

HEART OF THE SEA

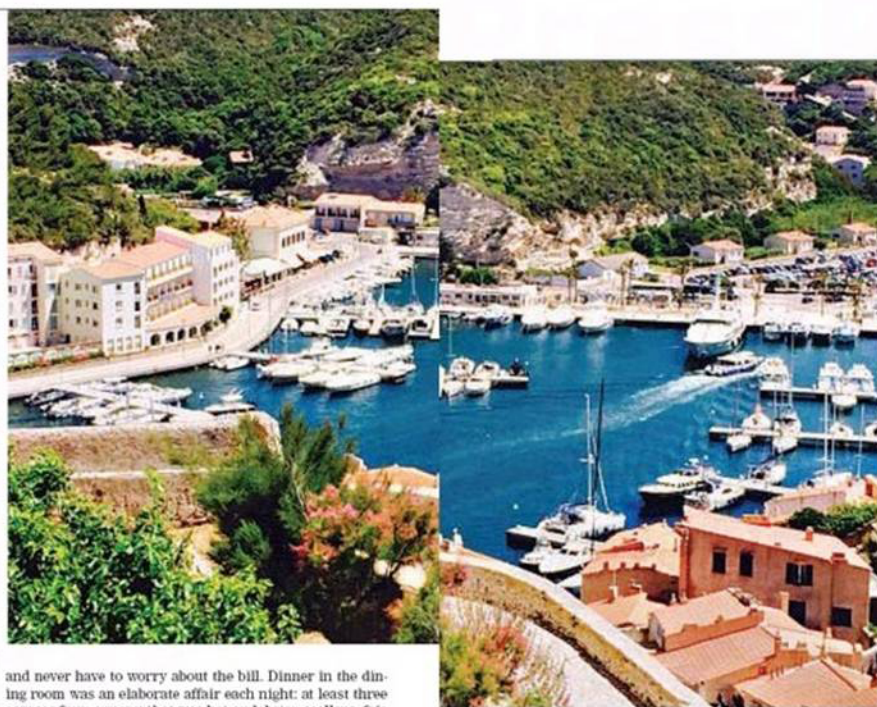
I had the voyage of a lifetime on the Mediterranean. And I think this one may have spoiled me for all other cruises

REGULAR READERS of this column may recall that I am ambivalent about cruise ships. I find them too big, too overpowering, and extremely limiting. If the food is inedible or the other guests are obnoxious well then, that's too bad — you are stuck there for a week or so.

So when Sudesh Kishore invited me nearly two years ago to travel in one of the SeaDream boats, I put him off. Eventually I agreed to do a voyage around the south of France but the general elections and TV commitments intervened, so I backed out again. But Sudesh is nothing if not indefatigable. He came up with another voyage scheduled to start around a fortnight after the election results were declared. Why didn't I try that? He was sure it would be a nice break after the marathon of TV shows and counting day special programming.

So at the end of May, I boarded SeaDream II in Rome for a week-long Mediterranean voyage. I had no idea what to expect. Sudesh had told me that SeaDream called their experience 'yachting' rather than 'cruising', and the cynical sod that I am, I had been sceptical and leery. But, Sudesh was right. It was a far, far better experience than I had ever imagined: a sort of once-in-a-lifetime trip.

The first surprise came when my taxi pulled up to SeaDream II at Civitavecchia port in Rome. I had visions of checking in but an elegant young woman greeted me, sent a porter to get my bags and motioned me to the ship. I walked on to what turned out to be a surprisingly small boat (only 56 cabins) to be greeted by the captain and his officers. They directed me to a saloon where waiters were handing out glasses of champagne and a chef was extracting huge por-



TAKE A BREAK

Once the SeaDream (right) docked at Corsica, I walked around the town. The ship yard in Corsica (above)

and never have to worry about the bill. Dinner in the dining room was an elaborate affair each night: at least three courses from a menu that was hot on lobster, scallops, foie gras, US Prime beef, crab and other high-value items. But you didn't have to stick to three courses. You could order five. They didn't care. Two sommeliers came around with the wines of the day (at least one white and one red), which were also free. If you wanted special meals (say, Indian vegetarian everyday), no problem. They would do that too.

I've had my share of luxury experiences in

this job but even I was gobsmacked by the sheer lavishness of SeaDream. Because the staff ratio is extraordinary (at least one employee to each guest), the service is exceptional. With half an

hour of having got on to the ship, every guest was being addressed by name. (I discovered later that staff were given a chart with photos of each guest and told to memorise their names).

The way it worked was that the ship would sail by night and then each morning we would arrive at a new port: Positano, Sorrento, Capri or wherever. You had the choice of taking guided tours organised by the ship through local operators (at about \$100 or so per head per trip), which could be interesting: I took one to the excavations of the ancient Roman city of Pompeii. Or you could do your own thing. In Corsica, I walked around the town. In Capri, I took taxis and toured the island.

Whatever option you chose, the ship's crew would help. At each port, there would be a SeaDream counter near the harbour, stocked with cold drinks and snacks, and staff who would help you find your way around. Some people went out to eat but I found that was a waste of time in the tourist towns because most restaurants were ghastly tour-



WALK THROUGH THE RUINS

I took one guided tour organised by the ship through local operators to the excavations of the ancient Roman city of Pompeii (above)



There are only two SeaDream ships and they are identical in nearly every respect. (A third is said to be under construction). They sail all around the world (one touched India a few months ago), from Australia to South America but

basically, they do the Caribbean routes in the winter and the Mediterranean in the summer. Space is — by definition — limited and most people book months in advance.

It is expensive by any standards. But how expensive is a matter of perspective. If a guest had done the voyage we did using other means of transport, it would have been difficult — there are few airports in Southern Italy and you would have to rent chauffeured cars, which (in Italy, especially) can be dangerous and expensive. If you stayed at grand hotels throughout and ate at good restaurants every day, then your costs would far exceed the cost of a SeaDream voyage. You should expect to pay upwards of \$1,500 a day for a couple which sounds like a lot till you work out that this includes travel (no extra fares between destinations), hotel room and all meals and drinks. Most wealthy Indians spend far more when they go to Europe in the summer. And there is none of the hassle of packing and unpacking at each destination, of checking into flights, of finding trains or cars or of being sure that you've got the best deal at each hotel you go to. On a boat, all that is taken care of.

So have I changed my mind about cruises? Well yes and no. I had the voyage of a lifetime on SeaDream so, yes. But it is also a no. Because I think this one may have spoiled me for all other cruises.

On this ship, once you've bought your ticket there's usually nothing you pay for

ist traps and the food on the ship was always so much better. (And free!) If I went out to a port, I usually ate after I came back. And there was always food on the ship. Typically I might return at three in the afternoon, sit on the deck, eat a hamburger or one of SeaDream's excellent (and addictive) hot dogs while the sommelier kept trying to persuade me to try one of the wines of the day. Then I would either read or write on the deck staring out at the clear blue waters of the Mediterranean.

It was while talking to other guests that I discovered that SeaDream has its own junkies. People who come back again and again. One couple I had dinner with had spent 114 days on the ship over the last few years and knew every member of the staff by name. I asked another couple why they came so often given that, unlike me, they hardly bothered to go out to port. They came for the luxury, they said. They were obviously well-off, so I asked them what was so special about this ship compared to the hotels and resorts they went to.

"Well, I get five-star service elsewhere. But I get ten-star service here," was the reply. And certainly there is the sense of being pampered, of staff who know your preferences and anticipate your every need and of gourmet food and wine. Plus, you can play it any way you like. Some people came with groups of friends. Some made new friends on the boat. Some (like me) used the time to unwind rather than socialise. Some used the jet skis and the water sports that SeaDream is famous for. Some went to every port. Some never left the ship.

Vir Sanghvi

rude travel

tions of caviar from a couple of giant one kilo tins. At some stage, somebody took my passport away and returned with my room key, which also served as my ID on the boat. One had the sense of checking into a swish hotel.

SeaDream's cabins are large by boat standards and decorated like luxury hotel rooms with flat screen TVs, Bvlgari toiletries in the bathrooms, DVD players, mini-bars etc. But it took me half a day to work out why the experience felt hotel-like and yet, not quite hotel-like. The difference was that on this ship, once you've bought your ticket there's usually nothing you pay for. (Internet is \$100 per week and laundry is extra, but that's about it.) You can order what you like from room service, raid the mini-bar, live on the best liquor; stuff your face with caviar — and all of it is free.

That night, when I went to the saloon for cocktails, there was more caviar and more champagne. And they explained it all to me. I could go to any of the bars on the decks (there are about three of them) and drink Black Label, cognac, cocktails, Bombay Sapphire martinis or whatever

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