

TIME OUT! SUNDAY

Your Planning Guide for Entertainment & Travel

February 9, 2014

A

Best Bets

A week's worth of entertainment » 2

On the road
Joffrey Ballet, Chicago hotel specials bring heat to frigid winter » 10

Setting sail

On the best cruise ship you've never heard of



Europa 2

second to none

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

It seems everywhere travelers turn some publication is presenting them with ratings. World's best hotels. World's best airlines. World's best cruise ships. The list goes on and on. In the cruise category, one top-rated ship doesn't appear, though. The Europa 2 has received the highest score in the 29-year history of Berlitz Cruising & Cruise Ships, considered the bible of the cruise industry. Yet you won't find it on readers' polls in Condé Nast Traveler, Travel & Leisure or most other U.S. consumer publications.

Why not? It's a German ship. And it's not widely advertised in the U.S.

"Europa 2 will probably never appear in ratings charts of North American magazines simply because the magazine doesn't include the ships and its readers don't sail aboard them," says Douglas Ward, author of the Berlitz guide. Yet, in the 2014 edition reviewing 285 ships around the globe, Ward gave Europa 2 a five-star-plus rating, a score of 1,860 points of a possible 2,000, the most the guide has ever awarded to any ship anywhere. Points are awarded by professional reviewers like Ward who has taken more than 1,050 cruises and has been evaluating ships since 1980.

Excellence doesn't come cheap. Cruises range from around \$560 to \$960 a day, per person. And that's in the lowest category accommodations.

Launched last May by Hapag-Lloyd Cruises, the Europa 2 has begun reaching out to North Americans by making all of its cruises bilingual. I stepped aboard to see for myself what makes it so highly rated and whether U.S. travelers looking for a luxury cruise can expect to get their money's worth.

Space and service

No cramped inside cabins here: All staterooms on the Europa 2 are suites, 258 of them, each with a balcony. Even the smallest is a generous 377 square



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Europa 2 will call at 167 ports around the world during its 2014-2015 season.

feet. And the public spaces are roomy, too. In fact, the ship has the most space per passenger of any in the Berlitz guide.

And there are lots of people looking after you. With a capacity of 516 passengers and 370 crew members, it has one of the highest ratios of crew per guest. In the middle to high-category cabins, a butler is on call to unpack your bags, shine your shoes and bring you afternoon sweets and evening appetizers — or a multicourse meal if you choose to dine in.

Want more room and

personal attention? You'd have to book a private yacht.

The ship itself is a beauty with teak decks and a contemporary decor. The spa is huge for the size of the ship. There's a cooking school and a saltwater pool with sliding dome — but no casino.

Suites come with a tablet computer, personal email (free except for attachments), Wi-Fi (extra charge) and minibar stocked with free beer and non-alcoholic drinks. In the upper suite categories, a selection of liquor is gratis, too. Beds adjust

for firmness and can be raised at the head and knee for comfy lounging. Unlike on other ships, though, the two beds are connected and cannot be detached for passengers who may not be keen on sleeping side by side.

Bathrooms are packed with amenities. Spa suites have whirlpool tubs, a TV built into the mirror and a combination shower and steam sauna.

Fellow passengers

Unlike its sister ship, the Europa, the only other five-star-plus in the Berlitz guide, the

Europa 2 is designed for young professionals and families, not the Europa's older crowd of wealthy CEOs and 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 your ballgown at home, but that cute cocktail dress? Bring it on.

Itineraries are shorter, too, with seven-day cruises in the Mediterranean and four-day short hops from Germany into the Baltic and Scandinavia to

fit and active options: hiking, kayaking, scuba diving, horseback riding.

Europa 2 also has more facilities for children, with three separate spaces for toddlers to teens. Kids can go on supervised shore excursions without parents or with mom and dad on family tours.

Though the Europa 2 is being marketed for a younger, international crowd, most of my fellow passengers were senior citizens from German-speaking countries. Night life was practically nonexistent. The Jazz Club



The saltwater pool can be enclosed with a sliding dome in inclement weather.

was mostly empty except for an evening when a European soccer match was broadcast on a big-screen TV. Shows in the theater were heavy on musical and visual performances that didn't require translation.

I counted only 14 native English speakers on board, most from the U.K. Word of the ship clearly had not gotten around to my fellow Americans. Perhaps that's because it is so new. "Well-traveled North Americans who seek out the best will, eventually, I am convinced, sail aboard the Europa 2," Ward assures me.

Many will be put off by the prevalence of smoking on board. While many vessels in the North American market strictly limit smoking areas, smoking is allowed on most outside decks, balconies, a section of the Jazz Club and in half the outdoor

What makes the ship so special? Why haven't you heard of it? And is it worth \$900 a day?

travel



All rooms aboard the Europa 2 are spacious suites with balconies.

Europa 2

Cruise fares: Vary by length of cruise, season and destination. A seven-day Mediterranean cruise next summer, for example, starts around \$6,740 per person in the lowest-category suite while a 12-day cruise from Dubai to Piraeus departing in April starts around \$9,635. Discounts are available for early booking.

Itineraries: In 2014 and early 2015, Europa 2 will call at 167 ports in Europe, Asia, North and South America and the Middle East. Cruise lengths range from four days in the Baltic and Scandinavia to a 76-day circumnavigation of South America.

Details: Hapag-Lloyd Cruises, hl-cruises.com



Sushi is a feast for the eyes as well as the palate in the specialty restaurant Sakura.

seating in two restaurants. The Herrenzimmer, which translates as "men's room" though it allows women, is a cigar lounge and bar.

Fine dining

The ship outdoes itself in the galley. "Europa 2 is different because the company spends more money per day, per passenger, on food," says Ward. China, glassware and tableware are all high end, too.

In addition to a main dining room and informal dining areas, there are four specialty restaurants — French, Italian, Asian fusion, sushi — plus a wine bar



Sommelier Florian Sender oversees a team of wine stewards in the main dining areas and four specialty restaurants.

Shore excursions in English were limited, just two in some ports, but because there were so few of us it was like a private tour. We didn't need the headphones the ship provides to big groups who have trouble hearing their guide.

Nor was the ship completely bilingual. The signs outside the specialty restaurants, describing the type of cuisine, were only in German. Menus, though, were offered in English. The ship's library had a broad variety of books in German. In English? Minuscule. The directions for operating the steam sauna in my suite were in German. I never did figure it out, though I'm sure the butler would have helped if modesty hadn't prevented me from donning a robe and summoning him.

When I booked a kayak shore excursion, a note with my ticket explaining what to bring was in German. I had to find someone to translate. As we stood on the dock preparing to depart, the waiver of liability I was given was in German. A crew member had to hunt one down in English, holding up the excursion.

And when translations were offered, I sometimes felt uncomfortable. Only two English speakers showed up for a gin tasting late one evening. The charming and always available international hostess was called in. She'd probably been on duty 14 hours and I was sorry she'd been summoned, but she stood behind us cheerfully whispering a translation in our ears. It just felt awkward.

Most of my criticisms will probably be eliminated if, or when, more North Americans

Not perfect

Still, my cruise wasn't flawless.

See **EUROPA** on page 16

EUROPA from page 9

book the Europa 2. Will they find the ship worth the fare?

“A cruise aboard Europa 2 is not inexpensive,” says Ward, “so it’s not for those who want ‘first class at half price.’”

Will they agree that the Europa 2 is the world’s best cruise ship? Ward doesn’t like the moniker “world’s best” because it is so subjective.

“The ‘world’s best’ for me may not be the ‘world’s best’ for you,” he says. “I could say that a Bentley is the world’s best automobile, but you might say it’s a Ferrari.”

In the long run a rating doesn’t matter. What matters is how it rates with you.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored Hapag-Lloyd Cruises.*