

Cruise facts

■ More than 10million people take a cruise each year. About 80 per cent do so in North American waters.

■ **The number of Britons taking a cruise in the first nine months of this year rose five per cent compared with 2008, despite the recession. Figures by the Passenger Shipping Association show 1.55million Britons will take a cruise this year, up from 1.48million in 2008.**

■ There are more than 2,000

ports of call in the world that can be visited by cruise ships.

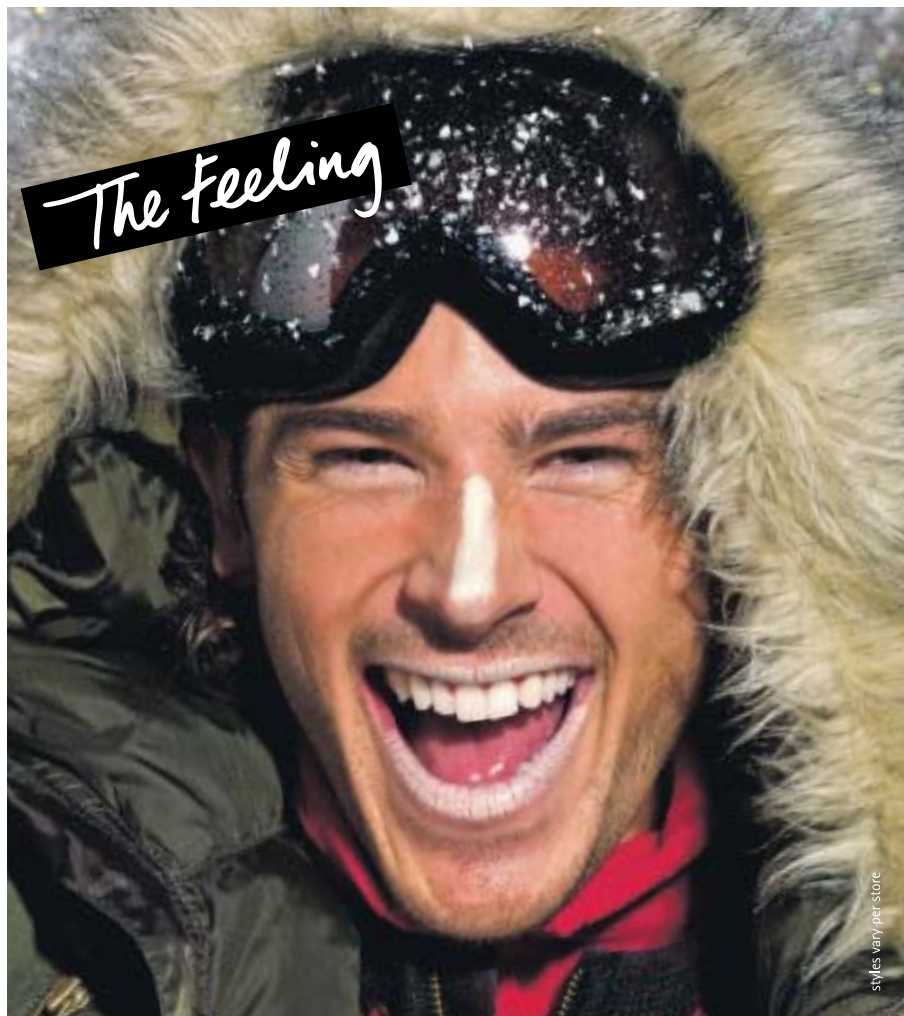
■ **More people cruise to the Caribbean than any other destination in the world.**

■ There are more than 300 seagoing cruise ships in the world. They collectively have room for more than a quarter of a million passengers.

■ **Features being introduced to ships to attract younger passengers include surf machines, water chutes, giant Wii screens and ice rinks.**

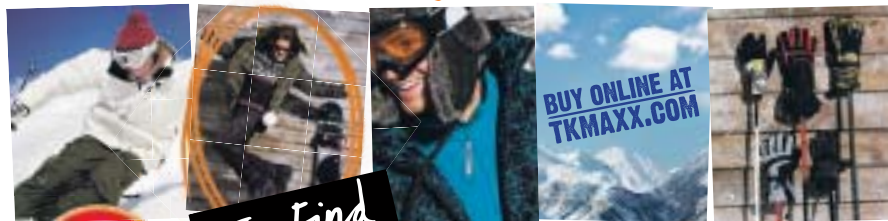


Picture: Alamy



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Voyage of discovery

Oh, what joy! Heading to the autumn sunshine without airports, cramped planes, luggage restrictions or the need to decant cosmetics into 100ml bottles.

We drive to Southampton where our car is collected and parked on arrival and our many cases piled on to a porter's trolley. After checking in, we settle into our hotel room for the next two weeks. It has the normal bed, wardrobe, shower and balcony – and it floats.

Yes, that's right, it's a cruise ship. Only for the newlywed, overfed and nearly dead? Increasingly not, as more people turn their backs on the ordeal of flying for the comfort of sailing to the hot spots of the Mediterranean or, in our case, the Canary Islands.

As well as having a variety of bars, restaurants and activities to hand, cruising offers you the privacy of your own space where you can spend hours reading, chatting and drinking – or just watching the sunsets from your balcony. There's plenty to do on board – sports,

Float your boat: Let the ship take the strain for a hassle-free meander around an array of Europe's finest destinations **BY DAVE MONK**

spa treatments, shopping, entertainment – as well as a variety of excursions in port. We sailed on P&O's Oceana to Madeira, La Palma, Gran Canaria, Cadiz, Lisbon, Vigo in northern Spain and then back to Southampton. The first three days were at sea, giving us the chance to thoroughly unwind, check out the ship and meet fellow passengers.

In Madeira – the island of timber – we took a cable car to the top of a mountain then hurtled down 2km of streets in a toboggan. Of course, we also had to take tea at the elegant Reid's hotel.

Next was La Palma, which despite its charming nickname of 'la isla bonita', is predicted to one day crack in two and send a tidal wave to America. We visited one of the (currently dormant) volcanoes. A coach tour in Gran Canaria – where Columbus heard Mass before

setting off to discover America – took us to a bustling market and a banana plantation. But for us, the highlights of the trip were the beautiful cities of Cadiz and Lisbon. Cadiz, the oldest inhabited city in the western world, has lovely beaches and squares, and even in October was basking in temperatures of 25°C (77°F). We went to a traditional Spanish bar to see an incredible display of flamenco while drinking, eating tapas and shouting 'Olé!'. It is also a departure point for tours to Seville and Jerez.

The best way to enter Lisbon is by the river Tagus, with its views of the giant statue of Christ as the ship seems to

barely scrape under the 2km-long April 25 bridge, a replica of the Golden Gate. We enjoyed a tour by tram through the back streets of the Portuguese capital, being served port and pastries. You can also explore the city by river or go on a Jeep safari.

Finally, we arrived in the beautiful bay of Vigo, where you can stroll around the town, do a final shopping trip or take a tour to the Portuguese border. Then it's a day at sea to pack and say your goodbyes before returning to Southampton.

Unlike some other lines, P&O is very British, with all the connotations this carries. Oceana has familiar electrical sockets, uses pounds as currency and has plenty of laundrettes. There's Robinson's jam, Old Speckled Hen beer and Tetley tea. The captain is Scottish and there are no US-style announcements

calling you to bingo, theatre shows or art auctions. But that doesn't mean it's all laid-back – the staff, from across the world, are polite and attentive.

There's a variety of eating options from a Marco Pierre White restaurant to an evening buffet, with daily changing themes such as Oriental, Italian or Indian. Though there is an 'eat when you like' option, the dress code applies throughout the ship, so you have people in dinner jackets and gowns sitting down to a Chinese takeaway in the buffet on a formal night.

While Oceana appeals to the older passenger, P&O next year launches its new ship Azura with single rooms, more family options and a cinema on deck. But if you want privacy in your own space with everything to hand and a fascinating selection of ports of call, there's plenty of life on the Oceana wave.

A 12-night Canary Islands cruise on Oceana's sister ship Aurora next year, leaving on November 15, costs from £925 based on two people sharing an inside cabin. Ports of call may vary. Parking and shore excursions are extra. (www.pocruses.com)



Shore leave: Take in stop-offs in Cadiz (above), the oldest inhabited city in the western world, as well as Madeira (top left) and Lisbon (bottom left) Picture: Corbis

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