

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN IT
PAYS TO THINK SMALL

A little luxury

TINY PORTS, SUNTANS IN SOLITUDE
AND STAFF EVER-READY WITH
A DRINK. **LAURA GOODMAN** TAKES
A BOUTIQUE CRUISE IN THE AEGEAN

Serene and not heard:
the views are quietly
spiritual on Santorini,
the Greek-island
pin-up in the Cyclades



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Home,

ome,' says Victoria.

'Home sweet home,' I reply. And we laugh our heads off, as we order more Mojitos. My friend and I are watching the sun melt into a pool of gold in the blue-green sea from a bar on Mykonos, right up at the Aegean's edge. 'Home' is floating on the horizon: the twinkling, navy-and-white *Azamara Journey*, motionless in the calm Aegean. After our drinks, we'll catch a small boat from the harbour back to our beds, and our home will whisk us to our next destination. We think that's hilarious.

We started out cruise sceptics. A spell of brochure-flicking helped convert us and the lure of seeing the Aegean's best bits without having to repack every night, or face daily interactions at ferry terminals, overrode our misgivings. And so here we are in Mykonos. And tomorrow we'll be in Turkey. From where we're sitting, the *Azamara Journey* looms large-ish, but its capacity is a meagre 694, compared to the behemoths of the 'big ship' category, which can carry 10 times that number. It means the *Journey* can sidle into smaller, trickier-to-navigate ports, and that onboard faces quickly become familiar, making the ship feel just a little like home.

We have spent our first full day wandering, dipping our toes in the sea, and pausing on white stone staircases to announce how outrageously beautiful this island is. A confession: we didn't research our pitstops – we are traditionally both over-planners, and we fancied going with the flow for once. Mykonos easily exceeded our expectations, with its tangled, Tipp-Ex streets, thatched windmills, empty beaches and almost-edible sunset. We head back to the ship, giddy on Mojitos, today's surprises, and the thrill of our mobile bedrooms, and tomorrow's possibilities.

By the time we pull back the curtains the next morning (a gorgeous first-thing ritual we promptly slip into), we have docked in Kusadasi, a brash port in which our sleek, lustrous neighbour is the *Pacific Princess*. It's our second day, and already we've found our stride: we hit the gym, check emails on our balcony, and go for omelettes and coffee at the buffet restaurant, Windows, where we're on first-name terms with our waiters. We do all of this, believing we're in Marmaris, because that's how much attention we've been paying. We've gone with the flow all right – perhaps a little too much. >



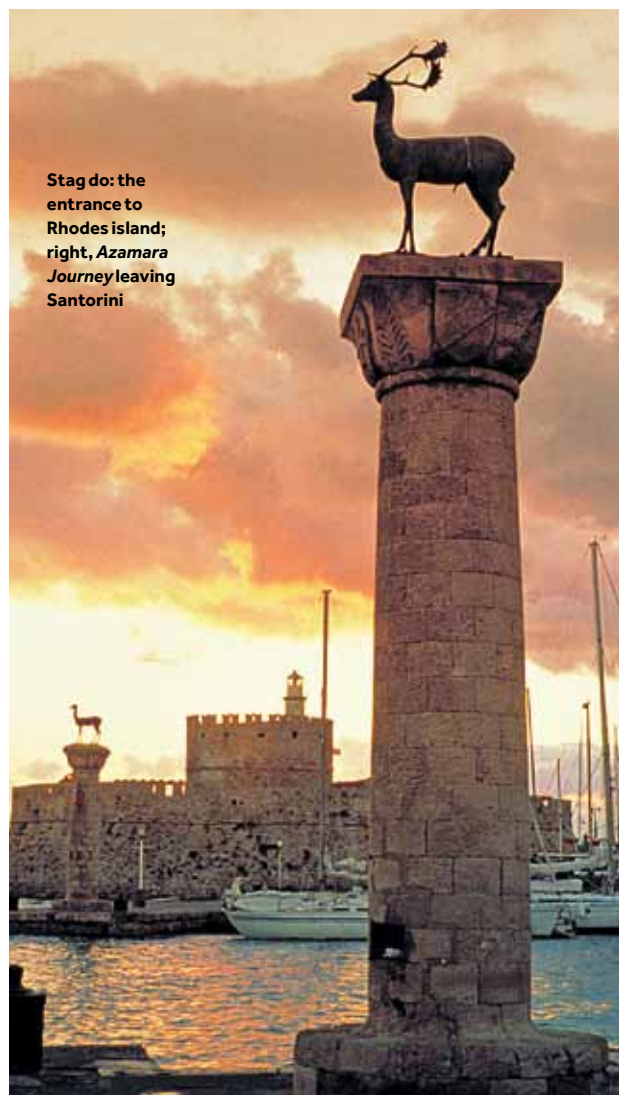
CRUISING
IT'S CLASSY!

We are sailing:
above, elegance
onboard *Azamara
Journey*; left, the
pool at night;
below, lunch
alfresco by the sea
in Mykonos – then
savour a delicious
dinner on the ship

We head back towards
the ship, giddy on Mojitos,
today's surprises, and
tomorrow's possibilities



CRUISE 2013 25



Stag do: the entrance to Rhodes island; right, Azamara Journey leaving Santorini



A guide leads us to various viewpoints and leaves us to fill our eyes, lungs, brains and memory cards

We find hulking Kusadasi underwhelming, so seek solace swiftly back on the ship, finding a quiet pocket on one of the decks to read. During the afternoon, we bump into both of the cruise's principal megastars: captain Johannes and cruise director Eric Degray. Johannes is small, with a bald, round head, while Eric is tall and thin, with spiky blonde hair and a supply of flashy suits. Aboard the *Journey* they are celebrities, and they love it. Wherever you go, there they are grinning, fist-bumping and telling tales.

We're awake before we've even docked at the island of Kos, so we sit on our balcony while the sun treats us to its fiery arrival, straight out of the ocean. This spectacle jumps to No. 1 on my ever-increasing 'reasons to cruise' list.

At No. 2: the staff. They are the absolute dons of this ship. They'd never leave you without a drink, or a nice bed, or a big, warm hello. Aldwin sometimes sings to us over breakfast and Godson has a few brainteaser games that keep us busy over lunch. We have time before we venture onto Kos, so we order eggs Benedict in the 'proper' sit-down restaurant, Discoveries, where Philbert keeps the coffee flowing, and Joshua pops over to say good morning.

We needn't have panicked about cabin fever, as one of the great things about this short-distance, small-ship cruise is that we spend every day ashore. On Kos, we choose to join a group tour of the archaeological site of Asclepion, in some gorgeous pine hills, but

our tour guide is a bit of a bore. Back on the ship we cheer ourselves with dinner in one of the fancier restaurants – I go bonkers over goat's cheese *soufflé*, lobster thermidor, *crème brûlée* and lots of wine. Time to brave Eric's cabaret act. It's a dazzlingly inconsistent show about one man's life, featuring his favourite songs by Elton John and Josh Groban, and it's funny for half an hour or so.

After the disappointment of the tour in Kos, we decide to go it alone in Rhodes, walking through the old and new towns, round the harbour and up to the hilltop Acropolis. It can't compete with Mykonos, but the views from the top are blue and infinite. We find wine and *mezze* at a restaurant called Koykos, where we eat parsley fritters, *tzatziki*, Greek salad and pitta bread. We could stay out until 4.30am if we wanted to because the ship's having a sleepover, but – as is customary – by midnight we are ensconced in our cabins. The beds are rather inviting.

In Marmaris (for real, this time), we join an all-day trip to Dalyan because we've heard there's very little to see at the port itself. A coach delivers us to a small boat, in which we breeze gently through beautiful wetlands, surrounded by mountains. It looks like somewhere altogether more exotic – somewhere like Vietnam, perhaps.

In the evening, we have grand plans of swinging by the Motown night after dinner, but we end up at our usual late-night hangout: Mosaic Café. It's the spot for pre-bed Earl Greys. You really do get to know people on a ship this size, and two other Mosaic regulars are shrewd cruisers Val and Gem (married for 34 years) – they come by every night to pick up hot chocolates and take them to their cabin, where they've got brandy.

The trip passes like this. Every morning, Bircher muesli or omelettes and coffee on the deck. Every evening, tea and a chat at Mosaic Café. In between, ports of varying prettiness, and the rise and fall of the amazing sun. >

CRUISING IT'S CLASSY!

And we have high hopes for our last stop: Santorini. In Oia, our Grecian dreams come true – it's the town in all the photos: a bright-white cliff-top village, blue domes, blue skies, blue sea. Our guide leads us to various viewpoints and leaves us to fill our eyes, lungs, brains and memory cards, which is all we want to do. It's a tour in the loosest sense, and that suits us fine.

Left to our own devices in Fira, the less lovely capital, Victoria and I eat frozen Greek yoghurt on a bench and have a conversation that makes us snort with laughter. For a moment, we're genuinely anxious about where we'll eat dinner back onboard, because we don't want to let any of our new pals down. We have so many goodbyes to say...

In the end, we get tipsy and nostalgic over cocktails on the pool deck. In Discoveries, our favourite Pinotage is back on the wine list. Johannes' voice sears through the atmosphere as we down glass after giddy glass; the sunset's directly ahead of him, which means those of us eating dinner can't see it, so he's going to loop round to give us a look. We raise a giggly toast to Johannes and those ravishing sunsets.

The next morning, we disembark sadly. We don't fist-bump Johannes and Eric, but we do give them a wave. Behind the scenes, the beds are being made. Dinner is being prepared. In a couple of hours, the *Journey* will be someone else's roaming home. ■



Lounge access:
lazy days on deck

SET SAIL!

Azamara Club Cruises (0844 493 4016, azamarclubcruises.co.uk) has a seven-night cruise to the Greek Isles and Turkey, like the one featured here, departing in June 2014. Prices start at £2,130pp (based on two sharing), with Heathrow flights, transfers, meals, drinks and tips. Contact the company, too, for details of cruises to the Italian Riviera, the Black Sea, Brazil and the Norwegian fjords.

BYGONE TIMES

Sail back in time to the days when 17th-century merchants traversed the seas in tall ships. Built in a similar style to their speedy vessels, the 227-passenger *Royal Clipper* comes with rigging, polished wooden decks and sails that are unfurled against a multi-hued sunset, as the ship leaves the photogenic historic port of

FOUR MORE BOUTIQUE CRUISES

Taormina, in Sicily, on its 10-night voyage. Daredevils climb onto the rope-rigging at the forward end of the ship (nicknamed the widomaker) for the best view of the passing scenery. *The 10-night western Mediterranean cruise departs on October 5 2013, and costs from £2,270pp, full board.*

Contact **Star Clippers** (0845 200 6145, starclippers.co.uk).

OOH LA LA!

There are saucy, Crazy Horse-style cabaret acts aboard French cruise line Compagnie du Ponant's ships. But despite the corsets, things are surprisingly sophisticated elsewhere on this fleet of four 90-berth yachts. Book a slick, neutrally decorated cabin on just-launched *Le Soleil*, or set off on a round-Sicily trip on *L'Austral*, and pitstop in gorgeous, windswept Bonifacio, Corsica (the joy of these bijou boats is that they can navigate tiny ports such as this one). There's great French food onboard, too: grilled seafood and fresh salads. *A seven-night 'Lisbon-Lisbon' cruise departing on October 23 2013, bound for Cádiz, Málaga, Seville and Portimão, costs from £1,587pp, full board, excluding drinks.*

Contact **Compagnie du Ponant** (0800 980 4027, en.ponant.com).

STAR BOARD

Make like Johnny Depp and the Jolie-Pitts and set sail on a superyacht. You'll have to share deck space with 71 other passengers on Variety Cruises' *M/Y Voyager*, but this is the closest you'll get to a Hollywood cruise without a movie-star salary. With sides as shiny as a newly minted coin, rich marble bathrooms and wood-panelled cabins, the *M/Y Voyager* has a film-worthy itinerary, too: along the Costa Rican coast and the Panama Canal. *The seven-night 'Treasures of Costa Rica and the Panama Canal' cruise departs on December 22 2013, travelling from Cartagena, Colombia, to Los Sueños in Costa Rica. From £3,195pp, full board, including flights from Heathrow and transfers. Contact*

Variety Cruises (020 8324 3114, varietycruises.com).

PACIFIC PARADISE

Who said cruising was for serious sightseers? You'll flit between clear Caribbean sea and virgin rainforest aboard a cruise on the newly renovated *Tere Moana*, while a crew-to-guest ratio of 1:1.5 on this 45-berth ship ensures your every whim is pandered to. The ship does dock at a Unesco World Heritage Site – but in this case it's Panama's National Park, where coral reef abuts coconut palms and sand. Not a museum guide in sight. And, there's a two-Michelin-starred chef onboard. *The seven-night 'Latin America & The Caribbean' cruise departs on March 15 2014, docks in Panama, Colombia, Aruba and the Dutch Antilles, and costs from £2,321pp, all inclusive. Contact Paul Gauguin Cruises (020 7399 7691, cruiseportfolio.co.uk). Lynn Houghton*



Mind the gap:
the *Tere Moana*
pictured here in
the Corinth Canal

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY