

SEA BREAK

# LIFE'S A CRUISE

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

UNTIL a few weeks ago, when I heard the words "cruise ship", I imagined dreary canteen-style lunch buffets, with 3 500 people queuing up for two-day-old pasta and soggy salads. 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 confined to a ship's pokey 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 toilet facilities.

After I was fortunate enough to be given a brief introduction to Azamara – a small, luxury cruise line that comprised of two ships, Azamara Journey and Azamara Quest – I was intrigued.

The smaller ships are able to sail to less travelled ports typically off limits to big cruise liners 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

destination, whether that means going to a jazz club or enjoying tea and cake 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 without stepping off at all.

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.

As a first-time cruiser, I wasn't 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 staffers, 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 16m<sup>2</sup> with a veranda.

Yes, cruise ship rooms are notoriously tiny, 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, above all, a panoramic sea view from the floor



Portofino: Luxury yachts and exclusive yachts alongside pastel coloured houses at Portofino.

"Pictures: Rishav Nair

to ceiling glass door leading to the veranda all helped to compensate for 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, coffee and tea 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 was the laundry and one "Azamazing Evening" event, a local experience rich in culture, which changes on every cruise.

At dinner, we had a choice of four restaurants: Windows Cafe, a casual buffet, Discoveries, à la carte fine dining, Aqualina,

European cuisine with a Mediterranean flair, and Prime C, a classic steakhouse.

The first two come complimentary with all rooms, while the last are only for suite guests and carry a \$25 (R246) surcharge for everyone else.

Alas, we were told the last three don't allow shorts or blue jeans at dinner – all my partner had packed. So we were restricted to dining at Windows Cafe until we visited the shops when 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. 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.

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 bowl of chocolate mousse.

We were soon to discover that the buffet changed daily, complete with decorations – we thoroughly enjoyed the Indian buffet when it came around to that.

Most nights, our restaurant of choice was Discoveries an upmarket, exclusive experience with incredible food.

I was constantly in awe of how

the skilled staff managed to serve almost 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 the plating and flavour of all the dishes.

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.

Because we had spent two weeks touring Europe before embarking on the cruise, we didn't have any desire to eat at the restaurants in the ports, but if the cruise had been the only element of our trip we might have felt we were missing out on a travel experience by eating only onboard the ship.

I raised the issue with restaurant manager Mario Kucko, who said any guest who wants to eat a particular meal need only ask. The chefs have diverse backgrounds; so they are able to prepare most dishes and try to

never refuse a request.

It is also easy to enjoy dinner outside because most nights guests had to be back on the ship only by 9.45pm in time for a 10pm departure. Considering the ship docked at each port no later than 9am daily, you have a full day to explore at your leisure.

As my partner and I are both under the age of 32, when I read Azamara's target market is guests aged between 45 and 65, I was worried.

A lot of the entertainment is aimed at 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 – anything from a Broadway-themed cabaret to a comedy show.

Afterward, 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 such as crowds, cigarettes and drunken, rowdy people.

It's 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.

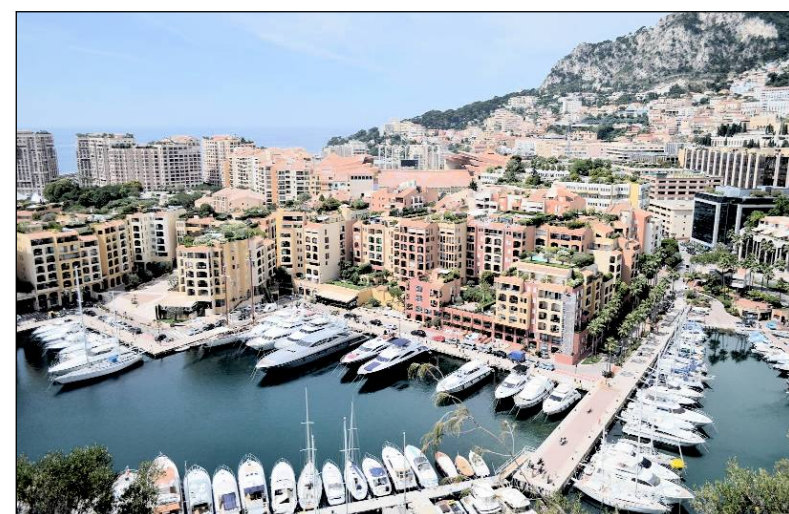
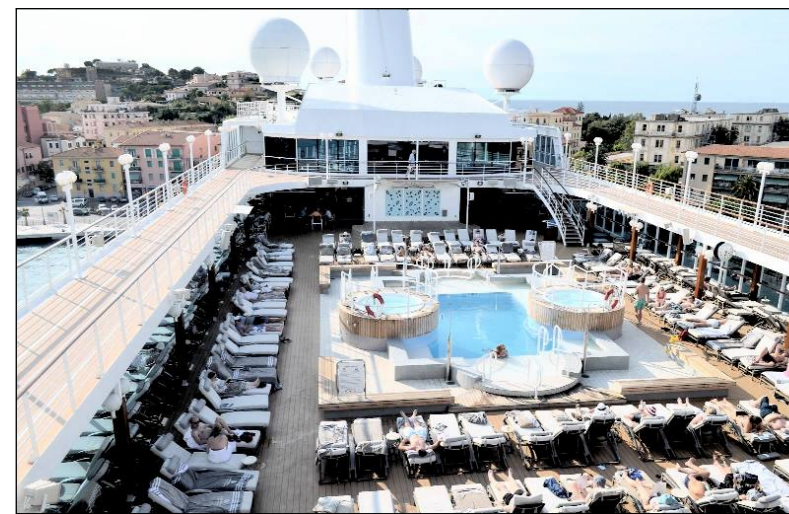
You know you're on a luxury cruise when in seven days not a single person gets noticeably drunk, which is bound to happen when you mix large groups of people and unlimited, free alcohol.

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) each for a seven-night cruise.

The most popular room choice is the veranda room, which is \$3 100 a person on average.

Then there are the luxurious suites, which come with a private butler, at about \$8 500.

Excursions tend to be pricey, costing \$130 on average for a half-day. You are not obliged to go on these. At each port, there are plenty of taxi drivers waiting for



Above: We were in the lap of luxury in Monte Carlo, Monaco, on the beautiful Mediterranean. Top: We worked off some of our indulgence on the jogging track above the pool.

passengers. It's simple to find other guests who want to go to the same destination, and that way you can split the costs.

The destinations were split between bigger, well-known ports and smaller, isolated islands, some of which I hadn't heard of. And every morning a destination expert was available to answer any questions about a particular port.

Guests were also given pamphlets on the port's history and tourist attractions.

After embarking in Rome, our first stop was Elba, Portoferraio, where 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, about 30 minutes from Pisa and an hour-and-a-half from Florence, where we were docked for two days.

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.

We travelled a scenic route to a hilltop castle in Greve, Chianti, where we saw the centuries-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.

Here you can pick up designer leather bags and jackets for a steal.

Porto Venere proved to be a small, medieval town on the Cinque Terre (five lands), one of Italy's most stunning coastal regions.

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. 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.

After playing a few rounds of table tennis, we decided to head to the barbecue, which was in full force, along with live music.

Instead of just the usual beef burger, there were vegetarian, salmon and chicken burgers to choose from, as well as a large array of toppings.

After lunch, we docked at picturesque Portofino, which had loads of luxury yachts in the harbour. The tiny town has pretty pastel-coloured homes and exclusive boutiques.

It's the summer hangout for celebrities and Italian fashion designers.

After walking up a hiking trail and admiring the views, we headed back to the ship for afternoon tea and snacks at Mosaic Café, another of the ship's inclusive amenities.

The next day we arrived in Monte Carlo, Monaco.

Waking up in a new port every day and soaking up the view from your veranda without having to stress about packing or catching a train from one destination to the next is a key reason I would cruise again.

Monaco is everything you imagine – every second car is a Porsche, Ferrari or Bentley, there are designer stores galore. The main attraction, of course, is their casino.

At only 2km<sup>2</sup>, it's the second smallest country in the world, after the Vatican. It was quite thrilling to see where the Formula One race starts and finishes.

We also witnessed the changing of the guards at the palace.

The ship docked overnight and when we disembarked at 4am to leave for Nice airport, we saw a group of girls arriving back from a night out on the town.

All in all, our cruise was spectacular, surpassed only by the beauty of the destinations.

Popular Azamara voyages include the 13-night Spice Route, which starts in Mumbai, passes through Kochi, the Maldives and Sri Lanka and ends in Chennai, and 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.

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**We feasted on dishes such as fillet mignon served with half a lobster tail, prawn tempura and lamb loin**

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