

TRAVEL TALES

# LUXURY ON THE WAVES

FROM A WILD WATER RIDE TO A LUXURIOUS SPA, GOURMET DINING EXPERIENCES TO HIGH ENERGY MUSICAL SHOWS, NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE'S NEWEST LUXURY SHIP - AQUA - TAKES CRUISING TO ANOTHER LEVEL.

By Pallavi Pasricha

**A**fter two days of stormy winds that almost blew me off my feet in Lisbon, I am not surprised by the announcement made just a few hours after I stepped onto the world's newest luxury cruise ship— the Norwegian Cruise Line's Aqua. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain. Unfortunately, due to the weather we have to change our schedule and dock in Lisbon for a couple of days and skip Rotterdam."

I have joined the luxury liner's inaugural five-day cruise from Lisbon in Portugal to Southampton in the





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UK with a one-night halt at Rotterdam. But I am not particularly disappointed at missing one destination -- after all there is a virtual city on water to explore with new thrills in store such as the world's first combination of a roller coaster and water slide on sea.

If streets are splashed with colour why not a ship? The first thing that strikes me after I board is the vibrant artwork on the Aqua depicting mythology through abstract and figurative representations of the sea and sky, ruled by goddesses. It is done by Allison Hueman, who is renowned for her graffiti and street art.

#### **ABOARD THE WAVES**

My fairly spacious balcony stateroom is done in soft beige with two queen beds and a sofa that can be pulled out to convert into a bed. The chairs on the balcony give visions of lounging with a book in the company of the vast ocean. Luckily I am perched on a high deck, Number 16, which is close to the spa. This is one of the seven categories of staterooms in the ship, which can accommodate about 3500 people.

Those who can splurge can opt to stay at 'The Haven', an exclusive ship within a ship section with 123 suites that is not accessible for everyone. It comes with a host of benefits like round the clock butler service, private hot tubs on the sundeck and its own restaurant and bar. This is the first time that they have three bedroom duplex suites here.

#### **ENTERTAINMENT EVERYWHERE**

Among the ship's umpteen options - from the casino, virtual games, arcade games to mini golf, what stands out is the Aqua Slidecoaster, a hybrid roller coaster and water slide that has never been done on ships earlier. Despite the bitter cold, I

decided to brave it. Seated in an inflatable raft at the top most level of the ship, I feel my adrenalin pump and heart almost stop as the magnetic lift system launches me at high speed into a tunnel with thrilling twists and turns. Less than a minute later, I am down, wet and cold but truly alive.

Another ride is The Drop, where one comes zipping down about 10 storeys on a dry slide. At the Game Zone, I have fun speeding down virtual roller coasters wearing VR glasses. One can also take a simulated Space Walk. The Glow Court is a new feature on this ship - where the floor of the court has high tech LED that lights up according to the game you choose. When it comes to theatre, the Norwegian Cruise Line raises the level with every new ship they launch. I ended up watching three shows; Revolution: A Celebration of Prince, an hour-long spectacle which is a must for all music lovers and Prince fans. Elements is a fun, vibrant and high energy show with a lot of acrobats and Rumors is a tribute to Fleetwood Mac.

#### **GASTRONOMY ON BOARD**

One thing is for sure on this ship - with 17



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Asian, Mexican, Latin American to Spanish. For the health conscious, there is a new plant based eatery, Planterie, that focuses on wholesome bowls prepared with a mix of grains, legumes, roasted vegetables and plant-based proteins like jackfruit and tempeh. But preferring to indulge, I order chicken tikka masala giving into my back-home culinary cravings. It was slightly dry but flavoursome.

Among the several bars and lounges, a new addition, the Swirl Wine bar, tucked next to the Whiskey Bar, has a quiet, intimate feel. Easy to miss, I have some trouble finding it, but sipping the delicious rose champagne one evening, it strikes me as being the perfect place for a date on the ship or a quiet tête-à-tête with a friend. The menu on the iPad is quite easy to navigate but if one is confused about what to order, the server is very helpful.

#### WELLNESS AT SEA

With its range of advanced treatments, the expansive spa comes as a surprise – it beats any regular hotel spa. From SmartGLO 360 facials, medical spa treatments like skin tightening, filler and cosmetic wrinkle, cryotherapy to regular body massages like deep tissue, aromatherapy, hot stone, Swedish, bamboo and more -- The Mandara spa has it all.

Going down a spiral staircase, I reach the massive Thermal Suite area, which has so many rooms that it can get a bit mind boggling. It recommends that for maximum benefit the treatment must be in this order ‘Hot, Cold, Relax and Repeat’ so one should start in the aromatic steam room, move on to the Finnish sauna, charcoal sauna, clay sauna, salt room and end at the vitality pool. There’s also a Flotation Salt Pool with warm salt water that is relaxing after a hectic day as well as an ice room. Alternating between a few rooms, I end up at the relaxation area that is lined with hot stone loungers overlooking the ocean. I could easily have had a relaxing nap on one of these.

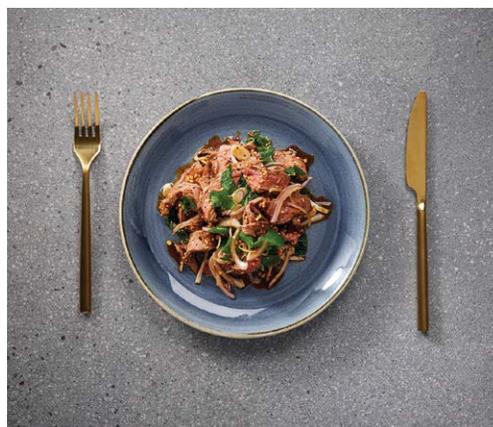
The next day I opt for a hot stone massage but go ahead with the deep tissue massage that my excellent therapist Joana from Philippines recommends. She uses a warm body oil made of sea buckthorn, sea fennel and orange peel extract that melts my aches, pains and leaves me completely rejuvenated.

As I reach Southampton – leaving the high seas behind I look back at the ship one last time and know that these five days and the vast ocean will stay with me for long.

restaurants, 18 bars and lounges, one can never go hungry or thirsty. In fact, it spoils one for choice with speciality restaurants that serve cuisines Italian, Thai, Japanese, Mexican, French, Mediterranean as well as a steakhouse.

My first meal at the Mediterranean seafood speciality restaurant, Palomar, sets the tone for the gourmet experiences to follow. All dishes come plated. The Greek Village Salad made with tomato, cucumber, feta, and olives and the sea bass with chickpeas and the saffron carrot puree for the main course are delicious.

While most of the restaurants are on the other NCL Prima class ships as well, this is the first ship to have a Thai restaurant, Sukothai. For me, the meal here is like a warm hug because coming from Asia I sometimes crave for such flavours while travelling. It is extra special because the ship has just set sail and is passing under Lisbon’s famous 25 de Abril Bridge which reminds me of the Golden Gate of San Francisco. Starting with Tom Kha Gai soup and salt and pepper prawns,



I move on to my favourite Red Thai Curry. The dishes are all bursting with flavour, though my Indian habits make me want a little more curry. Coffee lovers, there’s a Starbucks on board as well in the large atrium area which is always a hub of activity.

The Indulge Food Hall, a complimentary dining option, has an Indian kitchen – Tamara – among the multiple cuisines on offer ranging from