

CRUISING

Enjoying heaven on the high seas

Jeanne Beker learns how to relax on a Mediterranean cruise

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Back in the late '80s, I was married to a radio morning man. He hosted a contest that took a large group of "winners" on a Caribbean cruise and I was lucky enough to tag along — the first time I'd been on a cruise. Sadly, my seasick ex spent most of the trip holed up in our tiny room, while I was left to schmooze the guests. I managed to get off the boat for outings in Nassau (in the Bahamas) and Puerto Rico, and even did some scuba diving in St. Thomas, but the experience left me with a dubious impression of cruises.

As the years passed, I heard tales of sumptuous cruises on smaller luxury ships that afforded travellers the opportunity to savour relaxation in untold ways.

So this summer, when I was presented with the opportunity to take a Silversea cruise — this time, to the Mediterranean, and sans "winners" and seasick husband — I jumped at the chance.

DAY ONE

I arrive in Civitavecchia, a port outside Rome, to board the Silver Spirit, Silversea's newest vessel. I'm assigned Suite 649 and feel like I've just won the lottery when I see my wood-paneled quarters. The living room features a glorious arrangement of pink lilies and champagne. My butler introduces himself, informing me he's at my disposal for the duration of the trip. Finally, my very own personal assistant!

Madonna's "Holiday" blares as I indulge in a frozen margarita on the upper pool deck. Having been warned that one usually gains a half pound for every day on a cruise, I order a spinach salad for lunch.

Back in my suite, Christian shows up in a bowtie and tails, filling me in on more of the ship's details. I take a nap before hitting the spa for a massage by a superb therapist. Midway through, the ship sails. The gentle rocking soothes me, as though I'm not seasick enough.

There are several restaurants on board, but I opt for the main dining room, where I'm asked if I'd like to join a table of other solo passengers. I shyly choose to sit alone. Friendly waiters fuss over me, and the food is great, starting with sea bass carpaccio, a grilled veggie salad, spicy Bouillabaisse and low-cal ice cream for dessert.

DAY TWO

I wake up as the Sorrento coast comes into view. I've booked an excursion to Capri and 35 of us take the tender to the mainland, then board a hydrofoil for the 20-minute trip. A spirited guide named Antonio takes charge of 17 of us and we make our way through the beautiful town. I opt for a 12-minute chairlift ride to the top of the cliffs so I can take in the breathtaking views.

A little shopping time down below in a swank emporium and I walk away with two inlaid wood music boxes. I lunch on octopus salad at Villa Verdi, an eatery frequented by celebs such as Jessica Simpson and Magic Johnson, according to the restaurant's snapshot-lined front cover. More shopping post-lunch through the winding, bougainvillea-lined streets. My haul is a floral cotton pendant and eyelid lace skirts for my girls.

We make the trip back to the ship for high tea. Then to the pool for a siesta and back to the room to change for one of the two formal evenings. I meet a friendly man



DREAMTIME PHOTO

Zakynthos features a harbour full of pricey yachts. Right, Jeanne Beker and her butler, Christian.

from Florida at a drinks reception on the way to dinner, and he invites me to join him. He's a former cruise line exec, and helps fill me in on "cruise culture."

DAY THREE

We pull into Palermo, which is not the charming, exotic kind of backdrop I savoured at our last port. But one of my best friends, Bonnie Brooks, is joining the cruise today, so I'm excited.

Bonnie has been travelling for two days from New York to make it here, so we call it a pool day and luxuriate in the ship's amenities. A quick swim and then to the spa for a collagen facial — one of the best I've ever had.

There's a bottle of champagne in my room that would make the perfect aperitif, so Bonnie drops by for a glass before dinner. Christian pops in with shrimp and crab gaucamole appetizers and we sit on my veranda and thank our lucky stars.

Bonnie and I dine at Hot Rocks, the eatery overlooking the pool, preparing our own food under the stars — raw NY strip steaks are brought to us on sizzling stones, so we can cook our meat how we like.

I attempt to take in the Elton John "Rocket Man" review, but start to nod off. I wind up in one of the bars for a midnight cup of tea.

DAY FOUR

We start the day with a private yoga class with a hunky British instructor named Gareth. Then it's off the ship for a visit to Malta, where it's a sweltering 37 Celsius in the shade. This is a walled city and there are more than 100 churches nearby. It's noon, but the one we want to visit, which has Caravaggio paintings in it, doesn't open until 3 p.m.

We find a cab (ask what the fare will be first or you might pay 40 euros for a six-minute ride, as we did). Bonnie asks to go to "cute shops" but this old Maltese cabbie has no idea what "cute" means and we wind up at a modern mall!

Eventually we're dropped off at a "cute" restaurant, Peppino's. We sit at a tiny terrace and have calamari and linguine.

Back on the ship, Christian has left cool wet towels in my fridge to help me cool off. After a swim and a nap, we head to the Panorama Lounge for a fancy Cosmo called a "Deep Blue Sea," and then back down to the restaurant for a shrimp and red snapper dinner.

There's a jazz show in one of the lounges and a Ukrainian dance duo



tear up the dance floor. Bonnie goes to bed, but I'm determined to hang in at the lounge, which transforms into a disco. I'm dying to boogie, but don't dare get up myself. Suddenly, it starts feeling like I should have brought my guy along on this trip.

I go out on the deck to gaze at the moon and end the night reading and eating chocolate — the next best thing for a single gal.

DAY FIVE

I'm increasingly aware of the eclectic mix of guests. There are 470 on board: mostly European but about a third American and a couple dozen Canadians. There are lots of older couples and some younger ones, and large multi-generational families. There are also several single women and mother/daughter duos, but very few single men.

Today, we spend the day at sea, on our way to the Greek islands. We start with yoga, then bake at the pool. Escaping to my cool suite for a nap is a lazy luxury.

It's another formal evening and Bonnie and I have been invited to dine with the Italian captain, Angelo A. Corsaro, and a few other couples. After dinner, Bonnie and I pop into the casino, where she's lured into the action at a blackjack table, while I play a slot machine. I win \$23 and quit while I'm ahead.

DAY SIX

I float by the most beautiful scenery — mountains and cliffs and ancient buildings and beautiful little boats and lovely houses nestled into hill-

sides. And I just want to drink it in.

We reach Corfu. Eleven of us opt for a Greek cooking class onshore, and we take a 40-minute bus ride down a seaside highway, through olive groves and past sheep farms. Finally, we arrive in Telbouni and the Spyros & Vassiliis restaurant, housed in a former stable.

We sit in a large courtyard garden and are served tzatziki and taramasalata and feta cheese and crusty bread and bottles of wine. Chef Spyros shows us how to prepare horiatiki Greek salad and moussaka.

We don't get a chance to cook ourselves, but we do taste Spyros's delicious fare. The Bechamel sauce on the moussaka is crazy rich and the feta cheese and olives are so good I can't stop.

DAY SEVEN

This morning, we pull into Zakynthos, where we'll take tenders to the shore. But the second bus out is stopped by a large group of cabbies who are on strike. We go ashore anyway and explore on foot.

There's a main street with lots of pretty shops and an upscale feel. The rows of yachts are impressive and I start fantasizing about meeting a stranger who owns one and sailing off into the sunset. Instead, I buy more souvenirs.

DAY EIGHT

Last day of the cruise and we pull into Nauplia. I haven't booked an excursion but am eager to check out the town, so I take the tender. The shops are beyond charming,

with all sorts of restaurants and cafes down narrow streets. I find a toy store with old tin windup toys and puppets. I buy two traditional Greek puppets for my puppeteer daughter, Bekky, and a wooden box with a picture of a street musician festival on it for Joey, my musical daughter. There's also an antique store, where I find two wooden-framed silk prints of pastoral scenes — perfect for my farmhouse.

On the way back to the tender I pop into Elias, a restaurant on the square. The waiter is quick to tell me Mick Jagger, French actor Alain Delon and Marcello Mastroianni have all dined there, and he points out a picture of Mastroianni, the Italian actor, on the wall. I lurch on octopus in spicy tomato sauce before heading back to the ship for a hot stone massage.

I convince Bonnie to go back to Nauplia, since we aren't setting sail until 10 p.m. But first, we sit on my balcony and Christian pops a bottle of bubbly for us. He even offers to pack my bags.

In town, we do more shopping before finding a restaurant — Vassilis — for a traditional Greek dinner, complete with ouzo and tzatziki.

Back aboard the ship, the harbour lights twinkle as we sail into the great blue sea. I'm amazed at how all this romantic magic has become such a way of life. Unquestionably, I'll miss it madly. But next time, I'm bringing a man!

Jeanne Beker is a freelance writer and TV personality based in Toronto. Her trip was subsidized by Silversea Cruises.