

DINE

SARA WAXMAN TASTES AND TELLS™

TORONTO Top Chefs

Miami Heat
Savouring **Quebec**
Spiritual **Japan**
Cooking in **Thailand**
Sailing the Silver Seas



Indianapolis MOTO Grand Prix
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Wine Country - Falling For Niagara



Sailing the Silver Seas

Sara Waxman takes a pleasure cruise



I find my suite quite easily once on board the M/V Silver Whisper. Some suite. It's 919 square feet of elegance that would not be out of place in a swanky Toronto high-rise. A knock at the door. Who could it be? My private butler Nissim has my bags and prepares to unpack and hang my clothing in the walk-in closet. He offers tea sandwiches and champagne. We're about to set sail on a cruise along the Eastern Caribbean. I step out to my spacious teak verandah, put my feet up on a lounge and watch the orange and magenta sun set behind the hills of Barbados.

Up until the very last moment, I had my doubts about taking a luxury cruise on my own. I imagined the worst-case scenario: seven lonely days and evenings, staring at the sea. How mistaken I was.

Cocktails at 6:00; dinner at 7:00. The hostess at The Restaurant has a nice surprise for me — I will be seated with my countrymen tonight. The open seating allows guests to dine when and with whom they wish—a policy I appreciate. Except for the fact that we are moving, I could easily be in my hometown. Low cal, low carb, vegetarian and vegan options are on the menu. The thought of a wellness program or a spartan food plan flits through my mind for a few seconds, until I read some of the signature French dishes created by the Grands Chefs Relais & Chateaux. I resolve to visit the gym every morning at 7:30 for a circuit training class, or Pilates, or at least jog around the track on the upper deck. Now I can order delectable food and wine to my heart's content.

We plan to meet for lunch tomorrow at the pool, and I take the elevator to my suite. The large bed has been turned down—of course, there is chocolate—and an interesting pillow menu. Sleep comes quickly, lulled by the gentle movement of the ship. Next morning, we are in St. Lucia, where some people have taken advantage of the shore excursion to visit the much-awarded resort of Ladera, and sail around the island in a motorboat. I prefer to have lunch on board at poolside and enjoy a shrimp cocktail, salmon, strawberry and spinach salad and the drink du jour, Porto Cervio: grapefruit juice, Campari and a splash of soda. Other days, they suggest Silver Jasmine with Gin and Campari; Basil Gimlet with fresh basil added to gin and lime juice; the classic Mad Men martini. Bridge players seek each other out, and those who are competitive Trivia players have a rousing match at 4 p.m. each day. The hours pass in a flurry of conversations with other passengers who are here from all over the world, drawn by many of the same reasons: small ship; fine dining; excellent quality of service. And, I might add, meticulous housekeeping, even by my clean-freak standards.



Evening brings dining adventure on the pool deck. Hot Rocks Barbecue allows each guest to grill his own Sterling Silver AAA beef filet, New York strip, rib-eye steak or chop on hot rocks at each table. After dinner, dancing on the deck under the stars to Europe's Top-40 is fun (and exercise) and no one hesitates to invite a stranger to hit the dance floor. After this casual evening, everyone has become friends.

It's easy to lose track of time on board a ship. The next afternoon, sunning on the top deck next to the driving range, Robert Grossman, a physician from Toronto, tells me he has enjoyed traveling with the Silversea about eight times, and plans to continue. "We like the ambience of a small ship," he says, "and because of its size, it can go into more ports than the large mega-ships—the Falklands, for example. We have met delightful people over the years and have developed lasting friendships as a result." He adds, "the quality of service and the cuisine aboard this ship is of the highest calibre, it's like a traveling 5-star hotel." >>>

I check the mailbox outside of my door every day for my News on Board paper, *The Canadian* (ha, the weather in Toronto hovers between -4 with snow and -8 and partly cloudy), as well as for invitations and the *Chronicles* of the day's shipboard events. While some people plan excursions at every stop and visit beautiful beaches, zip-line, hike, snorkel, kayak and shop, for me, the ship itself is the luxury vacation. We did, however, stroll through St. Barths, an outpost of France, and spent quality time in an exquisite shoe salon. Later, we enjoyed a pain au chocolate and a superb tarte citron in a quaint pastry shop. Anchored in the harbour are the world's largest yachts, owned by international tycoons. These vessels are immediately recognized by boating-buffs, and Blackberrys are out, checking on statistics.

Don Fluke parlayed his interest in music, theatre, radio and TV into his dream job: Cruise Director. Clearly, the man is having fun making sure that we all have a good time. "I'm here for the guests," he says, and plans all the fun, games and shows. The Starlight Theatre has spectacular cabaret entertainment by professional singers, dancers and actors; these gifted people give their all, and every night, the show is a hit. After the curtain comes down, tiny lights highlight the stage and we're dancing, enveloped in what seems to be real starlight. Romance hangs heavy in the air.

Just as the first days pass slowly in idyllic relaxation, the final few days seem to fly by. I have a chance to speak to the person whose finger is on the pulse of the ship. Hotel Director Franco Rienzo is a man who anticipates. "I talk to the guests and listen to what they have to say, and in this way, I understand their needs." Rienzo is originally from Naples, has impeccable hotel management credentials and has honed his skills in the finest European and British hotels. "Besides the administrative work, there are always the daily challenges," he says. And I have the sense that he meets them all with aplomb.

The staff capably meets challenges as well. During a pre-dinner bath in my huge Jacuzzi tub, I hit the wrong button and clouds of bubbles and water begin streaming over the tub to the floor and, as I watch in horror, a deluge of water and perfumed bubbles begin to spill over into my living room! Frantically hitting all the buttons on the tub, eventually I hit the right one. Channeling the old TV series, *I Love Lucy*, I throw all my towels and Terry robes on the floor and call Nissim. He is at my door in moments, carrying my carefully ironed evening gown, and calmly suggesting I just get dressed and go to dinner. He will deal with it—and of course, no evidence remains.

Tonight I am feeling lucky and choose to spin the wheels of fortune in the Casino. I miss the Blackjack Tournament at 3 p.m. in favour of an Ionithermie Detoxifying Body Treatment. My cup of silver dollars empties quickly, then, just before I leave, the slot machine begins singing and dancing and spewing out a mountain of dollars. Now I can spree with finesse. Time to cash in my chips and visit the sumptuous and quirky tax-free Collections Gift Boutique and its pantheon of global brand names, which, by coincidence, is adjacent to the Casino.

Napoleon said, "an army travels on its stomach," and I would adapt that to include the cruise ship. The quality of cuisine at every meal, in every dining room and lounge has been excellent, with superb service by staff whose name badges show their home country. There is one man responsible for this, Executive Chef Denis Bettinger, and I seek him out for a conversation. Bettinger grew up by the sea in France, and worked in the kitchens of the world's top hotels. His sense of humour is evident when he presents a culinary demonstration and shows us how simple it is to prepare herb-roasted loin of lamb and honey and pepper-coated breast of duck. "You always have to wow them every time they come to dinner," he adds, "you can't let it get boring." The most popular menu items have proven themselves: "Out of every 250 guests, 120 will order Osso Bucco, and on lobster nights, we go through about 250 lobsters." Since the late '80s, Bettinger has called Canada his home, but says, "Wherever I go, that's my family."

Every day there is something that I would consider a highlight. Dinner with Captain S.L.C. Gennaro Arma at his table is a formal affair, with service and haute French cuisine to match. The pool deck buffet barbecue, with its array of spectaculars, whole roast suckling pig, whole enormous roasted fish, vegetables enough for an outdoor market and, of course, an overwhelming sweet table. The Relais & Chateaux dinner in Le Champagne is as if I were at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Paris. And yet, the most unforgettable dinner is my own private dinner party with shipboard friends, served in my suite by Nissim, from a menu I chose with Denis Bettinger.

Just as I turn on the music in my entertainment centre, my guests arrive, bearing a chilled bottle of bubbly, which Nissim opens at once and serves with our amuse of caviar and blinis. I've indulged myself with my favourite dishes and trust that my guests will enjoy them as well. An appetizer of torchon of foie gras and a small glass of Sauterne; an intermezzo of porcini mushroom risotto; a palate cleanser of coconut sorbet followed by our main course of rack of lamb with steamed vegetables. Nissim has chosen the appropriate wines, and our special dinner ends with coffee and petit fours.

Would I embark on a cruise on my own again? Absolutely. It's the only way to travel.
www.silversea.com



Top to bottom: Hotel Director Franco Rienzo; Executive Chef Denis Bettinger; private butler Nissim.