photographer Kaspars Dzenis is our guide and mentor for the next two weeks. His experience and knowledge of the landscape ensure we have the best opportunities to capture Iceland's green beauty during the day and – weather permitting – in the long hours of the Midnight Sun.

Our itinerary will take us clockwise on Iceland's Route 1, or Ring Road as it is known. As the name suggests, this scenic road circumnavigates the country in an easy-to-navigate 1,328 km loop and includes many of Iceland's best attractions. Our journey will be longer as we plan to include sidetrips to the Snæfellsnes Peninsula and the Eastfjords. There are long days ahead and many miles to cover, but the excitement is palpable as we start our journey.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA CRAWLEY

Midnight sunset at Iceland's Mount Kirkjufell.

10,000 WATERFALLS

Born of melting glaciers and dramatic geology, Iceland's 10,000 waterfalls take their place among the most unique and spectacular on the planet.

AS WE HEAD NORTH from Reykjavik, towards the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, our first stop is – no surprise – a waterfall. This is the first of countless waterfalls, each one more beautiful than the last. Iceland reportedly has 10,000 waterfalls (*foss* is Icelandic for waterfall) from tiny glacier-fed cascades to superstars like Dettifoss and Goðafoss in the north, and Seljalandsfoss and Skógafoss in the south. These giants are amongst the country's most popular attractions and are easily accessible from the Ring Road. They are often very busy during the day, so when possible, we visit later in the evening to take advantage of the extended golden hour light.

Our first midnight sunset is iconic Kirkjufell, Iceland's most-photographed mountain. As expected, we are not the only photographers here this evening and tripod space on the small pathways is tight, but we are prepared. Planning ahead, Kaspars had brought us here earlier for a short "practice" session, identifying the best camera angles in advance so we can quickly be in place when the sunset magic begins.

We spend two days in Mývatn, a geothermal area known for bubbling mud pots and steaming lava fields but our focus is a pair of waterfalls, majestic Goðafoss and fierce Dettifoss, Iceland's most powerful waterfall. We explore them from both sides, Kaspars always alert for interesting vantage points. For the sure-footed, there are rough trails to the edge and bottom and several of my colleagues go down for a closer look. Nervous of heights, I am content to stay in the safety of the sturdy viewing platforms.

I make an exception when we get to breathtaking Seljalandsfoss, a 60m cascade off a sheer cliff on the south coast. The classic photograph here is from behind the falls, so just before midnight, we clamber up the muddy path through a gale of wind and spray from the falls, dragging our camera gear over the treacherous wet rocks. Joining a row of other shivering photographers, we set up our tripods and wait for the perfect light. Tonight the weather gods smile on us and at the last minute the clouds break for a warm glowing sunset.

SIMPLY PERFECT CHURCHES

1 The classic view of Seljalandsfoss at sunset. A short hike up a slippery path brings us to this viewpoint behind the waterfall.

2 My colleague ventures to the edge to photograph the raging 44m high wall of water that is Dettifoss, Iceland's most powerful waterfall.

3 The famous little black church at Budir, serene in dramatic evening light.

4 Iceland's oldest surviving turf church, Grafarkirkja sits isolated on an lonely plain in northern Iceland.

5 "Don't call us ponies!" Friendly Icelandic horses come to the fence looking for a nuzzle and an ear rub.

A HORSE, OF COURSE

WE FIND ICELAND'S churches surprisingly compelling in a country known for dramatic scenery and otherwordly landscapes. We see small traditional red-roofed churches everywhere and are charmed by their simple beauty and often-scenic settings.

One afternoon, we visit the famous black church at Budir, in the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. It's so renowned that the tiny parking lot is jammed with coaches when we arrive. Fortunately, the long daylight hours allow us the luxury of returning later that evening when it is quiet. Our patience is rewarded with serene images filled with moody light and dramatic skies.

We also find our way to a few of Iceland's historic turf churches. Although turf has been used in Iceland as a building material for centuries, it is fragile, and only six of these now-protected churches remain.

Turning north from the Ring Road, we head for Grafarkirkja, the oldest of the six. The tiny wood and turf structure sits on a lonely plain against a backdrop of distant mountains. The church is no longer open to the public but we peer through the windows at the beautifully hand-carved wooden interior and marvel at those who created this church some 400 years ago.

WATERFALLS AND CHURCHES are lovely and photogenic, but in our hearts, what we all really want to see is Icelandic horses.

Descended from the horses brought by Norse settlers in the 9th century, the purity of this breed has long been protected by strict laws forbidding the import of any other horses into the country. Prized for being strong and hardy, they are stocky with short legs and thick shaggy manes. But although they are relatively small, we are firmly reminded, "Don't call them ponies!"

There are 80,000 of these horses in Iceland, and we see them everywhere along the road, but as there are no shoulders on much of the Ring Road, it can be difficult to pull over. Still, Kaspers always seems to find a safe place to stop when we simply must have one more horse photo.

We are fascinated by these gentle creatures and soon realize that the feeling is mutual. Friendly and curious by nature, they waste no time coming to greet us at the fence. We are unprepared and have no treats for them, but they don't seem to mind. No telephoto lenses are needed here – they come right up nose-to-nose, demanding a nuzzle and an ear scratch. We are happy to oblige.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA CRAWLEY

NESTING SEASON

1 Close up views of puffins in their nesting grounds.

2 Bickering kittiwakes in their cliffside nests.

3 Attack of the Arctic Terns.

4 Vestrahorn mountain in the beautiful Eastfjords.

5 Otherworldly glacial ice forms are covered in volcanic ash from a recent eruption.

6 Kayakers explore Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon in the midnight sun.

JULY IS PEAK NESTING SEASON in Iceland and that means puffins. Our itinerary includes a long – but scenic – side trip to the remote puffin colony at Borgarfjörður Eystri in the northernmost part of Iceland's Eastfjords. Atlantic Puffins spend most of the year far out at sea, but every summer some 10,000 pairs return to their annual nesting grounds in this pretty harbour.

A thoughtfully-designed series of boardwalks and viewing platforms allow us to get astonishingly close to the charismatic little birds without disturbing them. Even when they are so close, we can almost touch them; they pay us no attention as they bustle about their burrows.

Nesting birds are everywhere we look. In the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, we visit sea cliffs home to vast colonies of kittiwakes, a type of gull. Real estate on these cliffs is precious, and nests are built on impossibly tiny ledges. Watching through my telephoto lens, I am transfixed by the melodrama of life on the cliffs – fluffy chicks clamour for food; thieves and bullies swoop in to steal an unguarded morsel; victims protest indignantly – and all accompanied by a soundtrack of noisy avian bickering.

Arctic Terns are a distinctive sight along the roadsides, swooping and diving as they deliver food to their chicks. They nest on the open ground in damp and rocky areas – which we think seems risky for the youngsters. Kaspars laughs and assures us that the terns will ferociously protect their nests, and that most predators know better than to tangle with them.

However, a few days later, when we discover a small flock of terns brazenly nesting in our hotel car park, it's a too-tempting photo op. I wish I could tell you it ends well, but – in perfect Hitchcockian style – a squadron of angry dive-bombing birds with very long, sharp, pointy beaks quickly sends me scurrying for shelter.

FIRE AND ICE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA CRAWLEY

Without volcanoes, there would be no Iceland. The entire land mass was created by volcanic eruption.

ICELAND'S 130 VOLCANOES are quiet during our visit, but we see the results of ancient volcanic activity everywhere: miles of lava fields like moonscapes; basalt columns that remind us of Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland; geothermal hot springs, steaming mudpots and spikey mountains. And of course, black beaches. We have already visited a couple of these beaches in the north, but they are eclipsed by the spectacular black sands of the south coast. The most famous beaches near Vik offer miles of sparkling black sand and volcanic pebbles polished smooth by the waves.

But first up is dramatic Stokksnes, a dune-studded headland in the Eastfjords with a small but perfect black beach set against the panoramic backdrop of the much-photographed Vestrahorn. This expansive scene is a great reason to bring your wide angle lens (newer cell phones with wide angle capabilities also do an excellent job of capturing a scene like this). We spend a couple of hours wandering the uncrowded dunes, capturing the sheer beauty the volcanoes have wrought here.

Leaving the Eastfjords, we turn west on the Ring Road along the south coast. Most of Iceland's volcanoes are in this southern part of the country but here we find the glaciers too – fire and ice side-by-side.

A remarkable ten percent of Iceland is covered in glaciers, the largest of which is Vatnajökull, covering more than 4,000 sq km. These majestic slow moving rivers of ice are our constant companions for the next couple of days.

We spend an evening capturing the soft light of the midnight sun at Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon, where Breiðamerkurjökull glacier comes to the end of its journey. Large chunks of luminous blue ice break away from the glacier and drift through the lagoon until they are finally swept down a channel to nearby Diamond Beach and battered to pieces by the Atlantic.

As we drive back to our hotel well after midnight, I realize that Kaspars has turned on the headlights for the first time since we arrived almost two weeks ago. The midnight sun is coming to an end, along with our Iceland adventure. ■

MY GOOD IMAGES / SHUTTERSTOCK

UNDER THE MEXICAN SUN

JUDY ROSS

I travelled to this secluded Mexican resort for a week of sunshine and yoga but came home with much more than a suntan and limber limbs. A visit to Mar de Jade is a life-renewing experience, and an opportunity to see goodness in action. My travelling companions, a small group of women who had been going there for years with their yoga teacher, knew what to expect and were thrilled to be returning after missing two pandemic years.

Mar de Jade (Sea of Jade) nestles on a mile-long sweep of beach at the southern tip of Chacala, a fishing village about two hours north of Puerto Vallarta. It has 43 rooms in low-rise adobe style buildings. Some, high up the hillside boast glorious ocean views, while others (with fewer stairs to navigate) are surrounded by lush tropical gardens and stone patios. All are timeless Mexican-style with tile floors, stone walls, warm-coloured fabrics, and wooden furniture. Rustic but very comfortable.

The dining and lounge areas are open to the soft, salty breezes; hummingbirds flit in and out feeding on the bougainvillea and hibiscus; a large swimming pool meanders among rock boulders and, at the beachfront, a thatched palapa is strung with hammocks, ideal for watching the sunset. With no televisions, sound systems, or noisy swim-up bars, the only sound is the ceaseless surf pounding onto the shore.

But beyond the relaxing charm of the hotel something deeper is brewing at Mar de Jade – the beating heart of this rural community. Profits from the hotel are put towards apprentice programs where locals learn skills like farming, carpentry, cooking and sewing.

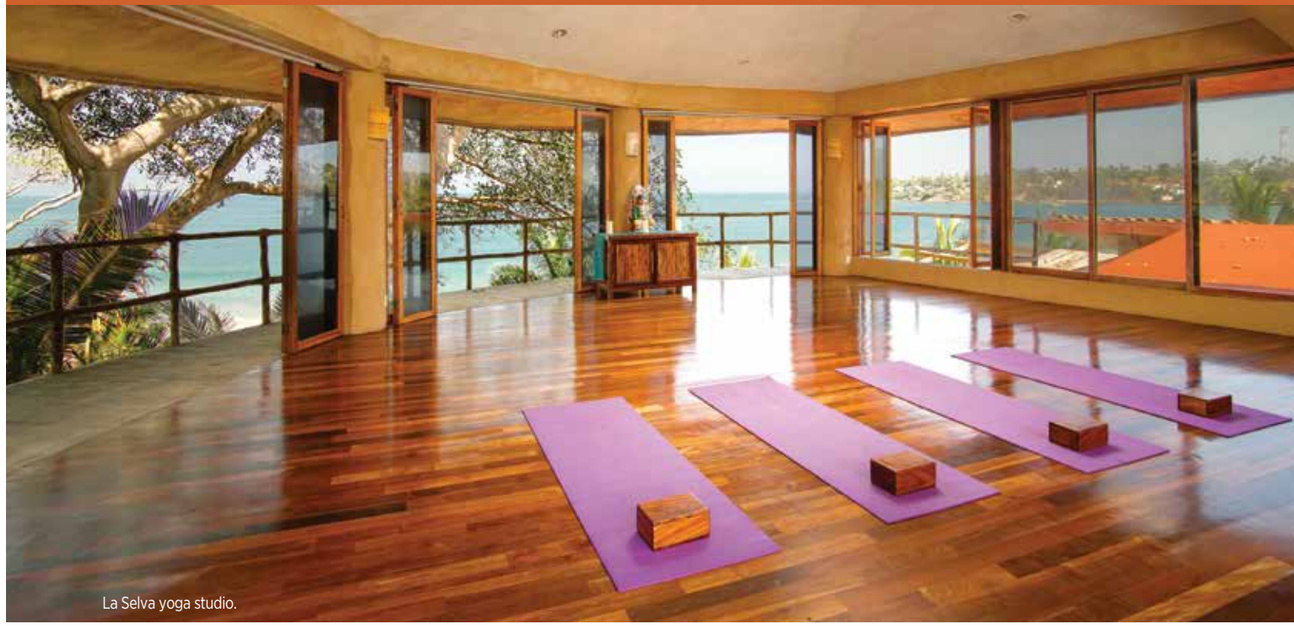
A vast organic farm, El Rancho, provides not only employment, but also vegetables, herbs, and fruit for the hotel, as well as chicken and eggs. In the new industrial kitchen young people learn to pickle, can, and preserve the harvested food. All the wooden furniture at the hotel is built, with donated machines, in a workshop for apprentices.

On the day I visited, women were working on sewing machines in a large light-filled room, making all the hotel uniforms, cushion covers, blankets and bedding. It's a circular economy with one woman at the heart of it all.

Her name is Laura del Valle and she is the energetic Mexican/American owner who bought the land in the early 80s as a newly graduated medical doctor, and set out to make a difference in the life of this rural community.

Living in a mud adobe hut on the beach she started a non-profit medical clinic and began seeing patients. Between 1985 and 2012 her clinic served 14,000 families and during this time, her dream of a Zen-like seaside retreat began to blossom.

Mar de Jade offers an inspiring, soul-soothing retreat on the Pacific coast of Mexico.



La Selva yoga studio.

PHOTOS COURTESY MAR DE JADE

Laura del Valle is like the guardian angel of this little pocket of Mexico; training and employing the adults, feeding and educating the children, caring for the sick and even fending off the developers who threaten this piece of paradise.

JUDY ROSS

This page:

Laura del Valle is the owner of Mar de Jade, as well as a medical doctor and lifelong Zen Buddhist.

The resort supports a successful orgnic farm and a Montessori/Waldorf school in the local viallage.

Facing page:

Mar de Jade spa.

Sunset yoga on the beach.

Huevos rancheros.

Garden room.

Laura del Valle is small but mighty with sparkling eyes and a ready laugh that punctuates the end of her sentences. "When I came here it was just jungle and beach," she explained over breakfast one morning, "and my first goal was to help the rural people, many of whom were living in poverty. I invited doctors to come and volunteer at the clinic and they told others and soon, we needed to have rooms for people and then, it just grew. I never expected to be running a resort."

Besides being a medical doctor, del Valle is a lifelong Zen Buddhist. As the years went by, she began attracting yoga and meditation groups from California where she lives part-time. To accommodate these groups, meeting rooms were added, and then came luxuries like swimming pools, air conditioning, and hot tubs.

The organic farm was started in 2008 and once it began producing, the hotel kitchen was expanded and the meals became more plentiful and delicious. The proud del Valle told me that one of her guests was so interested in the organic farm, she left her job in the U.S. and moved here to manage it. Most of her staff have been with her for years, appreciative of the chance to be part of this collaborative adventure.

Another initiative is El Jardin, the Montessori/Waldorf school that opened in the village 12 years ago when del Valle's grandson was school age. Her daughter Angelica and son-in-law Jorge have two children and have taken over much of the operation, including the school. It sits high on a hill with views of the sea and a large shaded courtyard where some of the children were gathered at tables eating a hot meal when I arrived midday. "This may be their only meal of the day," explained Adriana, the English teacher who showed me around. "We have 80 children from kindergarten to eighth grade.

The school started with just one small Montessori classroom and every year we added another grade." Without this school the children of Chacala could easily become part of a problem del Valle calls NoNa "... the young people here either go north for work or get into narcotics."

Much of my week at Mar de Jade was spent in admiration of Laura del Valle and what she has achieved. Every day I awoke at dawn (prompted by the crowing rooster) and strolled down to the breakfast bar where herbal teas and pots of excellent coffee were set out for early risers, along with homemade muffins and bread, fresh from the oven. I could sit with my coffee and watch the sea roll in, before heading off to yoga, which took place in an airy room presided over by a large bronze Buddha. Hikes were also offered and one could rent paddle boards and kayaks at the town beach. Massages and other spa treatments were relaxing options.

Another delight at Mar de Jade is the food. Wholesome meals are served buffet style and include salads and fresh fruits as well as a hot buffet with Mexican dishes – shrimp fajitas, huevos rancheros, chicken tortillas, and always, fish from the sea. There's a dessert and coffee station with cappuccinos, homemade ice cream, and an array of baked goods. And there's a terrific palapa-style bar with a vast menu of tropical drinks and a good wine list. After evening yoga, from 4.30 to 6, we headed straight to the bar where Augustine whipped up margaritas and piña coladas.

It was restorative to spend a week doing yoga, walking the beach, swimming in the sea, and meeting someone like Laura del Valle who believes that "people come to Mar de Jade to find the better part of themselves." She's like the guardian angel of this little pocket of Mexico; training and employing the adults, feeding and educating the children, caring for the sick, and even fending off the bad guys – the greedy developers who threaten her enterprise in this piece of paradise. ■

PHOTOS COURTESY MAR DE JADE

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There are some great offers on select 2023 European River Cruises from **Avalon Waterways**, with complimentary air from specific gateways and savings of up to $700 per couple. Some of the cities included in this offer are Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, Edmonton and Winnipeg, where, subject to availability and dates, you can receive free air in economy class to and from your port of embarkation for your river cruise. That's some offer – and it's valid while space lasts until April 30. See your travel advisor or check Avalon Waterways Canadian website for complete details and all cities. This is for new bookings, and it's wise to check all the conditions surrounding the offers. Avalon has many lovely river ships, sailing on the Danube, the Rhine, Moselle, and in France on the Rhône and Seine, so there are many choices, and they offer a terrific onboard experience and fantastic Active and Discovery shore excursions.

COURTESY AVALON WATERWAYS

FAMVELD/ SHUTTERSTOCK

Longer cruises from Riviera

Riviera River Cruises, the UK's leading river cruise operator with a fleet of 11 ships, has added three new 11-day itineraries to its 2024 European cruise program after seeing an increased demand for more in-depth experiences along the Seine River in France (Paris, Normandy and Historic Treasures of the Seine River) and the magnificent Rhine River (Cologne, the Rhine Gorge and Medieval Germany) and its tributary, the Moselle River (The Moselle, Luxembourg and the Majestic Rhine), in Germany. These new 11-day itineraries are the ideal fit between the brand's typical eight-day cruises, which some might think aren't long enough, and their longer 15-day cruises, which might leave others wanting to get home. Riviera offers 21 itineraries on 10 European rivers and waterways throughout the year, including Christmas Markets cruises on the Rhine and Danube rivers and exclusive departures for solo travellers with no single supplement.

SIMON DANNHAUER / SHUTTERSTOCK

Emerald expands 2023 river cruise lineup

Emerald Cruises has added four additional sailing dates to three of its most popular river itineraries. There are two new dates for the charming and festive Christmas Markets cruises on the Rhine and the Danube on December 16 and November 24 respectively. On Portugal's Douro River, Emerald's ship sails round-trip from Porto and through the valley lined with vineyards and gorgeous scenery. The season has been extended into the late Autumn with its golden colours –with sailings on November 18 and 25. Additional Christmas Market cruises and Douro River sailings are available for 2023 due to travellers' demands. And there's great news for families too! Dedicated Family River Cruises, designed explicitly for multi-gen cruisers, are now offered on the Rhine on **Emerald Luna** on July 17 and the Danube on July 15 on the **Emerald Dawn**. The itineraries are geared for family activities both ashore and on the vessels.

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