

Five-★ cruising

On the most famous ship you never heard of

By Kathy Rodeghier
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GOING PLACES

The waiter carries a silver tray with Champagne sparkling in crystal flutes. He wears a black tailcoat of fine worsted wool as he serves an elegant lady resplendent in a red satin ball gown.

Formal night on the Europa, the most highly rated cruise ship in the world, begins with cocktails in a two-story atrium where a classical pianist performs on a Steinway. Afterward, passengers sit down to a five-course gourmet dinner. My menu is printed in English, but nearly all the passengers around me read their selections in the official language on board the ship: German.

Hapag-Lloyd, the German shipping giant, operates four ships in its leisure cruise division and the Europa is the star in its crown. The only cruise ship in the world rated five star-plus by the bible of the cruise industry, the "Berlitz Guide to Cruising and Cruise Ships," it occupies a class by itself. It has held that position for the past eight years.

Most Americans, even veteran cruisers, do not know the Europa because Hapag-Lloyd has not marketed its ships on this side of the Atlantic. That is gradually changing as the cruise line engages in bilingual cruises. On these cruises, English-speaking passengers, whether they be American, British or Australian, receive menus, daily programs, travel documents, video presentations and a limited number of shore excursions in English. The entire crew speaks English, including a maintenance man who asked my husband if he was voting for Obama or McCain.

Nine cruises have been designated bilingual in 2009. In addition, if 15 or more English-speaking passengers reserve a cruise, it automatically

becomes bilingual with announcements and shore excursions in English. On other cruises, passengers can make a request in advance for English menus and other printed information, and the concierge on board will arrange individual shore excursions in English.

The Europa draws seasoned, sophisticated travelers wealthy enough to



The saltwater pool has a retractable roof for indoor-outdoor swimming.

afford this level of service. The average age of passengers is around 65, guesses Hapag-Lloyd Cruises managing director, Sebastian Ahrens, though it drops during school holidays when up to 42 children can be accommodated on board.

Despite the cost, the Europa almost always sets out fully booked. The luxury cruise market does not suffer the effects of a downturn in the economy unlike other segments of the travel industry, says Ahrens. Those with money continue to spend it.

What makes the Europa worth the cost, and worthy of five star-plus status? In a nutshell: space and service.

The Europa has the highest passenger space ratio in the cruise industry, with large public areas that never feel crowded. Private spaces also are roomy. Each guest room is a suite, the smallest measuring 290 square feet, and 80 percent have balconies. My jaw dropped when I laid eyes on the walk-in closet,



The Europa lies at anchor off Spain's Balearic Islands, one of many destinations it calls on around the world.

something I have not seen even on other luxury ships. Storage space is typically tight, but in this suite I had drawers and hangers to spare. Bathrooms on most ships also are tiny, but those on the Europa have a bathtub and separated glassed-in shower roomy enough for an NFL lineman. The suite's sitting area contains a chair, sofa bed, minibar with free beer, juice and soft drinks. A desk houses a keyboard for accessing a free e-mail account using the TV screen, where passengers also can view on-demand movies, shipboard programs and television channels in both

German and English.

The ship, launched in 1999, is small in comparison to the 6,000-passenger mega-ships being built today. A crew of 280 caters to just 400 passengers, the highest staff/passenger ratio of any cruise ship. This makes top-notch service possible.

"Smaller ships are especially good for seasoned travelers," says cruise expert Douglas Ward, author of the Berlitz guide. "Big cruise ships don't have the finesse of the smaller ships."

Crew members have years of training in the hotel business in Europe

and consider a position on the Europa a career-building move. "It is the crew that is the most important part of the cruise," says Ward. Europa crew members "have very good passenger recognition." On a two-week voyage, they often recall names, faces and passengers' special needs and requests.

On top of great service, Ward says the

If you go

Information: Hapag-Lloyd Cruises, (877) 445-7447, hl-cruises.com

Itineraries and cost: Bilingual cruises in 2009 range in price and duration from a 10-day voyage from Barcelona to the Canary Islands starting at about \$6,000 per person to an 18-day voyage from Tahiti to Australia starting at about \$9,900 per person. Gratuities not expected. A 5 percent discount is offered for early booking.

Dress code: More formal than on most American ships, with men wearing a suit or sport coat most evenings and a tuxedo or dinner jacket on formal nights.

Dining: Open seating in one sitting at dinner. Reservations taken in the formal dining room, and necessary (and much sought after) in two specialty restaurants. Though a German ship, cuisine includes dishes from around the world.

Europa earns its stars in its attention to detail. Fish courses are served with a fish knife. Coffee comes with three kinds of sugar, in addition to sugar substitute. A doily on a stemmed beer glass catches condensation. China and cutlery are top of the line. In the Oriental restaurant, one of four restaurants on board, the china plates have a rare flying fish pattern replicated from a 1920s design. Each plate, if you could buy it retail, would cost 350 to 400 euros.

Menu items cover a wide range of cuisines. The ship offers 8,000 food items, compared to around 3,000 on most cruises, and carries 17,000 bottles of wine covering vintages from all the



Live music fills the ship's atrium.

world's top wine-producing areas.

Still, the Europa is not perfect. More than once on our cruise, mistakes in the time of activities listed on the daily printed program confused and frustrated passengers. All the fish knives in the world can't make up for missing an excursion due to a miscommunication.

And while ours was one of the designated bilingual cruises scheduled in 2008, not all of the announcements on board were repeated in English. This was especially disappointing because the theme of our cruise was the

ship's annual Ocean Sun Festival, with performances by classical music artists. Since music is a universal language, it made no difference that the featured soprano and tenor sang arias in Italian or German, but we were disheartened when introductions to each piece were given in German only. Still, since we were the only Americans among just a handful of non-German speakers on board, we could understand the reluctance to inconvenience so many for so few.

On most voyages, the Europa showcases at least half a dozen musicians and vocalists in programs that include about 60 percent classical music. During the Ocean Sun Festival, which will be offered again in 2009 on the Aug. 12-22 sailing, eight internationally acclaimed artists perform in an entertainment program that is 80 percent to 90 percent classical music. The festival is gaining a reputation among classical

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Passengers lounge on deck as the Europa departs Lisbon.

PHOTOS BY KATHY RODEGHIER/krodeghier@dailyherald.com



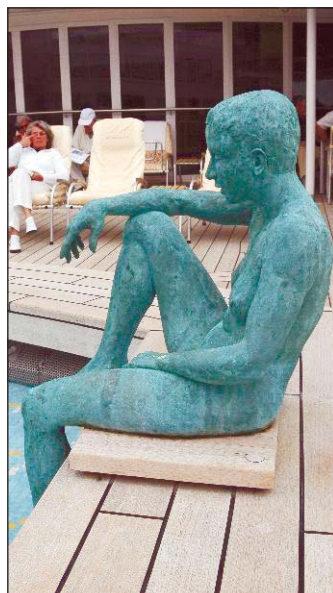
PHOTOS BY KATHY RODEGHIER/krodeghier@dailyherald.com

Afternoon tea is served in the Club Belvedere.

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music fans similar to that of Napa's prestigious Festival del Sole and Italy's Tuscan Sun Festival.

In addition to afternoon and evening performances on board during the festival, free private concerts are held in port. While in Cadiz, Spain, we traveled to the 13th-century Castillo San Marcos, where Christopher Columbus lived while planning his voyage to America. After cocktails and canapés in the courtyard, renowned German-Canadian Mozart tenor Michael Schade sang for us in the cloisters. In Majorca, Schade joined soprano Andrea Rost in a concert with the Orquesta Clasica de Balears at the Teatro Principal. On board after dinner, lighter musical fare in the Clipper Bar featured a chanteuse singing in



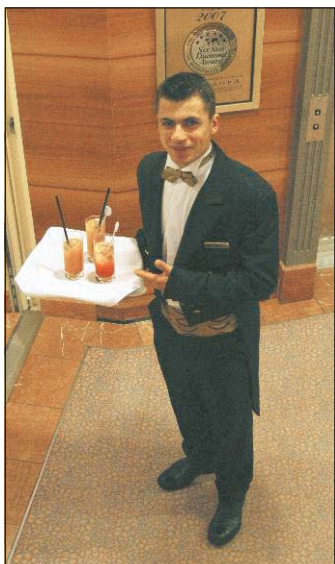
A poolside sculpture adds an element of class.

the style of Edith Piaf.

The Europa doesn't confine itself to voyages in Europe. Next year's bilingual cruises will call in the South Pacific, Australia, China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Libya and the Arab Emirates, in addition to the Baltics, Italy and Greece.

When not exploring ports, passengers enjoy the ship's many amenities, including a spa, saltwater pool with retractable roof, 21-course golf simulator with PGA pro on hand for lessons, and a fitness loft with ocean view. Above the loft, at the top of the ship, is an area not found on American vessels: A deck for those who choose to sunbathe in the nude — European style.

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



Waiters dressed in tails serve guests during the cocktail party on the ship's formal nights.

Make flight with planning, prep

By Gail Todd

Daily Herald Correspondent

AIR POCKETS

Last week, when my daughter, Kaley, flew from San Francisco to Chicago, she sat next to a man whose travel plans were up in the air, both literally and figuratively. Here's what happened.

Dave, a businessman who travels every week, got caught in traffic on his way to the airport. He arrived at his gate just in time to see his flight take off without him.

The agent booked Dave on another flight scheduled to leave in two hours. Not wanting to miss his second flight, he checked his ticket for the gate assignment and headed for gate 28, where he set up his traveling office. Five minutes before his scheduled departure, his flight was still not boarding. Concerned, Dave checked with the gate agent. Dave's flight was boarding, but at the other end of the airport. Seems Dave read his ticket wrong. Twenty-eight wasn't his gate. It was his seat assignment.

Three hours later, Dave boarded a flight to Raleigh, N.C. with a ground stop in Chicago. He should have had 45 minutes to catch the last flight to Raleigh. But when the Raleigh-bound flight

took off, Dave was over Chicago in a holding pattern. So was his meeting in Raleigh.

Several years ago, I met a man on a flight headed for Miami. He didn't miss the flight. He missed the boat. Seems he punched the wrong date into his Palm Pilot. The boat was on the high seas while he was at 35,000 feet feeling quite low.

According to travel agent Judy Barr, when it comes to air travel, because of crowded highways and airports and long security lines, more passengers are missing their flights. But it doesn't have to be that way. With some careful planning, when your plane takes off, so should you. Here's how:

Plan ahead. Under good conditions, the drive to the airport may be only 30 minutes. Murphy's Law says when you go to the airport it will take two hours. Give yourself time. Or better yet, use public transportation. Take the Blue Line from Chicago's Loop and you'll be at the airport within a half-hour. Take the Kennedy and you may be watching your plane takeoff over your car.

Print your boarding pass early. Ticket counters are understaffed and lines move

slowly. Most airlines let you print your boarding pass at home. If you don't have a printer, look for the kiosks at the airport.

Find alternative security lines. If the security lines looks like it rivals Disney World, ask if there's another one. At Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, the central security line at American Airlines sometimes snakes all the way to the door. Walk down toward Delta Air Lines, and you may zip right through it.

Get to your gate early. There was a time when the airlines waited to the last minute to close their doors. Not anymore. Many carriers now board their aircraft 30 minutes before departure. Some close their doors 10 minutes early.

Be aware. Gate assignments change. Check the boards often for your flight schedule. And read your ticket carefully. Missing a flight is not only inconvenient, it's expensive. Last-minute flight changes can double the cost of a trip and cause you a boatload of trouble.

• *Gail Todd, a freelance writer, worked as a flight attendant for more than 30 years. She can be reached at gailtodd@aol.com.*



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