

ANCIENT EMPIRES & THE SUITE LIFE

BY PHYLLIS HARBINGER



“Here’s your phone,” says the guide, as he hands over a cellphone in front of Saint Peter’s Basilica,

amid the bustling wonder of humanity, culture and history that endlessly churns around the center of Rome. It’s day three of our 2013 *Holy Lands and Ancient Empires* Mediterranean cruise aboard the exquisite and wonderfully intimate Seabourn *Quest*, and my husband and I are anxious to experience another port of call. Every year, we spin the globe and, while it’s rotating, plant a finger then find the Seabourn ship that goes to that part of the world to take us on another romantic adventure.

Although we’re oceans away from home, we receive a pampered treatment beyond expectation aboard Seabourn, with effortless elegance, quiet sophistication, attention to detail and a level of service that allows us to fully immerse ourselves into every experience.

On that day in front of Saint Peter’s, we were mere steps away from the flourishes of Bernini, the genius of Michelangelo and the spiritual heart of Italy, all of which we had explored on previous trips with Seabourn. So we decided on a different kind of cultural pilgrimage this time, one that would allow us to discover the scions of *haute couture*—Fendi, Bulgari, Armani, Cavallo, Valentino. Our guide, engaged by Seabourn, had given us marked maps and restaurant recommendations before sending us into the dizzying world of boutique shopping in Rome. “We’ll meet here to go back to the ship,” he knowingly grinned. “However, the phone is in case you don’t make it here in time. Rome has its share of distractions.”

Shopping bags in hand, we made it back to the meeting place among the cobblestone streets and the vendors hawking their wares, our guide waving us down and greeting us by our first names. The entire crew knew our names from day one, and this personal relationship extended from the captain to the waiters to even deck stewards we had hardly ever seen.

us on the ship for the entire cruise. Each of the 215 guest suites is so well appointed that there’s almost no reason to leave the expansive confines of one’s room. Even small details, such as opening the fridge and discovering that it’s stocked with our favorites, lend a warm touch of the familiar.

And, although we’re on a cruise, it’s more akin to chartering a private yacht with our sophisticated, well-traveled friends from the far reaches of the globe. At each port of call, we define our day. Private guides, unique tours and Seabourn excursions provide exclusive access—as much or as little as we want to experience. The day before our shopping safari in the haute streets of *Roma*, we had been captivated by an extraordinary stretch of the Italian Riviera, the dreamy Cinque Terre, where colorful fishing villages have been perched among the cliffs for centuries. It is a place that hardly looks real; it’s more like a perfectly defined Hollywood set, created to make Italian life seem quaint, beautiful, comfortable and unchanging.

From our dock at Livorno, we could have gone to Pisa, Florence or other iconic Tuscany locales. We decided to explore something different; something we’d longed to do since catching the travel bug.

We loved being able to follow our whims at every port. The next closest path to a traveler’s wish fulfillment would be to find a genie in a bottle.

Cuisine Dreams

While underway between ports, I like to surround myself with a cloud of pillows, bolsters and Turkish towels on the apathy-inducing chaise lounges poolside. It’s warm most afternoons during this itinerary. Before I have a chance to ask, one of the staff, impeccably attired, appears. “Good afternoon, Ms. Harbinger. The weather is

As we reboarded, there were chilled towels and champagne at the ready and special treats left waiting to be opened in our suites.

The crew couldn’t do enough for us. The sublime attention to detail always threatens to keep

lovely but a bit hot. Would you like a cold towel or a cooling spritz? Or perhaps might I clean your sunglasses?" As he is asking, another of the staff has noticed that the ice in my drink has melted, and so refreshes it. When my glass is empty, another drink appears.

Most evenings, a gentle breeze replaces the heat of the day, and the night sky overtakes bright blues of the cloudless days with deeper, quieter cerulean shades that bring their starlit mysteries and the promise of unforgettable cuisine amidst the laughter of new friends.

Meals on a Seabourn cruise are as much a sophisticated and celebratory punctuation to the day as a sybaritic gourmet extravagance. The chefs are all members of the *Chaine des Rotisseurs*, a gastronomic society whose apparent objective is to make me forget every meal I've ever had prior, including previous meals aboard the *Quest*. The complimentary wines help elevate my epicurean experience to a place I like to call a wonderful state of immoderation. Like many, I travel by my stomach as much as by my other senses, and I firmly believe that those who share their food with you share their heart. Maybe this is why great chefs are so well loved and why the food aboard becomes as much of a memory as the great monuments and landscapes we experience do.

At Sea

I love the sea days to luxuriate and rest: equal parts unhurried workout, yoga, relaxation, books, long baths and, for lack of a better word, *yummy* spa treatments. It is also an opportunity to enjoy everything the ship has to offer, from great movies and lectures to live music



and entertainment. Mostly, though, you'll find me settled into my Turkish-towel womb.

On sea days, unhurried music wafts through the air from unseen speakers, as if the ship is not only slicing through the crisp blue Mediterranean Sea but also composing music as it moves through the salty air. I frequently look up from my book to watch stylish people defy the heat and look perfectly coiffed as they stroll by *en route* to lunch.

When I break away from my book to take a dip in the pool, an attendant awaits to hand me a warm towel.

The Magic of the Night

During evenings aboard, the air seems to tingle as everyone readies for the Seabourn Deck Party. Festive

paper lanterns dangle over the pool. Guests gather. Conversations swell over the deck and get carried out into the expansive starry night. Lights twinkle as a live band plays. Champagne and other creative cocktails effortlessly find their way into awaiting hands. The ambiance harkens back to earlier, elegant eras, and we soak it all in as my love and I dance the night away under the black nightscape awash with the glittery, sparkling light of ancient horoscopes.

As we dance, a spell is cast at some point during this night at sea. All of a sudden, the band seems to grow quiet, the chatter lowers a few decibels and then grows mute, the clink of glasses takes on a musical quality—and for an unforgettable



and magical moment, time stands still, and despite everything in motion around us, it is just the two of us dancing.

The next morning, still warmed by the subtle spell of the night before, we arrive at the next port to experience another unforgettable adventure together. What more could I want?

A Lifetime of Luxury

The vast and varied itineraries encompass the greatest destinations around the globe, from the ice-bound and primal world of Antarctica to the exotic realms of Asia. There is something for everyone both on and off the ship. The luxurious cabins offer walk-in closets, and sumptuous bathrooms filled with wonderful

amenities. A spa menu of soaps and bath products are offered on a silver tray by your steward upon your arrival; champagne is poured, and hors d'oeuvres are presented in your suite with a wonderful regularity.

On board, I've been swept away by exceptional classical guitarists, a sexy violin duo, and, of course, the Seabourn Band that is present each night to entertain all in attendance.

Seabourn is also a unique cruising experience, in that all meals and drinks are included in the fare, and tips are neither required nor expected. Nevertheless, the staff and service remain prompt, even premeditative. Take note: Wine is poured endlessly, and cocktails are refreshed without asking, so heed your glass or stumble back to your suite.

Sophisticated Company

I should mention that for all intents and purposes this is a "couples" cruise. We have seen a few single travelers, but they are an exception to the rule. While kids are not unwelcome, there are no activities for them, and over the years, we have only seen a few babies. The ship caters to those 45 and over, with the median lying somewhere around 60. My husband and I both turned 50 last year, and we are one of the younger couples on board.

We also enjoy the company of people from all over the world. We have been traveling with this luxury line since 2009, and while we strayed for one summer to test the waters with a competitor, we were quick to hop right back on our beloved Seabourn the following year. The high level of service and the attention to detail without the pomp and circumstance, the lovely familiarity of the crew, and the unhurried grace and effortless refinement of the ships have begun to feel like a second home.

And there's something enchanting that happens once I board a Seabourn ship—something that rises up from the sea and through the deck and races through me, making me feel as if the world exists, in moments and memories, just between my husband and me.



OUR ROUTE: HIGHLIGHTS



MONTE CARLO: *The Principality of Monaco*

Monaco and the indulgent culture of Monte Carlo set the tone for the Seabourn adventure. Our first sight of the ship in this famed port—renowned for the glamorous excess and legendary nightlife along its sparkling Riviera and for the 700-year reign of the fascinating Grimaldi dynasty—elevated the experience of boarding to an unforgettable and dazzling event. The view of Monte Carlo from our suite aboard the Seabourn *Quest* enhanced the exquisite attention to detail, the crispness of the sheets and the champagne we drank on our balcony as we pulled out of port toward Livorno, Italy.



LIVORNO, ITALY *Gateway to Tuscany*

Most people get off in Livorno and head to nearby Pisa or Florence, but we hired a private guide and opted to see the five colorful and captivating seaside villages comprised by the rugged and remarkably picturesque Cinque Terre region, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Postcard views abound, and together with locally made pesto, fresh seafood and local white wines, you'll leave feeling wonderfully expansive and yearn to explore more.



ROME, ITALY *A Day of Fashion, Style, and History*

One can't come within a few miles of Roma and not get swept into the hypnotic world of Italian high fashion. Fendi, Bulgari, Armani, Valentino, Cavallo and Gucci can be found along the haute Via Condotti. But for the fashion savvy, swanky, stylish boutiques beckon from every corner of the city. So, surrounded by the deep roots of history, the trattoria culture, the museums and the antiquities that define the story of this remarkable city, we decided to make it a boutique day.

The selection of shopping diversions is dizzying. Some must-stops are the Saddlers Union (saddlersunion.com), for timelessly elegant handbags; the art-clad fashion of Spazio IF (spazioIF.it); and the even artsier Delfina Delettrez, a fourth-generation member of the Fendi clan (delfinadelettrez.com).



NAPLES AND CAPRI *Italy*

With so many choices at our next anchorage, Naples, we skipped the Amalfi Coast drive from Sorrento to Positano; the ruins of Pompei and its history; and the hustle and bustle of Naples and instead headed across the water by hydrofoil to the wonderful *Isola Capri*. On Capri, we explored the Villa Jovis, an ancient Roman villa; the Piazzetta of Capri Village; and the dazzling Grotta Azzurra (Blue Grotto). We then sipped the ubiquitous Limoncello di Capri as we indulged in the views.



MESSINA AND SICILY *Italy*

Although the island is part of Italy, Sicily's unique culture feels like another country; Messina is the port city closest to the tip of the Italian "boot." Founded in the 8th century BC, Messina's history endures in the collective cultures that have pressed their influence, invited or otherwise, onto this island. Messina and the nearby Taormina (also a side excursion from the *Quest*) are crowded with ancient monuments and architecture and a social landscape that is woven into notable literature, cuisine, folklore, music, arts and cinema. Best to hire a private guide and let the entirety of its history unfold before you.



EGYPT *Privileged Access*

Seabourn organized a day of ancient culture that began with special access to the pyramids and the Great Sphinx, followed by a private Nile River excursion. The day is both unforgettable and long, but the crew was waiting upon our return with cold towels, champagne and canapés to bring us back to our energetic spirits.



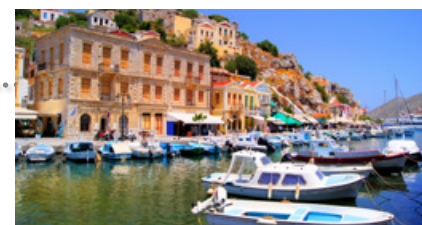
ASHDOD, ISRAEL *The Gateway to Jerusalem*

Embarking from the historical port of Ashdod, we ventured 45 minutes to Jerusalem. Perhaps the most sacred and embattled city on the planet, Jerusalem offers followers of one-third of the world's religions the opportunity to visit places that make sacred texts come to life. From the ancient winding passageways of the Old City Market to the Western Wall, the Via Dolorosa, the Dome of the Rock and the shrines of multiple religions, Jerusalem is a place that is at once full of contradictions and competing cultures and a cultural heritage that is completely and utterly unforgettable.



HAIFA *Israel*

Under the shadow of Mount Carmel, Haifa has two temptations: diamonds, and proximity to almost every known holy, biblical or historical site of note in the region, from the UNESCO Crusader city of Acre to the region on the Sea of Galilee—depending upon what you're looking to experience.



RHODES, GREECE *First of the Seven Ancient Wonders*

A mishmash of cobbled streets, exquisite blue water, ancient wonders and the clash of cultures left by the Crusaders, Turks, Greeks, Italians and privileged international yachting crowd, Rhodes is at once beguiling and enthralling. It's also the site of the famous Colossus of Rhodes, which once stood at the entrance to the port. Now, two proudly antlered bronze deer stand at the harborside and welcome us into the medieval warren of nameless lanes that make up the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Medieval City of Rhodes. Don't miss Lindos and the Acropolis.



KUŞADASI, TURKEY *Mythic Temples and Ancient Shrines*

One of the greatest cities of the ancient era, Ephesus is the big draw here. The Temple of Artemis, the Church of the Virgin Mary, the Basilica, the Celsus Library and the Agora highlight a long list of sites that will rattle old memories of your 10th-grade world history class. But, unlike the staid schoolbook version, this journey will have you boarding the *Quest* in a state of awe at the end of the day. A highlight: Seabourn organized a special concert amid the ruins for its guests.



PATMOS, GREECE *The Book of Revelation and Journey's End*

Both the Grotto of Saint John the Divine and the Book of Revelation found their inspiration on the quiet island of Patmos. Mostly a place for modern pilgrims, the island is known for its monasteries, empty beaches and religious enlightenment. It's fitting that it's the last stop of our indulgent week of exceptional experiences and kingly indulgence. 