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An Azamara ship at St-Tropez

CULTURAL CRUISING: THE COMPACT SHIP THAT SLIPS INTO SMALLER PORTS

Smaller vessels offering 'no-cruise cruises' are ideal for those, like Leslie Woit, who prefer a generous helping of shore time to mop up that Mediterranean decadence

Leslie Woit | Monday 06 April 2015 15:41 | comments

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My handbag rests on its own little stool while a gaggle of smiling waiters hovers tenderly round us both. The azure waters of the Med lick the horizon, and the champagne cart rattles comfortingly in our direction, across the cool marble floors of Monte Carlo's Belle Epoque beauty, the Hôtel Hermitage. Ah, la belle vie.

As I revel in the decadence of lunch under a Monegasque Michelin star, I spare a thought for my less fortunate companion – a tiny insect floating on the surface of my wine. At €125 a bottle, I'm tempted to swallow him whole but in a fit of Jainism, I watch him enjoy a last gasp of the good life, drowning in a bath of 2001 Cheval Blanc. After all, it's the same spirit that built Monte Carlo: place your bets or be damned.

One hundred and fifty-two years ago, the SBM (Société des Bains de Mer) was formed in Monaco – effectively creating the corporate backbone of the principality's gambling-based success. Without that mid-19th-century throw of the dice by Prince Charles III, permitting a German developer to build a casino and a railway to deliver gamblers to its door, there would now be no Cartier windows aglitter with princess-cut diamonds, and little chance to get your Grace Kelly on with a silk scarf and sunglasses, and no way to jetty-gawk the leggy arm candy who loll aboard helipad-equipped mega-yachts the size of football pitches. It's a naughty-but-nice atmosphere that's pure Monte Carlo.

Stepping off Azamara Journey straight into the Monte Carlo harbour is one of the advantages of a small-ship cruise. At 180m, and carrying a maximum of 694 passengers, the ship docks in atmospheric harbours that larger vessels can't get near: as well as Monte Carlo, we are destined for Nice and her flower markets, Napoleon's getaway at Elba and the beaches of St-Tronez. Azamara's destination-based itinerary

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After the requisite safety briefings, there's a drinks reception at which the following night's big kick-off – the Az-Amazing Evening – is revealed. This signature event takes place on most cruises and is a complimentary experience that showcases local dance, music, theatre or cuisine in a special private setting, from palaces to grand monuments or tropical gardens.



Bon voyage: Nice

Rather than making it the week's grand finale, Az-Amazing events are held at the start, "so people get excited about destinations and buy more excursions", I am told by Azamara's CEO and President, Larry Pimentel.

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cut the tension. It's not Pavarotti's power trio, but it is an easily digested 45-minute performance.

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Unfortunately, the finale is a long queue to board a flotilla of coaches back to the ship, but a surprise treat surpasses the delights of the Goldini Theatre. As we step from the coaches and on to the cement quayside, an angel is singing from on high. Cloaked in gauzy gown afloat on the night breeze, a silver-throated soprano blows the other three guys out of the water.

Pushing on towards the French coast, we skirt Corsica in favour of a two-day Tuscan tour – strolling the Renaissance-rich Duomo and the surprisingly affordable markets of Florence, the splendid, cool Carrera marble churches of Lucca's walled city, and a scenic excursion through rolling, umbrella-pine-speckled countryside to a wine tasting of excellent Sangiovese grapes.

Journey's nimble body plies smoothly through the Mediterranean, the languid hours on the water punctuated by the usual diversions – poolside drinks, gym, speciality restaurants, and on one night, a hysterically camp rollerblade dance that sees everyone grooving like disco never died.

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And yet this ship is from a bygone era. This year, Royal Caribbean will launch Anthem of the Seas from Southampton at 347m long and a maximum capacity of 4,905 passengers. P&O's Britannia (330m, 4,324 passengers) set sail on her maiden voyage last month. For now, Azamara's fleet of two mid-sized cruise ships visits 226 ports in 67 countries; with no particular home port, some routes are determined by the calendar of glamorous festivals and sporting events — the Monaco Grand Prix, the British Open, Rio's Carnival.

One of our last days ashore coincides perfectly with that more humble French occupation: café lounging on a Sunday afternoon. At leisure, I am free as a flâneur to dawdle the shops and streets of sunny St-Tropez, catch a game of pétanque, peruse the sexy sloops and find a perfect pair of espadrilles. Finally, it all comes down to a carafe of pale rosé under the ruby red awning of the Côte d'Azur's Le Sénéquier café. Comme d'habitude, the chic and the coiffed are poised for a ritual pastis and some people-watching. Among us, with a firm grip on his patrician cane and an eye for the camera as well as the ladies, Jacques Chirac raises a respectable frisson of interest. Just another amazing St-Tropez Sunday; no hurry, no rush on a no-cruise kind of cruise.

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