

Is Europa 2 the world's most luxurious ship?



The Europa 2 calls at dozens of ports on a variety of cruises worldwide.

Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor



All of the staterooms on the Europa 2 are suites with balconies.

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The knock on my stateroom door comes shortly after I board the ship. It's my butler. Do I want him to unpack my bags? Perhaps later, I shrug, but would you hand me a plate of those hors d'oeuvres you're carrying and uncork that bottle of champagne chilling in the sitting room of my suite? Wouldn't want to break a nail.

Such pampering comes with the territory on the world's most highly rated cruise ship, the Europa 2.

Haven't heard of it? No surprise. It's a German vessel, doesn't advertise much outside Europe and as such doesn't make it on the best-lists of travel magazines that circulate in the U.S. But *Berlitz Cruising & Cruise Ships*, the bible of the cruise industry with ratings of 285 ships worldwide, gives it the highest score in the history of the 29-year-old guide.

Excellence doesn't come cheap. Cruises cost in the range of \$600 to \$700 a day, per person, in the least pricey accommodations. Itineraries include a week in the Mediterranean to a 76-day cruise around Central and South America.

Launched in May 2013 by Hapag-Lloyd Cruises, the Europa 2 has begun reaching out to Americans by making its cruises bilingual. English and German are both spoken on board and on shore excursions.

I stepped aboard to see what makes the ship so highly rated and what U.S. travelers looking for a luxury cruise can expect for their money.

Space and service

No cramped inside cabins here. All staterooms on the Europa 2 are suites with balconies. Even the smallest is a generous 377 square feet. The public spaces are roomy, too, with the most space per passenger of any ship in the Berlitz guide.

Suites come with tablet computers, and minibars are stocked with free beer and nonalcoholic drinks. In the upper-tier categories, a selection of liquor is gratis, too. Bathrooms are packed with amenities. Spa suites have whirlpool tubs, TVs built into the mirrors and combination showers and steam saunas.

A lot of people look after you. With a capacity of 516 passengers and 370 crew members, it has one of the highest ratios of crew to guest. Book a middle- to upper-category suite and that butler is at your beck and call. Need your shoes shined? Done. Want your beef Wellington delivered to your balcony so you can watch the sun set over the Greek Islands while you dine? No problem.

Anyone requiring more room and personal attention should charter a private yacht.

Fellow passengers

Unlike its sister ship, the Europa, the only other five-star-plus ship in the Berlitz guide, the Europa 2 is designed for young professionals, not the Europa's older crowd of wealthy retirees. The ambience on the older ship is rather staid, with formal nights and captain's dinners.

The Europa 2 has no dress code. Guys, you don't need to pack a tie; ladies, you can leave the ball gown at home. But that cute cocktail dress? Bring it on.

Itineraries are shorter, too, to accommodate young professionals who can't break away for long stretches.

Shore excursions include some active options: hiking, kayaking, scuba diving, horseback riding.

Still, most of my fellow passengers were senior citizens from German-speaking countries. Nightlife was decidedly sedate on my cruise last fall. Word of the ship clearly had not spread to my fellow Americans.

Fine dining

The ship outdoes itself in the galley. In addition to a main dining room and informal dining areas, it has four specialty restaurants — French, Italian, Asian fusion, sushi — plus a wine bar and private dining room. All restaurants have open dining with plenty of tables for two, a departure from old-fashioned scheduled seatings at assigned tables. None of the specialty restaurants levies a surcharge.

I snagged reservations twice at the French restaurant and chose from a menu featuring lobster Thermidor, beef tartare and Chateaubriand.

Fine dining certainly figures into the cruise fare, as does the number of extras offered at no charge. That bottle of water offered as you depart for a shore excursion? Many cruise lines will ding your account for it. On the Europa 2 it's free, as are the welcome drinks when you reboard.

Gratuities are included, too, though I saw several passengers doling out tips anyway. Luxury like this puts passengers in the mood to be generous.

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When you go

Europa 2 calls at ports in Europe, Asia, North and South America, Africa and the Middle East with fares varying by length of cruise, season and destination. For example, in 2015 a seven-day Mediterranean cruise starts around \$4,760 per person, a 20-day voyage from Dubai to Mauritius from about \$13,353, and a 76-day cruise around Central and South America about \$53,060.

Hapag-Lloyd Cruises, hl-cruises.com.