



This is a new golden age for cruise holidays, with more exciting options, exotic destinations and onboard luxury than ever, as travel writer and cruise expert **Steve Newman** explains



COMPAGNIE DE PONANT

How do you fancy learning to play bridge or paint with watercolours in the morning, walking around an ancient city in the afternoon, enjoying a lavish four-course dinner and Broadway show in the evening and watching the sun go down with a night cap before retiring to your five-star room for the night?

Sounds good, doesn't it? A cruise can offer you all of these things, so it's little wonder that more and more of us are taking up cruising as a holiday option. An estimated two million people in the UK booked a cruise in 2013 and figures are rising. This year is set to be an exciting one for the cruising industry: Liverpool will celebrate Cunard's 175th anniversary in May, when all three Cunard cruise ships – the Queen Elizabeth, Queen Mary 2 and Queen Victoria – will meet on the historic Mersey waterfront, while P&O will launch its latest ship, Britannia, the biggest-ever built for the UK market.

There's a resonance with the WI's own centenary year, too. Saga is the official holiday provider for NFWI and its cruises are a great way to meet fellow WI members at cocktail parties, afternoon tea and special lunches. On each cruise, WI members are greeted by a representative from the NFWI Board of Trustees who kick-starts the holiday with a welcome speech and a sing-along to Jerusalem. Tutors from Denman College give talks and classes on such subjects as jewellery making, photography, gardening, history and

CELEBRITY CRUISES



Today's cruise ships are like floating cities, with spacious cabins

crafts, and if you're travelling solo, a Saga WI cruise will make you feel welcome, offering opportunities to make like-minded new friends.

Saga, as you may know, restricts its cruises to the over 50s with no children allowed on board. There are many other cruise lines, of course, which are just the opposite, catering for families with on-board swimming pools, games, competitions, theme parks, ice rinks and a host of other activities. This is the key thing with cruise holidays: don't make the mistake of thinking that they're all the same. The industry is evolving, diversifying and improving all the time.

Some ships have thousands of passengers and others less than 200, some are literally small cities afloat

whilst others offer specialist cruises tailored to a particular market (sometimes with your own personal butler!). You don't have to fly to join a ship any more, either: some companies now offer cruises starting and finishing from ports such as Liverpool, Belfast, Tilbury, Rosyth, Southampton and Newcastle, and you can be picked up and dropped off from your door to the port or airport.

So, where to start and how to find a cruise that's right for you? With so many new options available, let's begin by explaining the different types of cruise holidays: what they offer, what you can expect and where to find out more from the best in the business.

Luxury cruising

'Luxury' is an overused term when it comes to travel, but there are several cruise lines that offer a boutique style of luxury that's tasteful rather than ostentatious. Look for a really memorable, elegant experience with impeccable cuisine, unparalleled service, sublime entertainment and incredibly well planned land excursions.

WORTH A LOOK: Silversea (silversea.com), Seabourn (seabourn.com), Sea Cloud (seacloud.com/en), Hapag-Lloyd (hapag-lloyd.com), Crystal (crystalcruises.co.uk), Regent Seven Seas (rssc.com), Princess (princess.com). >>



CRYSTAL CRUISES

Luxury bedrooms, elegant décor and plenty of comfort



Spa at sea: some cruise ships now offer lavish facilities, such as hot tubs on private balconies

Luxe cruising

Not to be confused with luxury cruising, so-called 'luxe' or 'deluxe' cruise lines also offer an excellent service and experience, but the ships tend to have larger numbers of passengers. Not ideal if you're not keen on crowds, but they do offer an amazing experience for the cruiser and have many dedicated followers who would cruise with no one else. **WORTH A LOOK:** Cunard (cunard.co.uk), MSC (msccruises.co.uk), Azamara (azamaracruises.com), Oceania (oceaniacruises.com), Compagnie de Ponant (en.ponant.com), Holland America (hollandamerica.com).

Resort and classic style

Resort ships have all the latest amenities and activities, whether that's scary waterslides or a children's nursery. The family-oriented operators all believe that a huge water park and rock climbing wall, nightclubs and numerous take-away and national cuisine outlets are essential these days, a far cry from the shuffleboard and deck quoits which used to be standard entertainment fare. **WORTH A LOOK:** Carnival (carnival.co.uk), Costa (costacruises.co.uk), Disney (disneycruise.disney.go.com), Royal Caribbean (royalcaribbean.co.uk), Norwegian (ncl.co.uk), Louis (louiscruises.com).

Classic cruise

Classic cruise ships are a reminder of what it used to be like to take to the high seas. Some of them such as Cunard's cruisers simply ooze elegance and history. Not all of them are cutting-edge new but for many people they have the appeal of a friendly country hotel, as comfortable as a familiar old cardigan. Entertainment is more variety show than Broadway and expect deck games and a sense of old world cruising. **WORTH A LOOK:** Fred Olsen (fredolsencruises.com), CMV (cruiseandmaritime.com), P&O (pocruises.com), Celebrity (celebritycruises.co.uk).

River cruising

A sedate way of cruising in small boats with usually about 100 people on board. The scenery unfolds around you and each stop has organised excursions to places of interest or you can explore on your own. The Danube, Rhine, Volga and Rhône are all popular, and special mention must go to the Russian cruises that visit St Petersburg and the Douro cruises in Portugal that include visits to the port vineyards. You can even cruise down the Nile, Mekong and Ganges and this year the new must-see voyages are on the Irrawaddy in Burma. **WORTH A LOOK:** Emerald Waterways (emeraldwaterways.co.uk).



Sedate and surprising: river cruising in the UK and Europe is fast rising in popularity

co.uk), Viking (vikingrivercruises.co.uk), AMA Waterways (amawaterways.co.uk), Uniworld (uniworldcruises.co.uk), Tauck (tauck.com), European Waterways (gobarging.com), Avalon (avalonwaterways.com).

Cruising under sail

You can't get much more eco-friendly than a sailing ship, especially one that has been converted into a five-star luxury cruise liner. With their teak-lined decks and billowing white sails, luxurious amenities, gourmet cuisine, exceptional service and with only 150 to 300 guests on board these vessels (almost) give you the experience of sailing your own private yacht. And because they're smaller than conventional cruise ships they can call into the more unusual ports that larger craft can't reach. **WORTH A LOOK:** Star Clippers (starclippers.co.uk), Windstar (windstarcruises.com).

Adventure cruising

The ships used in adventure cruising are small and can sail into areas larger cruise ships can't, allowing

their guests to visit remote and isolated corners of the globe. You can even jump in a dinghy and land onto the beaches of uninhabited islands for close-up wildlife encounters. Floating in the middle of a school of hundreds of dolphins as they play around you or touching the side of a humpback whale as it rests in the water is what these cruises are all about. Walking through penguin colonies, watching giant tortoises and polar bears in the wild or talking with the Inuit in Greenland make these trips once-in-a-lifetime experiences. **WORTH A LOOK:** Hurtigruten (hurtigruten.co.uk), Gadventures (gadventures.com), Zegrahm (zeco.com), Noble Caledonia (noblecaledonia.co.uk), Once Ocean (oneoceanexpeditions.com), Mundy (mundycruising.co.uk), Lindblad National Geographic (expeditions.com).

Discovery cruises

If you want a cultural cruise visiting some of the most famous places in the history of the civilised world - but with the emphasis on fine food and comfort - this is the choice for you.

From the palaces of the Baltic States and the ancient ruins of Orkney, Athens, Rome and Petra to Baroque cathedrals and Islamic fortresses, there's plenty of options, and these cruises are fantastic for solo travellers.

WORTH A LOOK: Voyages of Discovery, (voyagesofdiscovery.co.uk), Voyages to Antiquity (voyagestoantiquity.com), Hebridean Cruises (hebridean.co.uk).

Working cruise lines

Don't worry, no-one is going to ask you to swab the decks. Some commercial shipping lines have realised that they can make extra money by letting out cabins to cruise passengers. For example, the Norwegian cruise line Hurtigruten has ships running up and down the Norwegian fjords in a sort of taxi/cruise ship/cargo ship role. You can also cruise with Aranui III which leaves Tahiti and does exactly the same thing in the French Polynesian Marquesa Islands. Benefits? Affordable travel and unusual destinations. **WORTH A LOOK:** Hurtigruten (hurtigruten.co.uk), Aranui (aranui.com).

Special occasions

It's increasingly popular to get married at sea, as well as renew vows and celebrate milestone birthdays or anniversaries. Surprisingly, it can cost considerably less to host a big celebration on the ocean wave than on land, mainly because everything is included: venue, photographer, cake, flowers, food and Champagne and the services of an organiser. Why not hold your wedding or party when the ship docks at a glamorous location, such as Monte Carlo, St Lucia or Barbados? You can even hire a small boat for a bespoke cruise for, say, eight or ten people: check out The Majestic Line which sails around the Scottish Islands in converted fishing boats with a high degree of luxury (themajesticline.co.uk). **WORTH A LOOK:** Cunard (cunard.co.uk), Princess (princess.com), P&O (pocruises.com), Celebrity (celebritycruises.co.uk). ■

WI CENTENARY CRUISES

To celebrate the WI centenary, Saga is offering two cruises with the emphasis on celebrating this special event: the Springtime in the Mediterranean cruise on board Saga Pearl II for 16 nights departing on April 26, 2015 from £2,337 per person, and the Britain and Ireland Explorer Cruise on board Saga Pearl II for 14 nights departing on July 30, 2015 from £1,999 per person. Details of the Saga cruises are featured each month in *WI Life* magazine and bookings can be made by calling FREE on 0800 056 5355. Visit travel.saga.co.uk/holidays for more information.