

VOYAGE OF WONDERS

Aboard a luxury cruise sailing from Reykjavik to Amsterdam, **KALPANA SUNDER** encounters both sea and land adventures.

HE'S TALL AND STATELY—20 decks tall and 294 metres long and weighs 1,42,500 gross tons. With 1,500 crew members and 1,600 staterooms, that can house up to 3,100 guests in a variety of categories, she's a new generation ship. My husband and I are on an inaugural cruise from Reykjavik to Amsterdam, passing through the UK, Ireland, and France, on Norwegian Cruise Line's (*ncl.com*) newest ship, the Prima.

The cruise started in style, with a concert by singer Katy Perry and the customary breaking of a champagne bottle on the hull of the ship. The previous evening, we were treated to a LED light show and a scintillating music performance

by Icelandic artists Olafur Eliasson and Briet Isis Elfar respectively, along with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra at Harpa, the glittering opera house in Reykjavik, on the water's edge.

Our last Icelandic experience, just before embarking on the cruise, was at the Sky Lagoon, a high-end geothermal spa in Reykjavik, with a seven-step bathing ritual on offer, and an infinity pool overlooking the North Atlantic.

On board Prima, I am delighted to see my stateroom with a balcony on Deck 11, in pleasing muted shades, a sofa, cupboard and a well-appointed bathroom. I am a cruise virgin, and I am afraid I will lose my way on this massive floating hotel. But the next few days at sea

reassure me. Touchscreen information panels are on the walls near the elevators, giving you the location of every place on the ship.

The central glass-walled Penrose atrium with an asymmetrical layout, curving balconies, and a large chandelier with moving light fixtures inspired by the constellations, covering three floors, is the heart of the ship where we congregate. It is either at Starbucks for a coffee or to simply sit around chatting with friends. Tucked away from the family fun is Haven, an exclusive enclave of 107 luxury cabins with their own restaurant, sundeck, and spa; it is for A-listers who don't want to be seen.

Deciding where and what to eat on the Prima is an art. The ship has as many as 18 eateries (some

Norwegian Cruise Line's Prima is a new generation ship that can house up to 3,100 guests.





▲ Clockwise from above: Prima boasts 18 eateries and 17 bars and lounges; Indulge Food Hall is home to 11 outlets that cater to distinct palates; Honfleur is located on the southern bank of the Seine estuary and is well known for its colourful buildings.

complimentary), 17 bars, and lounges. The Indulge Food Hall becomes our favourite place—it has 11 outlets offering food from around the world. As a vegetarian, I am delighted to find Tamara, which offers everything Indian from crisp dosas to samosas. Just outside and behind the Indulge Food Hall, at the aft end of Indulge Outdoor Lounge is Soleil Bar where you enjoy a drink looking at the ocean.

We love the rhythm of the cruise; days at sea are punctuated by shore excursions. Everything works with clockwork precision. Our first excursion is to Cork, in Ireland, where the ship docks at Cobb, a picturesque town with candy-coloured buildings. The town is famous as the last

town from where the ill-fated Titanic departed. A guided walking tour through Cork gives us a glimpse of its history and architecture. The best of our time at Cork turns out to be the one spent in the English market that dates back to 1720.

Back on the ship, we quickly shower and dress up for the evening's entertainment at the theatre—the new Broadway musical *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical* that follows the rise of a woman from a starlet to the queen of disco. With a map in hand, I explore the ship when it sails. From shopping arcades that sell everything from jewellery and clothes to perfumes, a Monte Carlo inspired casino, the futuristic Galaxy Pavilion that offers as many as 14 virtual gaming options and simulators, and a floor that has games like darts, pickle ball, and table tennis, to swimming

pools and hot tubs with views of the sea, I leave nothing. Soon, we discover our favourite haunts on the ship. Surfside Café becomes our go-to for breakfast; it has omelette stations, fresh French toast and waffles, breads, and cereals. Evenings are spent at the Local Bar and Grill, for a drink over live music or pub trivia quizzes, or at Syd Norman's Pour House with live music every night. I also meet other guests including a Japanese journalist who has been on more than 300 cruises!

I spend a delightful morning at Mandara Spa, which has an indoor waterfall. I soak in the hot pool and then warm myself in a series of saunas. There are other unique experiences on offer here, like a salt room and an ice room that make sure that all your nerve endings are tingling. The best part comes last—a relaxation space with a zen ambience, heated ceramic beds, and views of the sea, where I nod off in utmost bliss.

Art is an integral part of the Prima experience. I follow an art trail through the ship, which has 700 pieces of artwork worth USD 6 million. The multi-million-dollar sculpture garden created by American artist Alexander Krivosheiw on the Ocean Boulevard on Deck 8 looks striking at night. The swirling blue patterns on the hull of the ship inspired by the ocean is a design by Italian graffiti artist Manuel Di Rita. My favourites are the gold butterfly installations that adorn the ceiling in Hudson's restaurant.

Our last shore excursion takes us to Rouen and Honfleur in Normandy, France. Rouen on the banks of River Seine is a delightful town with a modernistic church in honour of saint Joan D'arc who was burnt here at the stake in 1431. We sip coffee in a waterside cafe in



Honfleur, on the southern bank of the Seine estuary that is lined with colourful half-timbered and slate and brick buildings and huge stone buildings that once stored salt for the cod industry.

On our last evening on the cruise, we pack and head for a farewell cocktail at the Observation Lounge on Deck 17. As I sit on the balcony and the Prima sails into Amsterdam, past windmills and gabled roofs, I muse on the past week and the multifaceted experiences on this floating five-star hotel. Someone once said, "I wanted freedom, open air, and adventure. I found it on the sea." I could not agree more. +

▲ From top: The cruise sets sail from Reykjavik; Honfleur is lined with half-timbered and slate and brick buildings.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE (2); KALPANA SUNDER

FROM TOP: NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE; KALPANA SUNDER