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Cruising: More than the bare necessities at sea

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CRUISING: MORE THAN THE BARE NECESSITIES AT SEA

Celebrity Reflection set sail this month with a mission to leave old-school stuffiness in her wake

Wait, climbed aboard to discover the naked truth

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Only a thin membrane of clear glass stands between me and the bright lights of Amsterdam's infamous red-light district. Bit by bit, I unzip and undress. Off comes the frock, then the bra. Reluctantly, slowly, my pants are last to roll to the floor. Like many women in this city do each day and night, I am putting it all out there. And even though it's legal, I've got to be honest: I feel the frisson.

I get no customers, not least because I am standing on the 14th deck of Celebrity Reflection, about to depart on her maiden voyage. My glorious vitrine moment is held, unadmired, in cruising's first-ever "smart" shower. Part of the lavish two-bedroom butler-enhanced Reflection Suite, this sexy glass-bottomed-and-walled box not only juts out over the water, its privacy-guarding windows can be changed from transparent to translucent at the flick of a switch.

Unlike mine, Reflection's act may be hard to follow. The 3,030-passenger vessel is the final one of a record five new ships launched in the past four years by Celebrity Cruises. In addition to new ships, it remodelled all its older Millennium ships in "Solstice" style – a version of a modern luxury liner that is likens to the difference between a sexy iPad and an old-school newspaper, a groovy Audi compared with a Mercedes. Think Philippe Starck sharing appetinis with the QE2.

The "medi-spa" does botox, teeth whitening and acupuncture. There are 23 sommeliers on board. It takes days to absorb the onboard collection of hundreds of funky photos, paintings and sculptures. I commit to using the 15 flights of stairs to

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A massive gym (free) and spinning and yoga (for a fee) are also there, for those who find time. There are Spanish lessons, Texas hold'em tournaments and Impressionist painting classes. A wellness area features a hammam, saunas and an ice room; the full Elemis Spa does a mean bamboo massage.



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Compostela, and cruise onwards to Gaudí-land.

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The outside is as valued as the inner world: 85 per cent of accommodation on this behemoth of the sea comes with a balcony. And the style and amenities are sugared by cruising's standard blessing: the ease of returning to base after each excursion. As an American guest with 17 cruises under her belt said: "Heaven is unpacking once."

What I understood about modern cruising until now you could write on the back of a prescription pad: seasickness, norovirus, high cholesterol. What I see here is people making an effort on formal evening attire (is that a train trailing behind her?), dining rooms aglitter with a thousand mirrors, real grass on the top deck that's heaven for boules and picnics, a swanky martini bar, a library brimming with actual paper books and comfy chairs – and plenty of greying but nimble couples sauntering past the jazz singer, throwing shapes, arm in arm on the walk to dinner.

"We want a customer who has good taste, high standards and high expectations," explains Michael English, head of sales at Celebrity Cruises. "One who stays at the Ritz-Carlton, the Four Seasons, The W."

But standards collide with expectations at the on-trend Celebrity iLounge (the ship is the first Apple re-seller on the water). With a queue snaking out the door, th

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Over a shared glass, I talk to a charming couple from Washington DC, veterans of cruises such as these and impressed by the flow of the rooms and the chance to find cozy corners: "It feels very much like being at home." In a decadent Signature suite equipped with bathtub and rain shower on the balcony, I should think even the Romneys would feel chez nous.

This elegant pair sounds precisely like the bull's eye at which Celebrity president Michael Bayley is aiming Reflection. British-born Bayley, who worked his way from purser to president, has come to see off his latest baby on her maiden voyage. "We are particularly interested in the affluent segment, in customers who are willing to pay a premium for the experience."

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Even when stationary in port, Reflection is a multiple-choice of touristic pleasure-ticking. Which prompts a little niggle of doubt about my sea-edged wash with a view. With so many decks, dinners and diversions, I can't be sure I did push that "Privacy" button after all. Still, there is always the butler to blame.

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS



After a short turn about the Med in October and November, Reflection heads to Miami for seven-day Caribbean cruises. Next summer she will be based in Rome.

The Reflection Suite starts at £6,747 per person based on two people sharing (cruise only).

Celebrity (0844 493 2043; celebritycruises.co.uk) offers a seven-night Eastern Caribbean fly/cruise from £1,310 per person, based on two people sharing an inside stateroom. Price is based on 23 February 2013 departure.

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