

The 10 best
cruises in the
Mediterranean.
Which one is
right for you?



We step on
board the most
luxurious boat
in the world

CRUISE



GREAT

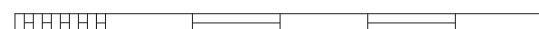
Is this the world's most luxurious cruise ship? DAVID LESER laps it up for five nights in the Mediterranean on the new *Seven Seas Explorer*.

THE

(Clockwise from right) An Indian peafowl stands sentinel at the Citadel of Saint-Tropez; *Seven Seas Explorer*; Saint-Tropez's Old Town



ESCAPE



Luxury shopping in Sardinia's Porto Cervo (above); the cruise ship's grand atrium



"I HAD a \$150,000 sleep last night," says Frank Del Rio, president and CEO of Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings Ltd. "How do I look?"

Like a man who's woken up in a \$US150,000 king-size British Savoir bed handcrafted from horse's tail, lamb's wool and cashmere combed from the neck of a Mongolian goat is how Del Rio looks. When you preside over a company that describes its latest vessel, Regent's *Seven Seas Explorer*, as the most luxurious cruise ship in the world, it's one of the perks.

You also get to share your 360-square-metre Regent Suite on Deck 14 with a \$US250,000 Dakota Jackson-designed Steinway piano, an Italian marble bar, handmade crystal chandeliers from the Czech Republic and two Picassos. And when you glide from the living room into the bathroom, you enjoy a gilded spa retreat with wet and dry saunas, indoor and outdoor hot tubs, a raindrop shower bed and heated sleep chairs.

My Concierge Suite, five decks below, is a tad smaller than Del Rio's and there's no glass-enclosed outdoor sitting area with 270-degree, floor-to-ceiling views over the ship's bow. However, what I do have on this special-preview five-night Mediterranean cruise from Barcelona to Monaco (with stops at Toulon, Sardinia and Saint-Tropez) is an elegant suite with a spacious walk-in closet, a marble bathroom, L'Occitane soaps, shampoos and lotions fit for a cosmetics king and 24-hour room service.

"Good old, unabashed conspicuous consumption has been so maligned over the past few years," says Del Rio without even a hint of irony. "But I think those days are over. Luxury is back."

You can say that again. From every vantage point on this 55,254-tonne vessel, there's enough opulence to make an oil-rich sheikh blush. For instance, more than 4000 square metres of mostly Carrara (Italian) marble; exquisite crystal chandeliers in the corridors (so who needs one in their suite?); Versace place settings; glass features from the Venetian island of Murano; extravagantly designed lounges and a casino; corridors filled with original works of art; and six lavish restaurants, including Pacific Rim, where a three-tonne bronze Tibetan prayer wheel bestrides the entrance.

Did I mention there's nearly one crew member for every passenger, including a private butler (for guests staying in the premium suites), a suite steward, a team of pool attendants and a mixologist for your own tailored cocktails? Plus, there's the Canyon Ranch



Calanque d'En
Vau, near Cassis
(above); the ship's
palatial Regent
Suite (right)



Pastis, an anise-flavoured liqueur, is the apéritif of choice in the Provence-Côte d'Azur region

SpaClub with a teak terrace and infinity-edge plunge pool; a full-service salon with four hair, two manicure and two pedicure stations; and a fitness centre with enough space for exercise bikes, yoga and Pilates. Who says luxury can't be measured?

As the architectural treasures and soaring ramparts of Barcelona begin to drift from view, our butler delivers a bottle of Jacquart Champagne to our suite (let me point out we have our own private balcony, too). I learn there's going to be a jazz quartet playing in the Explorer Lounge tonight, followed by dinner under the cascading aqua chandeliers in Compass Rose restaurant, a French variety show called *Paradis* (one of four spectacular musical productions shown over the next five nights in the ornate two-tiered, 694-seat Constellation Theater) and a DJ taking us through the moves in the Meridian Lounge.

I'm no sea-dog – and certainly no cruise junkie like the Florida travel agent who tells me he's on his 63rd voyage – but suddenly I love ships, especially luxury ones. Not only is there the bridge, decks and long raised catwalks with the crew in their crisp, white uniforms to stir the heart, there's also the thrill of the sound of the ship edging away from the mouth of the harbour and, in our case, sliding towards the famed Côte d'Azur, in both safe passage and design splendour.

"I saw this ship when it was just metal, cables and partitions," says the spectacularly named Captain Stanislas Gerard Jean Mercier De Lacombe when we meet in the plush library on Deck 11. "But I am still discovering all its great architectural features."

On this glorious coastline, we glide through the night towards the French military port city of Toulon where, over 200 years ago, British naval commander Horatio Nelson established his blockade and, nearly 140 years later, the French fleet was scuttled to avoid being seized by Adolf Hitler's forces.

But we don't want to spend *too long in Toulon* (which could be the title of a song) because

the delightful Provençal seaside town of Cassis beckons with its imposing sea cliffs, white limestone *calanques* (inlets) and Roman fishing port. There we eat moulles-frites (mussels and fries), washed down with rosé from a local vineyard, all the while reimagining ourselves as members of a latter-day “Bloombsury-sur-Mer” Set. In 1925, when Virginia Woolf and her husband, Leonard,

[illegible]



Resort town
Porto Cervo (above);
the ship's Pool
Deck includes
two whirlpools



Flight path

DXB

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visited Cassis for the first time, she declared: "Nobody shall say of me that I have not known perfect happiness."

The British writer was obviously in a swoon, as are we when we return to our floating palace for dinner at classic steakhouse Prime 7, where a waiter guides us to a plush leather banquette overlooking a translucent sea – one that turns from silver at dawn to turquoise at noon to royal blue in the evening.

Like Del Rio, we sleep with the angels then wake to a sunrise that has coated the world in a blaze of yellow. We've arrived in the ancient city of Olbia, in

northern Sardinia, and are bussed to Porto Cervo on the Costa Smeralda, where the Aga Khan built a village retreat for the rich in the 1960s. It's home to Italian businessman Flavio Briatore's Billionaire Club – a favourite nightspot of supermodels, oligarchs and Hollywood stars – and some of Europe's most expensive real estate and superyachts.

Word has it that one of Russia's richest men, Roman Abramovich, caused a stir here a few years ago when his \$US1.5 billion yacht, *Eclipse*, was seen sailing the remote beaches of nearby Cala Luna, Cala Mariolu and Cala Sisine.

All I can say is: "You call *that* a boat, Roman? You should come and see ours. For one thing, at 224 metres, ours is 62 metres longer than yours and it doesn't need a missile warning system and a submarine to show people a good time."

However, I digress, because after an eye-popping afternoon in Porto Cervo, we're on an overnight dash to Saint-Tropez. This is the charming French Riviera town that Brigitte Bardot made famous in the 1950s when Roger Vadim directed her in *And God... Created Woman* on Pampelonne Beach – the film that transformed Bardot from an

unknown sex kitten into an immortal one. For most of the day we're content to stroll the old port with its dramatic history and medley of narrow, charming streets, all of them offering every conceivable delight of French provincial life.

On our last evening, I'm not sure whether the gods have sent a special dispatch but the night is perfect: darkness falls like velvet. There's a gala barbeque poolside, songbirds streaking over the hills and spires of the town and a crescent moon lying on its back as we set sail for the beguiling sovereign city-state of Monaco.

In two days' time, Monaco's Princess Charlene, the wife of Prince Albert II, will preside over the ship's christening. Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli will perform pierside and there will be a black-tie gala dinner for 700 on board after Princess Charlene blesses the vessel and all who sail on her.

I would love to stay, really and truly, but I think I need to come back down to Earth.

Following its maiden voyage on July 20, 2016, *Seven Seas Explorer* will spend its inaugural season in Europe before heading to Miami for a series of Caribbean voyages. Fares for a 10-night voyage in the Mediterranean start at \$6193 per person, twin share. Visit rssc.com.

Photography: Raimund Franken. Statistical sources: Cruise Industry Source Market Report – Ocean Cruise Passengers Australia 2015; Cruise Activities in MedCruise Ports – Statistics 2014

BARCELONA WAS THE MEDITERRANEAN'S MOST POPULAR PORT IN 2014, WITH 2.4 MILLION TRAVELLERS VISITING ON A CRUISE.

