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Exploring Tuscany's distant shores on Windstar yacht cruise

PORTOFERRAIO, Italy When you sail on a ship like the 208-passenger Star Breeze, a vessel nimble enough to squeeze up to almost any tiny cove or narrow gorge, it's a good idea to bone up on the ports-of-call in advance.

Researching local history, anecdotal and otherwise, always adds zing to a day spent in an unfamiliar destination. If nothing else, you'll have time to decide which shore excursions if any promise to be that one and only magical mystery tour.

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And so it was last spring, as we sailed down Italy's west coast on the Star Breeze, one of Windstar Cruises' three newly acquired and refitted all-suite yachts, a move that Windstar CEO Hans Birkholz describes as the company's "first venture into ships without sails."

Like Odysseus sailing home from Troy, we my husband, Steve, and I couldn't resist the lure of Tuscany's distant shores, a siren song of rugged cliffs, green hills and secluded coastal villages. After a busy first day in Monaco and a glittering sendoff at the Monte Carlo Casino, we sailed on to Portofino, the oft-photographed celebrity hideaway whose harbor and village are as famous as they are tiny.

Going ashore for a wake-up coffee, our usual vacation ritual, we set out to explore Portofino's steep streets, poking through cheese shops, bakeries, art galleries and souvenir stands. At noon we climbed the ridge behind the village for lunch at the Hotel Spendido, an annual contender for the world's best hotel award.

But later that evening, as I studied the ship's next-day port-of-call, the town of Portoferraio, I suddenly realized we were headed for the island of Elba, best known beyond Italy as one of European history's most infamous prison sites.

If you're a fact-freak, you may know that that Elba is the island where Napoleon, self-proclaimed emperor of France and the scourge of Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was exiled. Why Elba? If Elba's a barren, storm-tossed rock like Alcatraz (as I'd always imaged it was), I'm not wasting my day going ashore.

But the next morning, as we sailed closer, a gentle hill appeared on the horizon with an ancient tower and walled harbor along the shore. Red-tiled mansions lined the water's edge where private yachts and fishing boats rode at anchor. Miniature cottages climbed the hill, half hidden among groves of trees. Elba wasn't a prison at all.

And the shore excursions I'd expected to blow off? Two choices offered rich dividends. The first, a visit to Napoleon's in-town quarters, the gardens, a museum and his country residence, would cure my ignorance. Napoleon, in fact, didn't live on Elba

very long, escaping within the year. (More fool he, considering how things turned out.) But the second excursion, a circle-island tour, offered a chance to see the real Elba, geography, topography, warts and all.

Piling into the bus we were off, following a winding two-lane road across the island, stopping here and there for photos, heading for La Chiusa vineyards and a wine tasting served with fresh bread, local olive oil, cheese and fruit. Hillsides planted in pines and olive trees gave way to pastures, milk cows and vegetable gardens; seaside rental cottages perched above sand and pebble beaches.

The tour ended with an hour in another tiny seaside town, Porto Azzurro nearby, leaving enough time to stretch our legs on narrow cobblestone streets, shop for souvenirs and postcards and to sit in the sun with a glass of wine. Elba, it seemed, was the kind of no-worry paradise where novelists go to find inspiration and the rest of us can only dream about.

Sitting on the piazza, watching the slow pace of life, the residents shopping, tourists carrying backpacks and fishermen tying their boats to the dock was so pleasant I wondered why Napoleon wasn't tempted to stay. But the day on Elba was a testimonial to Windstar's conviction that small ships and offbeat destinations are the answer to the growing demand for more innovative and authentic cruises.

On the Star Breeze, luxury set the pace. But it was the ship's size that felt so manageable. It took me just an hour to explore from top to bottom, learning my way around every space from the decks and the dining room to the lounges, library and the gym.

With fewer than 200 passengers on this cruise, meeting people and learning names was easy. The crew members, too, made a point of remembering not just our names but our preferences. And the longer we were onboard, the more comfortable it felt.

But it was a couple of sad-tears days for the Seabourn Cruise

Line fans on board, passengers who'd sailed on the ship before Seabourn sold it to Windstar.

"We've celebrated some very special birthdays and anniversaries on this ship," said Sarah Miller, as we stood in line to pick up our passenger identification cards. "It's been a tradition since 1994. It meant a lot to us. And now, just like that, everything's changed."

Miller's family knew the ship and their favorite stateroom so well that they felt like owners, she told me. When Windstar announced the Star Breeze's new itineraries, Miller decided to take her chances with a one-week voyage from Nice to Rome. By our last night on board, she'd had a change of heart.

"I guess the ship really needed a face lift," she reported as the waiters began to serve dessert. "The new color schemes work and the upholstery is elegant but unobtrusive. This room, especially, seems brighter.

"I can't get used to the new name or why they call it a yacht. But it's the same ship, same polished brass and teak decks. The bathrooms still have those gorgeous marble counters and big tubs. And the walk-in closet that I don't really need."

For most us, the Star Breeze was still a ship. But as Birkholz explained, the "yacht" classification is part of a cruise industry shift toward more narrowly focused cruise experiences.

In the early days of cruising, ships were a one-size-fits-all product. If you were sailing on the Muddy Duck, you and every other Muddy Duck passenger boarded the ship in Port A and disembarked 10 days later in Port B.

Students and bargain hunters bought inside staterooms on D Deck, sometimes called third class; middle class travelers booked second-class, or "Cabin Class" staterooms; and celebrities and corporate millionaires booked first-class suites, with a separate first-class dining room.

But with today's larger pool of frequent cruise travelers looking for new destinations, cruise lines are targeting more narrowly defined demographics. Passengers' ages and income levels still matter, but their interests come first.

Expedition ships can be Spartan or deluxe, but they invariably offer demanding or even strenuous shore tours and single-themed trips: Polar bears and Arctic ice; the Amazon jungles, coral reef health.

The biggest, most affordable ships, the 2,000- to 4,000-passenger giants, sell onboard vacation fun as low as $100 per person a day, with poolside parties, loud music, drinks by the pitcher, glittery theater shows, casinos and basketball courts.

And in the yacht category, the Star Breeze adds a new dimension to the Windstar fleet, continuing to offer authentic experiences in offbeat places, with all the creature comforts anyone could want: Spacious suites, fine cuisine, personal service and kindred spirits to share the pleasure at every turn. "So far, it's a winning combination," said Miller as we disembarked.

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FOR PRICES: To compare discounted fares with listed "brochure fares," go to www.windstarcruises.com. For example, the fare for our 7-day cruise, "Yachting the Riviera," if booked now, is $2,799 per person. If booked later at the "brochure fare," the cruise costs more than twice as much, at $6,599 per person.

2016 SAILING DATES: The Star Breeze sails to Costa Rica and Panama in January and February; in April to Morocco and the Canary Islands; in May to Spain and Portugal; in late May to Monaco (includes two days of Grand Prix events); in June-August to Italy, Sicily and Spain; in September and October to Venice and Athens; and in late October the ship returns to the Caribbean.