



PHOTOS BY CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Caribbean, with extra layers of luxury

By Claudia Capos
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MIAMI — The wind-ruffled tourmaline hills of Saint Barthélemy greeted us on a Sunday morning as Oceania Cruises’ M/S Regatta nosed its way through tropical waters toward Gustavia, the Caribbean island’s Swedish-named, French-infused capital. Captain Jurica Brajic dropped anchor away from some rocky outcroppings. Near the entrance to Gustavia’s horseshoe-shaped port, a thicket of sailboat masts swayed in unison. Fort Oscar, a stone fortress housing the Gendarmerie, guarded the tony settlement from atop La Pointe. Around the Regatta, yachts tugged at their anchor lines, a not-so-subtle reminder of St. Barts’ cachet as an exclusive enclave for millionaires and movie stars. (Unbeknownst to us at the time, our captain also was a celebrity, on the Seven Seas not the silver screen.)

Christopher Columbus discovered the 8-mile-square volcanic island in 1493 and named it in honor of his brother Bartolomeo. Once a Swedish colony, St. Barts is now an overseas collectivity of France and part of the French West Indies, which includes St. Martin, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. Retracing Columbus’s footsteps, Doug and I felt a tinge of excitement



at the prospect of exploring an island and a port of call not offered on previous Caribbean sailings aboard much larger cruise ships.

An orange tender boat carried us ashore to Quai de la Republique, where we hired a taxi for an hourlong tour. Our third-generation, island-born driver, Henri, regaled us with tales of growing up on the island and pointed out villas formerly owned by French actor Gerard Depardieu and the late ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev. We admired 938-foot-high Mount Vitet and snapped flower-

framed photos of Grand Fond and Marigot beaches. Henri dropped us off at the Eden Rock Hotel, a favorite haunt of actor Tom Hanks and rock star Mick Jagger, for an afternoon of swimming and beach walking on crescent-shaped Saint Jean Beach. After returning to the Regatta, we ordered surf and turf burgers, a delectable pairing of lobster and filet mignon, at the Waves poolside grill to enjoy during the sail-away.

As newcomers to Oceania, this was our first Caribbean cruise on a smaller midsize ship. We had taken numerous cruises on “big-box” ships with 2,000-3,000-plus passengers but had tired of long lines, repetitive ports, and perceived cutbacks in service and food. This year, we decided to pay extra to enjoy more luxury and signed up for Oceania’s 10-day Sun-Splashed Isles cruise, with seven ports of call. Sailing round trip from Miami in early January, the 684-passenger Re-

St. Barts (top) has long lured yachts, movie stars, and other riches and fame to its inner harbor. On Grand Turk in the Turks and Caicos, cruise passengers took a catamaran (above right) to the Turk Wall to snorkel and dive. On Virgin Gorda (left), Baths National Park has huge boulders and secret rock pools.



sire, time, and money to take longer, more exotic cruises. “You’d have to be a millionaire to get food and service like this,” said Evelyn Newman, 92, of Coconut Creek, Fla., who was celebrating her 106th cruise and her fifth voyage with Oceania. Others were first-timers with Oceania. “We travel to the Caribbean frequently and were looking for a higher-quality cruise experience and cuisine than we’ve had in the past,” said Peter Abraham of Plymouth. “We like the ship’s smaller size, because we can meet interesting people and forge new relationships. This creates a more intimate experience that we really enjoy.”

Oceania’s goal “is to offer the best food and great service,” general manager Raffaele Cinque said. “Our midsize ships can sail to remote areas and small ports, which is an added advantage. We don’t go to heavily touristed destinations, and we arrange more exclusive

gatta and its 400-member staff promised a more personalized way to rediscover Columbus’s Caribbean and visit out-of-the-way ports while being pampered by fine cuisine, exceptional service, and first-class amenities.

Two-thirds of our fellow passengers were repeat Oceania customers, mostly retirees and seasoned travelers with the de-

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tours for our clientele.”

During a shore excursion on St. Martin, 30 passengers trained for crew positions aboard an America’s Cup raceboat and competed in a regatta. Others had the option of revving up a Harley-Davidson motorcycle for a wind-whipped ride through the island’s countryside. In Tortola, we joined a tour that took us to the nearby island of Virgin Gorda, where we marveled at the Baths National Park’s huge granite boulders and crystalline pools of water. Led by guide Alex Esser, we threaded our way from the Baths to Devil’s Bay through bone-twisting crevices and over water-slicked rocks to reach a pristine sugar-sand beach.

In the Dominican Republic, our 24-passenger tour group descended 240 feet into the cathedral-like Maravillas (“Wonders”) limestone caves, used by the Taino Indians for tribal rituals in Columbus’s time and containing 472 petroglyphs etched on the walls. We also visited San Pedro de Macoris, once a booming sugar town, to admire the homes of Dominican-born Major League Baseball stars, including Sammy Sosa, and watch workers hand-roll cigars at the Macorix Cigar Co.

On our final excursion, at Grand Turk Island in the Turks and Caicos, we sailed aboard a catamaran to the “Turk wall,” an underwater coral shelf teeming with marine life. Donning snorkel masks and fins, we delighted as our jovial Jamaican crew “chummed” the water with bread, attracting fish in rainbow colors and a small reef shark. Later, on a secluded beach, we drank rum punch and dug our toes into sun-bleached sand.

On sea days, we signed up for personal training sessions with champion body builder Vefa Toga at the ship’s Canyon Ranch Spa Club or tuned into talks on Caribbean culture by guest lecturer Robert W. Kirk. We didn’t miss the rock-climbing walls, giant water slides, and zip lines on larger ships.

Every evening we savored outstanding cuisine from five-star menus inspired by executive culinary director and master chef Jacques Pepin for the Regatta’s main dining room and its two specialty restaurants, the Polo Grill and Toscana. One evening we dined at a romantic table for two at Toscana, overlooking the twinkling lights around Philipsburg, Dutch St. Martin’s capital. We selected carpaccio di manzo (thin-sliced prime beef), black tagliolini with truffle cream sauce, risotto all’aragosta (lobster with pasta), filet mignon in Gorgonzola crust, and osso buco alla Milanese. As we finished our sorbet and Italian torte cake, Toscana chef Biagio Gallo stopped by. “From beginning to end, all our dishes are made to order,” he said. “Everything is prepared fresh daily. We have no microwaves.”

Our biggest surprise was learning that Brajic had fended off an attack by Somali pirates six years ago. The silver-haired, Croatian-born captain recounted the rapid-fire events of Nov. 30, 2008, aboard the M/S Nautica, as it sailed through the Gulf of Aden. Early that morning, Brajic spotted two skiffs with gunmen approaching and ordered passengers to take cover. To save the ship, he ramped up the Nautica’s speed to 21 knots and outran the pirates, who fired 10 shots. The captain received two awards from the Croatian government, commending him for his valor.

Fortunately, we did not encounter any pirates of the Caribbean during our Regatta cruise. As we disembarked on the final day, Brajic stood calmly at the gangway to shake hands and wish us farewell.

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