

UNTIL a few weeks ago, when I heard the words “cruise ship”, I imagined dreary canteen-style lunch buffets, with 3 500 people queuing alongside dry, pasty bain-maries filled with two-day-old pasta and wilting, soggy lettuce.

I pictured screaming kids climbing over each other in the shallow end of a too-small pool and rooms full of grey-haired people playing bingo. No, there was no way I would consider spending my precious annual leave days confined to a ship’s poky cabin and crowded entertainment areas, as opposed to being free to roam the streets of a foreign city.

I am now confessing I was horribly mistaken but, in my defence, the only cruises I had heard of were the ones that go nowhere or to an arbitrary Portuguese island which is really just a barren stretch of beach without so much as a toilet facility.

After I was fortunate enough to be given a brief introduction to Azamara, a small, luxury cruise line which is a member of the better known Royal Caribbean group, I was intrigued.

The smaller ships are able to sail to less travelled ports typically off limits to big cruise lines and dock in prime positions close to town.

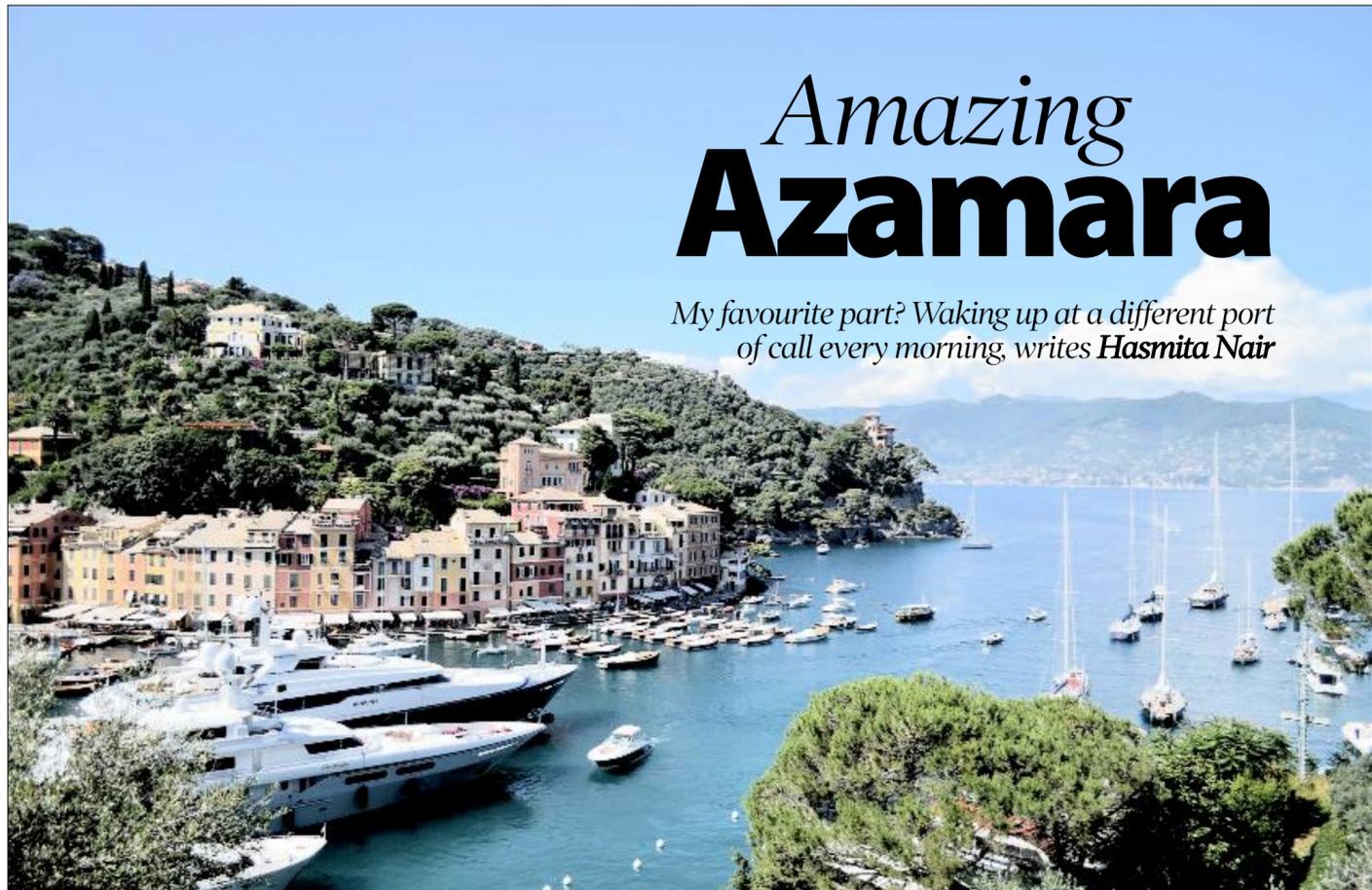
Azamara’s focus is “destination immersion”, meaning longer stays and more overnights at each port, so you can fully experience the place you visit, whether that means going to a jazz club or enjoying tea and a pastry at a local café.

The cruise line’s focus is the allure of the ports of call, rather than the grandeur of the ship, although one could easily spend all seven days enjoying its five-star luxury and not stepping off at all.

And so, I eagerly agreed to join Azamara on a cruise starting in Rome, stopping over in Tuscany, then sailing through the Italian Riviera and ending in Monte Carlo, Monaco. Before I even continue, let me say I have already asked for a copy of next year’s itinerary and am planning my return.

Being a first-time cruiser, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect. We arrived at the Civitavecchia Port, about an hour-long train ride away from central Rome, to a red carpet with staff waiting to welcome us. The lobby looked like that of any other five-star hotel – warm, friendly guest relations staff, luxury finishes and a golden spiral staircase. We were shown to our room, which admittedly I was concerned about, after reading that it was a mere 16m² in size with a 6m² veranda. Yes, cruise ship rooms are notoriously teeny, and I could barely do an unobstructed 360° turn in the shower, but despite the size, it still felt luxurious. Egyptian cotton bed linen, terry bathrobes and slippers, freshly cut flowers, high-quality amenities, 24-hour room service, and most of all, a panoramic sea view from the floor to ceiling glass door leading to our veranda, all helped to placate the lack of space.

We were even more pleased when we found out what was included with our room. Complimentary meals, bottled water, soft drinks, coffees and teas as well as selected spirits, beers and wines were more than welcome after spending the equivalent of a home loan repayment on food in Spain, the week before we embarked on the cruise. Also free of charge was self-service laundry and one “Azamazing Evening” event, a local experience rich in culture, which changes on every cruise.



Porto Venere is a medieval town that stretches north along the coast of the famous Cinque Terre – one of the most stunning coastal regions in Italy.

Pictures: Rishav Nair

Amazing Azamara

My favourite part? Waking up at a different port of call every morning, writes *Hasmita Nair*



Tuscany is the most beautiful area – green fields, olive groves and medieval hilltop villages.



We were in the lap of luxury in Monte Carlo, Monaco on the beautiful Mediterranean.

At dinner, we had a choice of four restaurants: “Windows Cafe”, a casual buffet offering, “Discoveries”, à la carte fine dining, “Aqualina”, European cuisine with a Mediterranean flair, and “Prime C”, a classic steakhouse. The former two come complimentary with all rooms, while the latter are only complimentary for suite guests and carry a \$25 (R246) per person surcharge for everyone else. Alas, we were told the latter three don’t allow shorts or blue jeans at dinner, and obviously that was all my partner had, so we were restricted to dining at Windows Cafe until we visited the shops as soon as we docked at our first port the next day. Upon entering the restaurant, and soaking up the sounds of a guitarist and singer crooning in the corner, it didn’t feel like much of a compromise at all.

Half the seating was outside, while guests who chose to sit indoors could enjoy a stunning view of the sea, as the restaurant’s walls are glass. Despite being a buffet, many of the menu items were made fresh on the spot including pastas and stir fries. There was a roast on offer, as well as a wide variety of breads and salads. Desserts were prepared individually, so there was no hacking from a large container of chocolate mousse. We were soon to discover that the buffet changed daily, complete with decorations – we thoroughly enjoyed the Indian buffet.

Most nights, our restaurant of choice was Discoveries. The dress code led to an upmarket, exclusive experience, preluded by the incredible food. I was constantly in awe of how the skilled staff managed to serve close to 400 people at any

given time, and still provide service rivaling that of a top fine dining restaurant. We were greeted by name by our waiter, and observed the tablecloths being changed at every seating. I was equally impressed by both the plating and flavour of all the dishes – it was as if we were enjoying fine dining at a different restaurant each night, as the menu changed daily, with fish, meat, poultry and vegetarian options to choose from. We feasted on dishes such as fillet mignon served with half a lobster tail, prawn tempura and lamb loin, New York cheesecake and giant-sized crème brûlée. My favourite dish was the chocolate fondue – melted chocolate (possibly Lindt), served with strawberries, marshmallows and chocolate brownie pieces on toothpicks.

Because we had spent two weeks touring Europe prior to embarking on the cruise, we didn’t have any desire to eat at the local restaurants situated at the various ports, but if the cruise had been the only element of our trip, we may have felt that we were missing out on part of the travel experience by only eating on the ship. I raised this issue with restaurant manager, Mario Kukco, who said if a guest wants to eat a particular meal, all they have to do is ask. The chefs come from diverse backgrounds, so they are able to prepare most dishes, and they try never to refuse a guest’s request. Of course, should a guest wish to dine outside the ship, they are welcome to, and it is quite easy to enjoy dinner outside, because most nights guests were only required to be back on the ship by 9.45pm in time for a

10pm disembarkation. Considering the ship docked at each port no later than 9am daily, you are given a full day to explore at your leisure. However, dinner is only the start of the evening. As both my partner and I are under the age of 32, when I read that Azamara’s target market is guests between the ages of 45 and 65, I was a tad worried. It is fair to say that a lot of the entertainment is targeted towards an older audience, but that doesn’t mean there is nothing on the ship for younger people. Every night, after dinner, there is a performance in the cabaret theatre. This could be anything from a Broadway-themed cabaret to a comedy show. After this, guests can gamble at the casino, or go upstairs to “The Looking Glass”, where there is a daily dance party – basically a nightclub without everything I hate

about nightclubs – crowds, cigarettes and drunken rowdy people. This is more of a high-class lounge; guests alternate between ballroom dancing and booty shaking. We enjoyed the older, mostly American, crowd and found them very sociable. It was as if we were all on this adventure together, and most people were more than willing to share their travel tips. On more than one occasion, we ended up joining tables at dinner with other guests after chatting in the lift or on the tour bus. You know you’re on a luxury cruise when in seven days not a single person gets noticeably drunk, which is bound to happen when you mix large groups of people and unlimited, free alcohol.

Pricewise, the cruise offers good value for money, considering the prices are all inclusive. The least expensive rooms, which are interior cabins, are priced at around \$2 300 (R22 664) a person for a seven-night cruise. The most popular room choice is the veranda room, which is priced at \$3 100 a person on average. If money poses no restriction, the suites are excessively luxurious and come with a private butler. These are priced at about \$8 500 a person.

Excursions are on the pricey side, costing \$130 a person on average for a half-day excursion. You are by no means obliged to go on these excursions, but at each port, there are plenty of taxi drivers waiting for passengers. You are bound to find other guests who want to go to the same places, so it’s quite easy to share a taxi and split the cost.

I really enjoyed the fact that the destinations we docked at were split between bigger, well-known ports and smaller, isolated islands, some of which I hadn’t even heard of. I was a bit anxious about not knowing what to do in these lesser known destinations, but every morning, a destination expert was available to answer any questions guests had about a particular port.

Guests were also given a daily pamphlet outlining the specific port’s history and tourist attractions.

After embarking in Rome, our first stop was Elba, Portoferraio, a tiny island dotted with quaint towns, beautiful scenery and a turbulent history – this is where emperor Napoleon Bonaparte lived in exile. Here, we climbed up a fortress and walked around the city looking for free wi-fi – expensive on the ship.

Next up, we stopped at Livorno, a port about 30 minutes from Pisa and an hour-and-a-half away from Florence, where we were docked for two days, giving us more time to explore.

We spent a day visiting the Leaning Tower of Pisa, aiming to get back to the ship early ahead of our “Azamazing Evening”, which was a Tuscan experience, complimentary for all guests. We travelled a scenic route to a hilltop castle in Greve, Chianti, where we saw the century-old vineyards of Tuscany and enjoyed local food and wine, along with a Three Tenors opera performance.

The next day, we took a train to Florence, which is a beautiful city – small and compact with narrow streets and large open squares. This is definitely the leather capital – you can pick up designer leather bags and jackets for a steal.

The following stop was Porto Venere, a small, medieval town that

stretches north along the coast of the famous “Cinque Terre” or “Five Lands”, which is justifiably famous as one of the most stunning coastal regions in Italy. Hiking trails stretch the length of the coast and the views are unsurpassed.

On our second last day, we were due to visit two ports, the first being Santa Margarita, a classic harbour town. We opted to stay on the ship, and tried to work off some of the food we had indulged in by running on the jogging track and working out in the gym. The latter part of the morning felt much like being at a resort; we lay on deck chairs with a panoramic view of Santa Margarita, a book in one hand and a piña colada in the other, which seemed to automatically refill. After playing a few rounds of table tennis, we decided to head to the barbecue which was in full force, along with live music. This was just another example of the way the catering staff go all out – instead of just the usual beef burger, there were also vegetarian, salmon and chicken burgers to choose from, as well as a large array of toppings.

After lunch that day, we docked at incredibly picturesque Portofino. The first thing that caught my eye was all the luxury yachts at the harbour. The tiny town has pastel-coloured homes and exclusive boutiques, like Louis Vuitton and Rolex. This is the summer hang-out for celebrities and Italian fashion designers alike. After walking up a hiking trail and admiring the overwhelming views, we headed back to the ship for afternoon tea and snacks at Mosaic Café, another one of the ship’s inclusive amenities.

The next day was our last, and with a heavy heart we arrived in Monte Carlo, Monaco. Waking up in a new port every day and soaking in the view from our veranda, without having to stress about packing and unpacking or catching a train to move from one destination to the next, was my absolute favourite part about the cruise, and is the main reason I would cruise again.

Monaco is everything you imagine it to be – every second car is a Porsche, Ferrari or Bentley, there are designer stores galore and the casino is the main attraction. The entire state is only 2km²; the second smallest country in the world, after the Vatican. It was quite thrilling to see where the Formula One race starts and finishes, and we witnessed the changing of the guards at the Palace of Monaco.

The ship was docked in Monaco overnight, and when we disembarked at 4am to leave for Nice airport, we saw a group of girls just arriving back from a night out on the town! All in all, our cruise with Azamara was spectacular, surpassed only by the beauty of the destinations it docked at.

Azamara cruises all over the world: popular voyages include the 13 night “Spice Route”, which starts in Mumbai, passes through Kochi, the Maldives and Sri Lanka and ends in Chennai as well as the nine-night “Best of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina”. I’ve earmarked “Croatia’s Inside Passage and Montenegro” for my next voyage, which starts and ends in Venice and cruises through four different destinations in Croatia.

Visit www.cruises.co.za for more details.



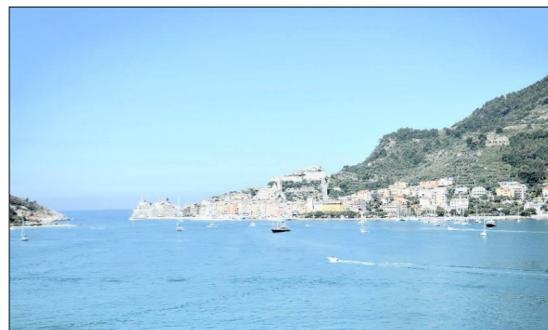
The Azamara docked off the coast of Elba to which Napoleon was exiled.



We worked off some of our indulgence on the jogging track above the pool.



Most nights, we opted to dine at the swanky Discoveries restaurant



Porto Venere, on the Gulf of Poets, is indeed a place worth lyricising about.



The Indian buffet at Windows Café is a delight to the taste buds.