

THE JOYS OF DISCOVERY

A MEMORABLE CRUISE OPENS THE DOOR TO EXPLORATION IN SOUTHERN EUROPE AND MOROCCO

BY LESLIE FORSBERG



THE SPANISH MOSQUE PROVIDES A STUNNING VIEW OF CHEFCHAOUEN, MOROCCO.

It was the oranges that drew my attention.

TIED TO A TANGLE of grape vines overhead, they were vibrant, almost glowing, against the pale blue dwelling. A young boy with dancing eyes stood at attention behind an orange juice stand on this quiet side alley. Next to him, a crinkle-faced elder seated on a ledge wore a flowing white garment, a neat white-striped cap on his head. ¶ Glancing at oranges bobbing in a metal tub of water at the boy's feet, I smiled and held up two fingers. The old man burst into a grin and waved me to a cushion next to him. The boy did a noble job of peeling the thick-skinned oranges with a knife, but it was a big job for little fingers. A man in his 30s came to the rescue, smiling warmly as he pulled on the lever of the metal press. ¶ "Papá?" I asked, pointing to the man squeezing our juice, and then to the boy. To answer, he pointed to the old man and then to both himself and the boy, saying "Papá!" with a broad smile. "Same!" he added, gesturing again to himself and the boy. The old man beamed and seemed to sit a bit taller, gushing with pride over his two sons. ¶ Watching this sweet scene unfold in the mysterious, Instagram-worthy Blue City of Chefchaouen made the juice taste all the richer. My partner, Brian, and I were on a day trip from Tangier, Morocco, with our cruise ship docked just 70 miles away. The fact that a shore excursion could bring us to a place that seemed set so far back in time reflects one of the most-impressive trends in the travel industry. Recognizing the demand for intimate experiences in exotic destinations, cruise lines are offering increasing opportunities to explore remote locales. And because many of their ports can only accommodate smaller ships, the trend is bringing the added benefit of more-intimate onboard experiences, too. ¶ On Seabourn's 11-day Spanish Magic and Morocco sailing, we discovered an invigorating blend of exploration and relaxation aboard the 600-passenger *Seabourn Encore*, a state-of-the-art vessel launched in 2016. Each port offered new opportunities to absorb more than 2,000 years of history as we learned about the Carthaginians, Romans, Moors and others who have occupied these regions.





Our history lessons were complemented by modern-day pleasures as we sampled regional cuisine, shopped for local goods and found our way to lovely beaches, both on tours included with our cruise and on our own on days we decided to explore independently. Seabourn is known for luxury, all-inclusive experiences, and each evening we returned to a spacious stateroom, which included a marble bath, walk-in closet and veranda. Time to socialize around the pool was followed by dinner in one of five onboard restaurants.

We began our journey in Barcelona, where Sagrada Família, one of Gaudí's greatest accomplishments, stunned with its infinitely detailed exterior, soaring columns and spectacular stained glass. We bought stylish Spanish-made clothing in the narrow streets of the Gothic Quarter, sated our hunger with tapas in the open-air La Boqueria market and closed out our day grooving to a Cuban beat at the Harlem Jazz Club.

Once we set sail, each day brought new surprises and revelations: Whitewashed villages and sherry factories near

Recognizing the demand for INTIMATE EXPERIENCES in EXOTIC DESTINATIONS, cruise lines are offering increasing opportunities to explore remote locales.

Cádiz. The Picasso Museum in Málaga. A recently discovered and restored Roman theater in Cartagena, and the town's fascinating National Museum of Underwater Archaeology, showcasing historic shipwrecks.

In Portimão, Portugal, we made our way to the Mercado Central, where a bounty of seafood—mackerel, octopus, squid, swordfish and more—was artfully arrayed atop ice. But it was the *pasteis de nata* (Portuguese custard tarts) that stopped me in my tracks at Cafe do Mercado. The caramelized crust shattered into shards as I bit into it, the rich custard worth every calorie. After I oohed and aahed over the pastry, I couldn't help but shake the hand of the baker, and say “*obrigado*,” thank you. Smiling broadly, he proffered a business card, referring us to his friend's seaside restaurant.

A taxi ride away, at O Luís, in Alvor, we enjoyed delicious, homespun plates of fish with potatoes and almonds before kicking off our sandals and exploring the beach. A cleft in a group of rock pillars to our left yielded a passageway to another beach. Strolling to its far end, we found a tunnel to another beach. As we continued around and through rocks, we were immersed in a fantasy-scape of rock formations, arches and caves, as beach after beach revealed itself to us.

Chefchaouen clung like a wasp's nest to a steep hillside in Morocco's Rif Mountains, its alleys and pathways, houses, doors and steps painted a hundred shades of blue. The azure sky overhead created an infinity-pool effect. Our guide, Mohammed, walked us up steps and through narrow alleys, to a rug merchant in a room stacked head-high with carpets, who offered us cups of sugary-sweet mint tea; to a rustic bakery whose workers urged us to dip our hands into a gunny sack to sample hot, freshly roasted peanuts; and to the Jewish Quarter, where a group of excited young women perused traditional wedding jewelry.

Days later, in Ibiza, we stumbled across the most-spectacular beach of all. We'd asked our young taxi driver about her favorite beach while we were en route to pick up a rental car for the day. “Platges de Comte!” she said, enthusiastically.

Arriving at the headland, we were awed by the dazzling view, a study in buff and teal: A point of amber sand extended toward an island, with lace-edged turquoise waves washing onto beaches on either side. To our right, an alfresco bar and cafe seemed to grow organically out of the bluff. The beaches were dotted with bikini-clad sunbathers, and we joined them, alternately absorbing the sun's rays and submersing ourselves in the warm, soft-as-silk water.

On our last full day, we rented a scooter in Le Lavandou, France (*Seabourn Encore* will not port here in 2019), and rode up steep switchbacks to the flower-bedecked medieval village of Bormes-les-Mimosas. Cicadas sang in the trees, and the air was still and hot as we enjoyed lunch and a grand view of the Côte d'Azur at a hilltop restaurant. Weaving our way back down to the shore, we motored along a serene, winding coastal road, rounding olive groves, winery chateaus and hidden beaches.

With a warm wind buffeting us, the drone of the motor and the golden tones of the landscape, the entire effect was so perfect and cinematic, I easily could have believed we'd just stepped into the frame of a movie. And in a way, we had. Our own movie that we'll play and replay as we remember the beauty of the landscapes and the warmth of the people in our own sun-drenched, southern European adventure.

BOTTOM COURTESY OF SEABOURN; RIGHT: COURTESY OF HURTIGRUTEN

BOTTOM LEFT: LESLIE FORSBERG



Hot Trends to Embrace

Small is big in cruising these days, as the industry caters to travelers' growing appetite for unique, intimate experiences, including those in remote areas. As a consumer, this gives you more choices than ever in your search for travel experiences that best suit your tastes. Here are three popular trends to consider.



EXPEDITION AND ADVENTURE

For the active, outdoors-oriented set, expedition and adventure cruises offer daily doses of excitement, often in areas so remote that few ever visit. Expedition-oriented ships are by necessity small, allowing them to cruise close to shorelines and anchor off remote beaches, and naturalists and cultural experts are often onboard to provide insights about these destinations. Hurtigruten is one of the top expedition cruise lines, sailing to bucket list-worthy destinations such as Antarctica and Svalbard. Aboard an UnCruise expedition, adventures range from listening to the songs of a pod of whales surrounding the ship in the Sea of Cortez to forming a human chain to ford a rushing stream in a private valley in Hawai'i.

A NEW GENERATION OF CRUISERS

Cruise lines are appealing to millennials with everything from unique itineraries to shipboard entertainment (with Broadway-quality shows) to shops filled with designer goods to more nights in port, so guests can experience local nightlife. Celebrity Cruises checks all these boxes and more, offering onboard activities that reflect the tastes and interests of younger passengers, such as Silent Disco, comedy and music headliners in their onboard showrooms, and more.

LUXURY

Sailings on luxury cruise lines are hot as cruisers seek first-class personalized service, large, well-designed guest rooms, fine wines and thoughtfully prepared food (specialty restaurants are often included among the dining options at no extra charge), and the ease of making a single payment up front for everything. Luxury lines pay a lot of attention to the design of staterooms; all the cabins on Regent Seven Seas and Seabourn are suites. Royal Caribbean's *Spectrum of the Seas*, due to launch this spring, will feature an all-suite complex with a private swimming pool and private restaurant. ❶

Call or visit your nearest AAA store (see the list on Page 2) to learn more about exciting new cruise opportunities.