

A CRUISE FOR BODY AND SOUL

Cruises are hot. Not a year goes by without some new record being broken. More and more passengers book cruises on ships that seem to grow in size each season. Why are we so fascinated by the sea?

By Zora del Buono

Translated by Judith Thomas

CAN YOU TRULY SAY THAT YOU ARE A scrupulously honest person? By which I mean – are you honest with yourself too? Are you prepared to take a long, hard look at your character and reach an impartial judgement? If the answer to this question is yes – congratulations! Why don't you go ahead and book a cruise as a reward! Sit on the deck and stare at the horizon. Once you've been at sea for approximately 9.6 days, you will know everything there is to know about yourself. Well, perhaps not quite everything, but as near as damn it. And all it will cost you is 1,913 Euros. Cheap at half the price! Where could you get therapy for that price?

But before we turn to matters of the soul – your soul – we want to take a slight detour and immerse ourselves in high culture. Let's just listen to this aria: Farewell, oh earth, oh valley of tears. The dream of joy has turned sour. Heaven opens its doors and we arise and move toward the light of eternity...

The characters singing here are Aida and Rademes, the lovers who appear in Giuseppe Verdi's opera. It sounds as if they are both on a ship, standing near the railing, about to set sail. In fact the aria is an elegy – the couple is imprisoned and about to die. But what does the imminent decease of an enslaved princess named Aida from the land of the Pharaohs have to do with modern-day cruises. Not much really. But on the other hand...

The chartered cruise ship Aida has launched a new era in the history of German cruise ships. A new kind of customer is being targeted. It is no longer necessary to prove that you possess wealth or seniority, the two traditional prerequisites to gain passage on a cruise ship. In the old days these two factors were of the utmost importance to operators such as Cunard or Hapag-Lloyd. "Moving toward the light of eternity..." could be seen as an appropriate slogan not just for death but also for a cruise to an exotic destination such as Egypt. In the meantime Aida is no longer the sole ship in the fleet. There are now five ships, in all, displaying on their bows the stylized image of the Nubian princess's face complete with bright red lips.

The cruise business is booming like no other area in the tourist industry - the figures are startling. In Germany alone, 965,000 people booked a cruise last year – an increase of 8.5 percent in comparison to the previous year. Aida alone commissions a new ship every year. The Papenburg shipyard is bustling. There is competition worldwide for new customers, and the ships are getting bigger. The British Cunard line is launching a new liner in 2008. The "Queen Victoria" is the name of the latest ship to follow hot on the heels of the Queen Mary.

The German-speaking market is ready to expand, according to business forecasters. Booking holidays on cruise liners is already an accepted practise in Britain and the USA. One of these nations

has a long history of seafaring – the other one has a similarly long history of pleasure-seeking. But things aren't much different over here. The average duration of a cruise is 9.6 days at a price of 1,913 Euros (I realize that these figures have already been quoted but don't worry – we'll come to the psychoanalysis later). The big question is what drives people to book cruises?

"There's no security without freedom," said Wilhelm von Humboldt. His brother Alexander travelled the high seas like no other before him. This could be the new motto of the cruise passengers. There can be scarcely a more fitting venue than a cruise ship to see the union of both these opposites. Life on board is certainly very secure. The passengers are kept warm and well-fed. The captain navigates the ship expertly though all kind of severe weather conditions. And there's always a doctor at hand. But the passengers also have the freedom to go ashore and explore foreign countries. They learn to survive nights in Port Said and Reykjavik with just a pocket book. They don't need to find a hotel; all they have to do is skip down the gangway and walk into the city. They can immerse themselves in the chaos of a new city for a few hours and get away from it all.

These polar opposites make a cruise so fascinating. Extremes that feed off one another and become more glorious through their symbiosis. Cruises embody a colourful catalogue of contrasts: first sailing then dropping anchor; first enjoying a contemplative moments on the top deck in silent union with nature, almost touching the sky, surrounded by an oceanful of water, and then relishing a stint in the ballroom amidst cheerful people moving their bodies to the beat. There are both familiar and unfamiliar elements here. Everyday is different. Towns with romantic names such as Mukalla or Aden beckon. It's fun to imagine how it must be like to live in all these places. Fragments of foreign cultures are collected. You can go wandering among incense stands or grazing goats and still be back on familiar territory aboard the ship half an hour later. People who were strangers just days ago have now become friends who like to chat. The Asian maids say hello, and slowly their faces begin to grow familiar. The smell in the cabin and the freshly made bed form the anchors in your new world, a world that has become increasingly familiar. Polarities are the key to this experience.

Here comes yet another dyad: anonymity and intimacy. It's up to you which extreme you choose. It all depends on how many passengers there are on board and how you, yourself, tick. Some people adore anonymity and enjoy mixing with the masses without baring their souls. Such people choose to cruise on huge club ships which have room for 3,000 passengers. Others prefer things to be more intimate and always choose the same ship with

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200 passengers many of whom are regular customers. They know the crew and book the same cabin every time. Ships are predestined to create emotional bonds. The operators live from such passengers. Some never leave the ship, like the legendary Mrs Muller on the Q.E.2 who has been a permanent guest there for years.

Of course, finding the right ship is an art form. But one thing is certain. Everyone can find their perfect ship somewhere because the market forces operators to come up with appealing scenarios for all kinds of tastes. Every target group provides the cruise operators with inspiration for creating a bespoke cruise experience.

Suddenly you are confronted with freedoms and opportunities you never knew existed. Families can go on family-friendly holidays with nobody around whining about the kids. Homosexuals can book heterosexual-free passages. Singles needn't put up with gleeful couples. The elderly needn't feel terrorized by screaming children. Even those people who couldn't, in a million years, imagine going on a cruise and enjoying it, because they see themselves as the ultimate individuals who don't do well in groups and dismiss package tourism as a waste of time, feel tantalized by the idea of travelling along on a Russian ice-breaker through the north-west passage (it's all in the catalogue, folks!) or alternatively heading for the Indian Ocean on a Ukrainian training ship in the middle of summer which is the off-peak season. The Ultimate Individualist can rest assured that he will never feel more of an individual than when he looks around and sees himself surrounded by 20-year old sailors who climb the ropes with bare chests unable to speak a word of German or English.

So we finally come get to the soul issues. What effect can a cruise can have on your soul?. Every ship forms a microcosm, a newly formed society that has to work things out together for better or worse. For a limited period you are plucked out of your everyday routine. And every departure holds a promise that you might arrive at your destination as a changed person. That's why it's important to use this opportunity to get your bearings on life – and in fact find out if you still like the self you have become. The thing that is most fabulous and most fascinating at the same time is that, after 9.6 days, you are poised at a point of discovery.

It would be an illusion to believe that everything on a cruise is different. It isn't – but it is a world in miniature which is newly created like a model village in a paperweight which can be picked up and shaken until the snowflakes fall exactly where they should. Watch the others and watch yourself. The brave ones go for a walk in Jemen on their own, exchanging money in some

gloomy backyard. The inquisitive ones ask the harbour workers about the funny, curved sabres that are hanging from their belts. Everyone ends up where he or she belongs. The nervous ones prefer to stay within the group and only eat meals on board ship. Or they smuggle rolls from the breakfast buffet into a bag so that a safe snack is always at hand. Such people have an unholy fear of getting a nasty stomach bug from all that foreign food. The bored ones lie in their cabins and zap through the feature films. And nobody bothers with the bores after the fourth day. The chatterboxes stand alone at the railing and the corner of the captain's mouth starts to twitch when the know-it-all knocks at the door on the bridge.

Unfortunately there isn't much chance of finding a scapegoat to blame for your own inadequacies. There are no telephones here, no pressure of work, no deadlines to met, no family members around to get on your nerves and no annoying friends. (Unless you mistakenly brought them with you. But even if you did bring friends and family along, that might also be justified. Getting through a cruise together cements the bonds of love and respect.) You are largely forced to fall back on your own resources. On the fifth evening on board you catch yourself reacting sharply to your fellow diners. You put on a polite smile or feign interest in the topics – or you exude thin-lipped disregard for the trivialities that are being bandied around the table. There are many possibilities ranging from open hostility to blatant unpunctuality. Sometimes you wonder if you have told people too much about yourself – or too little. Why do some people ignore you while others seem to woo you? Why is it possible, after an excursion, to have a cosy chat with some but be snubbed by others?

Each person becomes a specific element in the mix. Everyone finds the perfect role, whether you project aloofness, arrogance or any other of the myriad qualities. And the serious student of human nature discover a golden opportunity to decide on whether he or she wants to stay the way they are, or transform themselves in some way. A cruiseship can be a merciless mirror or an cathartic cauldron. The only other environments where you get the opportunity to know yourself that quickly are hermetically-sealed: prisons; monasteries, boarding schools, insane asylums... All in all you could do worse than a cruise. ☺

Zora del Buono, born in 1962, is Deputy Chief Editor at mare. She got to go on her first cruise by taking up an assignment. It was not to be her last cruise but it certainly was the most enjoyable one. There were 1,600 gay men on board. She has also crossed the Atlantic on the Queen Elizabeth 2. But she prefers ships that still look like ships – ones that carry 200 passengers at the most.