

Short haul



Pictures: ARTERRA / ALAMY, FREDERIC DUCOUT, RICHARD EDEN

The latest news for your next cruise

ALL ABOARD

A real page turner

IF YOU love to read a good book while cruising there will be many inspiring reads during Queen Mary 2's Literature Festival at Sea, curated by the Cheltenham Literature festival team. Authors Ian Rankin, Alexander McCall Smith and Prue Leith will be on the seven-night Transatlantic crossing which departs Southampton for New York on December 1. From £1,199 pp including return flight to UK (cunard.co.uk, 0344 3388 650).

Sail soon for £509

ESCAPE the cold on a seven-night Med cruise on MSC Grandiosa which departs Barcelona on February 4. Calls include Marseille, France; Genoa and Civitavecchia, Italy; Palermo, Sicily and Valletta, Malta, with a fly-cruise price from £509 pp departing Luton or Manchester featuring two-nights in Barcelona and on board tips (cruisenation.com, 0800 408 0759).

Be quick for discounts

NORWEGIAN Cruise Line is offering up to £1,500 off per stateroom on all 2020 cruises of nine nights or more, and £750 off any six to eight-night sailing, when booked by Monday. Prices for the 14-day Scandinavia, Russia and Amsterdam: Ultimate Baltic fly-cruise on Norwegian Jade now start from £2,166 pp on the June 13 round-trip from Amsterdam with calls including St. Petersburg, Russia, and Stockholm, Sweden (ncl.com, 0333 2412319).



Pride of Panama

IT'S all balmy sunshine in Montego Bay, Jamaica at this time of the year and Marella Discovery's seven-night sailing from the port on February 11 starts from £1,150 pp. Fly from Gatwick for the all-inclusive Pride of Panama cruise visiting Santa Marta and Cartagena, Colombia, above; Colon, Panama, and Puerto Limon, Costa Rica (tui.co.uk, 0871 230 2800).

Cutting edge dance

WATCHING a sword dance on Korcula, the Croatian island said to be explorer Marco Polo's birthplace, is one of many unusual sights during Silver Shadow's Mediterranean Grand Voyage which visits 17 countries in 59 days. The refurbished ship sails from Venice to Lisbon with Albania, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Italy and Portugal all among the September 8, 2021 departure. Prices from £26,500 pp (silversea.com, 0207 340 0700).

Belgian chocolate – and gin

EMERALD Dawn's Springtime Delights eight-day river cruise from Amsterdam has a treat in store for guests with a maiden call to Hasselt, a small Belgian town that's big on attractions, with gin and fashion museums, 600-year-old Herkenrode Abbey and renowned chocolate shop, Boon. Further ports include Arnhem, Antwerp, Beverwijk, and Rotterdam plus a visit to Keukenhof Gardens. Price from £2,545 pp, departing April 1, 2021 (emeraldwaterways.co.uk, 0808 301 3352).

LESLEY BELLEW

from Stansted to La Rochelle with Ryanair. Ile de Re is a 20-minute taxi via a two-mile bridge linking the island to the mainland. We were staying at Villa Clarisse, in main town Saint-Martin-de-Re. The 18th-century mansion was transformed into a charming nine-room boutique hotel in 2011.

The lengths to which Marina and Sofia would go to achieve the perfect photo was comically evident on our first night.

All dressed up for dinner, Sofia posed by the outdoor swimming pool in her trendy new white jumpsuit. Pouting, she was encouraged by her sister to step backwards for the perfect shot, only to tumble into the water.

That set the pattern, with every trip into town prolonged by frequent stops for selfies in front of delightful doorways deemed 'Instagram-able'.

Saint-Martin-de-Re is an elegant port surrounded by fortifications built in the 17th century to protect the town from, among others, an English invasion led by the Duke of Buckingham.

These days the only invaders are tourists, and we joined them climbing the tower of the 14th century church.

A traffic light system avoided overcrowding at the top, from where we could see all 19 miles of the island.

After climbing the 117 steps, we deserved a reward, so headed to La Martiniere, an ice-cream shop with almost endless flavours including Madras, caviar and oyster.

The girls, conservatively, opted for Ferrero Rocher and tiramisu while I scoffed the fluffiest of waffles covered in Chantilly cream.

You shouldn't visit Ile de Re



Island life: Saint-Martin-de-Re harbour, top, Villa Clarisse, above, and, right, Richard's daughters Marina and Sofia



without hiring a bike. The island is as flat as a crepe and criss-crossed by 68 miles of well-maintained, clearly signposted cycle paths.

We pedalled along the coastal path, past salt marshes and vineyards bordered by hedgerows filled with poppies and cornflowers. When the girls eventually tired, we stopped at the Plage du Grouin, where they played in the warm shallows.

But the girls craved waves, so next day we took a £10 taxi ride to Le Bois-Plage-en-Re on the southern coast.

It's part of a four-mile stretch of dunes and golden sands

where the breakers roll in from the Atlantic.

Our hotel offered only breakfast and snacks, which gave us the opportunity to try some of the nearby restaurants. And, as Marina had a French speaking exam when we returned home, we encouraged her to do the ordering.

Lunch at Re Ostrea was a treat. Its kitchen is in a rustic cabin, and diners sit outside at driftwood tables with sea views.

The menu is mainly oysters and prawns. Each dish is served with a free glass of chilled white wine. The girls had tried oysters only once before but, as soon as

Marina had practised how to pronounce 'huitres' she and Sofia were slurping them down. The best way to learn a language is, of course, by making friends and, after some gentle pushing, Marina joined her sister in chatting to the children of French guests at our hotel.

A true entente cordiale.

TRAVEL FACTS

RATES at Villa Clarisse start from £210 per night (excluding breakfast, in a superior room). For more information and reservations, see villa-clarisse.com or call +33 5 46 68 43 00.

SNAP UP A BA SALE BARGAIN

YOU can still bag a deal in the British Airways flights and holidays sale which continues until Friday. Trips include Gatwick to New York from £262 return and a week self-catering in Barbados from £529 pp including flights at the three-star Halcyon Palm apartments (ba.com).

DOGS THAT HELP YOU TO FLY

SOUTHAMPTON Airport has introduced

READY FOR TAKE-OFF

Flights ++ Airports ++ New routes

'Canine Crew' therapy dogs to calm stressed passengers with a fear of flying or hidden disabilities. On patrol once a week, they are handled by experienced volunteers from the charity Therapy Dogs Nationwide. A similar scheme

operates at Aberdeen International Airport (southamptonairport.com).

BRITANNY BOUND

RYANAIR start twice-weekly flights from Bristol to Brest on March 31. Fares for the 65-minute flight are from £9.99 one-way. An hour's drive east, the elegant Grand Hotel des Bains in Locquirec has doubles from £101, room only, through I-escape (ryanair.com, i-escape.com).

NIGEL TISDALL