

'spa style' shower, luxury bathrobes, loofah slippers, high quality toiletries, daily fresh fruit and flowers, and canapés served in the afternoon. You are welcomed on board with a glass of champagne, but in these staterooms there is also a bottle of bubbly waiting for you on ice, just the thing to start your cruise. Other very nice touches in Aqua Class are the two bottles of min-

eral water delivered to your stateroom each day and unsweetened cold tea. All Aqua Class Staterooms are on the 11th deck, with easy and direct complimentary access to the Persian gardens with steam baths and saunas and relaxation areas, plus of course the gym and health club.

The only slight 'omission' is that, unlike Concierge Class

(read more about this class at [www.travel.theportugalnews.com](http://www.travel.theportugalnews.com)), the perk of serving your breakfast on your veranda with a tablecloth and a delightfully laid out table is not available. You can request room service (which is complimentary) but it will simply be served on a tray.

The alternative, which we really appreciated is that one deck above, next to the indoor pool, is the small and discreet Aqua Café which serves healthy breakfast options and is rarely (if ever) full and overlooks the sea and the pool. Most people are in the Ocean Café tucking into eggs and bacon, and a vast range of other delicious, though perhaps not quite so healthy, breakfast options. Keep your visit to the Ocean Café for afternoon tea for delicate sandwiches and pastries and early evening when they are serving wonderful fresh Sushi, prepared by Japanese Chefs.

We sampled a 10 night cruise

from Rome which took us around the Greek Islands, also stopping at Sicily and Turkey. In each port there is the chance to take organised trips to local attractions, or to simply stroll off the ship and walk around. The Greek island of Santorini was fascinating as we stopped in the bay and took a shuttle boat to the port side where you boarded a cable car that took you to the mountain top village. We chose to spend each morning on board by the pools and Jacuzzis, then visit the local town after lunch to walk around. We are slightly ashamed to say that we didn't participate in a single one of the many excursions which almost empty the ship each day, nor were we very good at joining in the plethora of on board fun activities, so popular with many of the passengers.

In the evening after dinner, the shows are a must. Each night is a different performance, either with a top line international



The Aqua Spa Café for healthy breakfast and lunch by the pool



A stateroom with balcony



Luxurious seating in the pool areas



Real grass in the lawn club, ideal for bowls and putting or just lounging

### Cruise Misconceptions

#### "I'll be seasick"

No you won't. Movement is barely perceptible and as the CEO told us "We don't dream up the perfect holiday environment and then allow people to feel sea sick". The stabilisers are amazingly effective.

#### "I'll get stuck with people and have to socialize"

You only have to be sociable, if you want to. You can dine alone and the public areas are so spacious that you can always keep yourself to yourself.

#### "I'll get fat"

You might be tempted to overeat on the first day or two, but with so much quality food available all the time, you'll soon be opting for the healthy choices and tucking into the mountains of fresh fruit and salads. Fattening fast food will be off your menu for the duration of the cruise, so you'll probably lose, rather than gain, weight, and of course there is a gym!

#### "Other passengers will be old"

All ages enjoy cruises nowadays. That's why there are so many activities for children, bars and discos for the young, whole families enjoying meals together and then go their separate ways during the day and there are quite a few singles.

#### "A package holiday in a single destination will be cheaper"

Not so. Consider all the entertainment, the free food, the service - a cruise is the best value for money by far.

#### "I'll be bored"

Only if you want to be. Because we wanted to relax, we sat by the pool, read books from the library, strolled on shore, took leisurely drinks and meals and this is as boring as it gets. Every night a programme for the next day is delivered to your cabin with activities and classes including fitness, language, Photoshop, glass-blowing, dance, cookery and wine-tasting, games, raffles, bingo, casino, game shows, various parties, singalongs and live music groups throughout the ship.

The ship is a virtual art gallery with fascinating works of art on permanent display and you can also bid at art auctions. Add the on-shore excursions for the strenuous and the not so strenuous and be convinced that boredom is not an option.

artist or a show. On the Sunday we had 'Equinox The Show', which was something in the style of Cirque du Soleil with dancers and acrobats 'flying' above the audience on wires, to say it was spectacular is an understatement.

The theatre is almost an experience itself, with platforms that raise and lower, superb lighting and sound, three levels of seating and great staging and sets. If you had paid €30 a seat you wouldn't have been disappointed, free was even better but was not taken as an excuse to compromise on quality.

In fact quality is something that really isn't compromised anywhere throughout the ship. I don't know of any luxury hotel that has so many staff waiting to help you. A small example is that in a good five star hotel you may get a 'turn down' service, where the maid will turn down your bed and put a chocolate on your pillow. On board the Equinox your stateroom is fully serviced while you are at dinner, the bed re-made, the bathroom

cleaned, the veranda tidied and everything put in order. It's impressive.

You really have to try a cruise to know how good it is, but expect to be 'converted'. On this page you will find the contacts for the RCI and Celebrity Cruises main representative for Portugal, and as a reader, there is a complimentary bottle of champagne on offer for you (even if your stateroom includes one, then you will have two!).

Paul Luckman

#### NEXT WEEK:

Going on a cruise if you have a physical disability.



Wake up to a new view nearly every day

### Cruise Tips

- Cruises from Barcelona, Rome and Malaga are less expensive than from Southampton (most of the time).
- Travel the day before to the departure port (unless you have bought the transfer arrangements from the agents). We missed our cruise last year due to flight delays.
- Both RCI and Celebrity offer coach transfers to and from the Airport, and they deliver your bags straight to your stateroom.
- Stay on board some mornings, the ship is almost empty while people go off on trips.
- Look at RCI if you have kids, Celebrity if you want a little more luxury.
- Avoid UK school holiday periods if you want the best prices.

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