

Story by Nancy L. Claus

cruise control

FROM THE UNABASHED LUXURY OF A TRANSATLANTIC CROSSING TO THE COMPLETE LAZINESS OF CRUISING THE CARIBBEAN, IT'S TIME TO WAVE GOODBYE TO THE HO-HUM HOLIDAY.

The Queen Mary 2: arguably the most luxe liner that ever sailed.

THE TRANSATLANTIC CROSSING

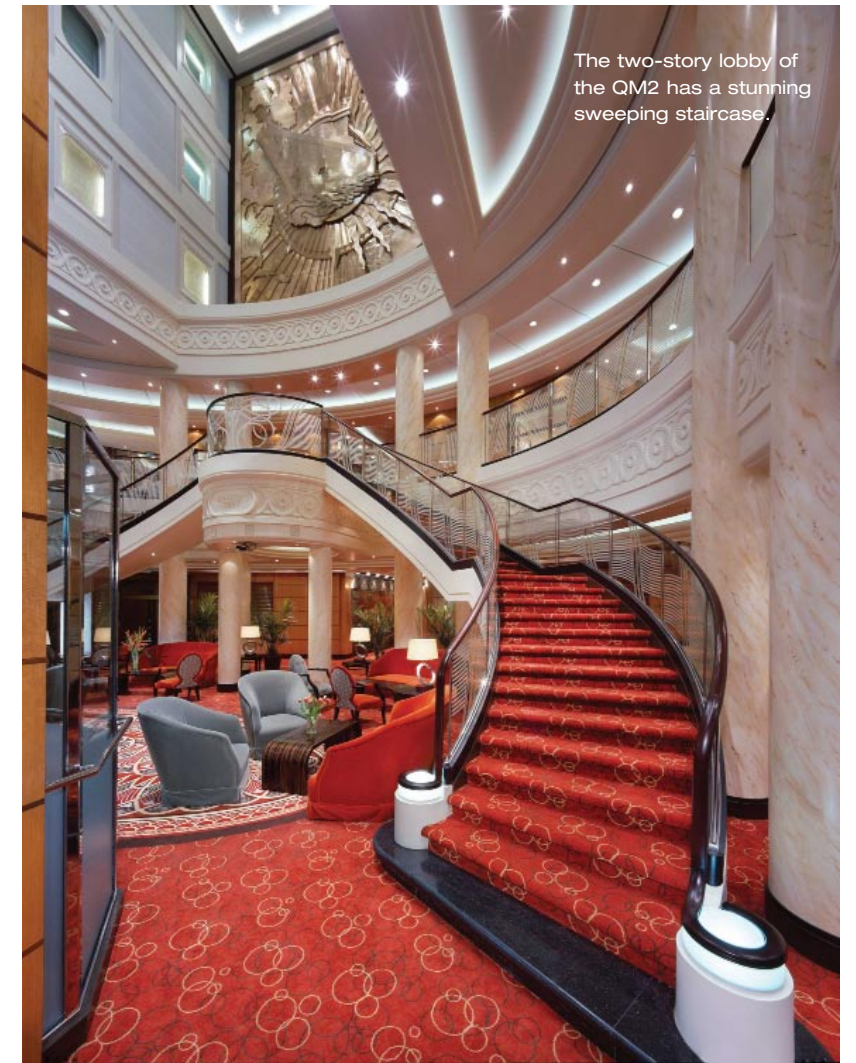
The Queen Mary 2: an updated return to the golden age of cruising

Conjure up memories of your favorite five-star resort: the great restaurants, the impeccable service, the lavish amenities. Then put it out to sea. What have you got? The Queen Mary 2, arguably the most luxe liner that ever sailed.

First, there's the wow factor of the behemoth's sheer size. At 1,132 feet long, the QM2 is longer than the Eiffel Tower is tall, nearly twice as large as the original Queen Mary, and three times the size of its legendary predecessor, the Titanic (plus a whole lot safer).

The interior is equally dramatic with grand public spaces such as a two-story lobby with a sweeping staircase and the enormous Britannia Restaurant—three decks high and spanning the full width of the ship. Spacious staterooms are luxurious, too (marble baths, Frette linens, a crystal bowl ringed in sugar and filled with perfectly sweet, perfectly ripe strawberries).

If your idea of cruising includes hordes of the newly wed, overfed, and nearly dead, banish the thought right now. On the QM2, you're more likely to see tuxedo-and-gown-clad couples dancing to Big Band tunes (there are three formal nights per crossing), fit joggers making their rounds on the ship's teak promenade, and standing-room-only crowds packing lectures by Oxford professors on topics running the gamut from the cradle of Western thought to why apples fall.



The two-story lobby of the QM2 has a stunning sweeping staircase.

ROYAL REPAST

On a typical six-day transatlantic crossing, 16,000 meals are prepared each day. Here's the shopping list:

- 50 tons of fresh fruit and vegetables
- 13 tons of fish and seafood
- 12 tons of meat
- 8 tons of chicken, duck, and turkey
- 4 tons of flour
- 2 tons of rice
- 2 tons of sugar
- 2 tons of cheese and dairy products
- 5,000 gallons of fresh milk
- 32,400 eggs
- 20 kg of Russian caviar

There are 14 passenger decks, one indoor and four outdoor swimming pools, a putting green and golf simulator, and the fabulous 20,000-square-foot Canyon Ranch Spa with a full gym and salon. A kids' playroom is staffed with British nannies; the 6,000-square-foot casino and a nightclub offer playgrounds for more mature clientele. There's even a kennel that can accommodate five dogs and three cats (\$500 for dogs, \$300 for cats, per cruise).

If, somehow, between activities you happen to find your stomach growling, there's no need to ever go hungry. There are 10 dining venues onboard, from the casual buffet-style Kings Court to the upscale Todd English, at which cruisers must pony up an extra \$20 for lunch (\$30 for dinner).

As in England, the QM2 also has a class system—at least when it comes to dining. High rollers in the duplex apartments (1,566 and 2,249 square feet) and the more lavish suites dine at their leisure in the Queens Grill, a 206-seat gourmet venue with its own private lounge. Passengers in junior suites dine in the Princess Grill, a more intimate 180-seat restaurant, also with its own private lounge. The rest of the passengers dine in the Britannia Restaurant.

At 1,132 feet, the QM2 is longer than the Eiffel Tower is tall.

Vegetarian and Canyon Ranch spa selections are available at each of the venues, but with choices like lobster Americaine flambé with cognac, truffle, and wild mushroom risotto (prepared tableside) and duck à l'orange with hazelnut croquettes and Grand Marnier sauce, calories and cholesterol were the last things to ponder.

The week was a whirlwind of lectures, shows, high teas, and formal dinners. I'm kind of a casual gal, but there's something about the QM2 that makes one want to dress for dinner. We visited the galleys and the bridge, played blackjack in the casino, shopped the boutiques and bookstore. But the not-to-miss moment came when I awoke on our last morning at 4 o'clock to join the throngs on the promenade gazing at the lights of New York City as we passed (just barely) under the Verrazano Bridge toward the harbor.

Details: Six-night transatlantic crossings start at \$1,399 per person for a standard inside room. Princess Grill suites start at \$3,649 per person; Queens Grill suites at \$4,999; the grand duplex can be had for \$23,199 per person. Call (800) 728-6273 or visit cunard.com.

GRAND MEDITERRANEAN AND GREEK ISLES CRUISE

The Emerald Princess offers an ambitious itinerary of Europe's top sites

The Emerald Princess can accommodate more than 3,000 passengers.



If you're looking to check off as many Places to See Before You Die as possible, there's no better choice than to book a grand Mediterranean cruise.

In May, my daughter and I visited eight ports in just 12 days, taking in the ruins of Ephesus and Pompeii, cruising the Amalfi Coast, bargain-hunting in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, riding a gondola at sunset in Venice, and experiencing some of the world's greatest art masterpieces in Florence and Athens—all without the hassle of daily packing and hotel checkouts.



La Piazza, the Emerald Princess' dramatic three-story atrium

Cruising on the Emerald Princess, one of the newest jewels in the Princess crown, means cruising in style. An enormous resort of a ship that can accommodate more than 3,000 passengers, the Emerald has an outdoor movie screen, a spa, a gym, and all the requisite sports activities to keep off the pounds while at sea. There are three main dining rooms (one with traditional seatings, two with seating anytime), two buffets, and

two specialty restaurants, Sabatini's for Italian and the Crown Grill for steaks and chops (both have a surcharge).

Sea days provide optimum relaxation time; our favorite place to do that was at

The Sanctuary, an adults-only retreat on the 16th deck, where you can bask in the sun or enjoy the sea breeze in the shade or even indulge in a massage in one of the cabanas. (It's worth the \$10 surcharge.) Downstairs is the Lotus Spa with its Thermal Suite: heated stone loungers, rainforest showers, and saunas and steam rooms. The gym was always packed as well—working out while overlooking the ocean is quite the incentive.

Our port days were filled with four- to 10-hour itineraries, the evenings with luscious meals. Foodies definitely should not miss the Chef's Table dinner experience on the Emerald Princess, a multi-course extravaganza paired with the perfect wines.

We returned to the U.S. exhilarated, exhausted, and with a few extra pounds. The pounds will (hopefully!) disappear, but the memories of this trip will last forever.

Details: For 2009 bookings, prices start at \$2,090 per person for an interior cabin to \$3,815 for a mini-suite for a 12-day Mediterranean cruise.



A sailboat cruises the Sir Francis Drake Channel in the British Virgin Islands

EXPLORING THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

Try an oceanfront floating room for a true island experience

I love everything about the Caribbean: the impossibly clear blue waters, the lush vegetation, the soft white sands. But as fabulous as it is to look out at the water from a luxury resort like, say, Little Dix Bay, nothing compares with actually living on the water. As in, on a boat.

Seasoned sailors can go it alone—called bareboating—stocking provisions and preparing their own meals, planning routes, and navigating solo. But don't worry if you can't tell a batten from a bollard; fully crewed catamarans, mono-hull sailboats, and motor yachts are available for the maritime pleasure of even the most novice of sailors. There are no formal nights on this type of cruise—just pack your bathing suit, some shorts and tees, and a sarong or two (and plenty of sunscreen).

Plan to swim, snorkel, scuba-dive, sunbathe, star gaze, sightsee, and sup on the sumptuous meals the crew has prepared for you, all with 360-degree views of the more than 60 islands, cays, and islets



Swimming in Deadman's Bay by the BVI's Peter Island



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travel

that make up the British Virgin Islands, the undisputed sailing capital of the world. The quarters are cozy, but that's part of the fun. Cabins have a double or Queen-size bed, nifty built-in drawers, and a teeny-tiny private bathroom.



Fishing in Devil's Bay by Virgin Gorda

What's there to do in this watery wonderland besides drinking in the views (and drinking, in general)? For starters, there are more than 160 varieties of fish to catch, from "secret" fishing holes to deepwater spots. Rather swim with the fishies than catch them? Just jump off the boat and snorkel (man overboard is considered part of the fun!). Jacques Cousteau Coral Garden at Cam Bay on Great Camanoe Island is one of the loveliest coral gardens in the world. The giant rock formations of The Baths on Virgin Gorda, created millions of years ago by a volcanic eruption of granite, are a must-see. Weathered boulders, some three stories tall, are stacked and strewn across the white sand beach, forming grottoes and wading pools to explore. The Bubbling Pool on Jost Van Dyke, a little tidal pool with waves cascading over the rocks like a

natural Jacuzzi, is a fun side trip. And, if you're looking for adventure, try riding an all-terrain vehicle straight up the mountain on Jost Van Dyke—and then back down again. It's truly terrifying; reward your bravery with a painkiller at the Soggy Dollar Bar afterward.

If you want someplace truly remote, check out the tiny atoll of Anegada, population 200, about a two-hour sail from Virgin Gorda and surrounded by the world's third largest coral reef (behind Belize and the Great Barrier Reef). Scuba enthusiasts come to explore the 500 wrecks here; landlubbers loll on Loblolly Beach (try the potent planter's punch at the Big Bamboo lounge there).

The beauty of sailing in the BVI is that apart from Anegada, you can navigate between most of the islands by sight, anchoring in a beautiful little inlet for lunch, swimming off to a tiny picture-postcard beach in the afternoon, and mooring in a different marina each night. And each morning, when you climb on deck from your quarters, the sight still takes your breath away.

On the last night, setting sail for Tortola and then home, I sat on the boat's trampoline, sipping a margarita and watching a sunset of biblical proportions blossom across the endless sky. Nothing but sea and sunset for as far as I could see, just a single sailboat off in the distance. It doesn't get better than this.

Details: For specifics, visit bvitourism.com or contact any of the many charter companies in the BVI, including Horizon Yacht Charters (horizonyachtcharters.com), The Moorings (moorings.com), Voyage Charters (voyagecharters.com), or BVI Yacht Vacations (bviyachtvacations.com). 

Westchester Magazine features editor Nancy L. Claus can't wait to embark on her next cruise.



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