

ON THE HIGH SEAS

EXPLORING THE BALTIC ABOARD THE MOST LUXURIOUS SHIP EVER BUILT.

BY AMBER GIBSON



PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY REGENT SEVEN SEAS CRUISES



Compass CRUISE



When the Regent Seven Seas Explorer set sail from Monaco on its maiden voyage in July 2016, it was touted as the most luxurious cruise ship ever built. And two years later, it still lives up to its reputation.

Last summer, my mother and I set sail to explore the Baltic Sea. In just 10 days, we saw Sweden, Estonia, Finland, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany and Denmark. Our Concierge Suite was the most spacious room I've ever experienced aboard a cruise ship, with double sinks and a large walk-in closet. The terrace was so expansive that I nearly sipped the welcome bottle of Jacquart Brut Mosaïque Champagne in my glee. Just in time, an announcement warned us not to cast even the smallest object (say, a Champagne cork) into the ocean.

All the details — from the Versace dinnerware in Compass Rose to the dazzling crystal chandeliers and vintage photographs lining the halls — convey a tasteful luxury that no other ship can match. The art collection is simply spectacular, including several Picassos, a handful of Mirós and a Chagall. It was curated by Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings President and CEO Frank Del Rio and includes many contemporary pieces he discovered during his travels.

The pièce de résistance is no doubt the two-ton floor-to-ceiling Tibetan prayer wheel at the entrance to Pacific Rim, the pan-Asian eatery exclusive to *Seven Seas Explorer*. I made a habit of running my fingers along the engraved cast-bronze cylinders before sitting down to a meal of curry, tempura lobster, beef bulgogi or dim sum paired with sake. The Indonesian chef de cuisine happily indulged my request for extra spicy chicken curry with a flurry of diced bird's eye chilies. And having tried it twice, I can confidently proclaim the miso black cod as better than Nobu's.

If you're staying in the \$10,000-a-night Regent Suite, a driver and guide are included at each port, plus you always have the option of booking a private tour. Otherwise, most of the 40-plus group excursions are complimentary. Regent's tours run like clockwork, and the guides we met were all friendly, knowledgeable and enthusiastic.

Our first stop was Tallinn, Estonia. After an overview of the UNESCO World Heritage fortified Old Town, we had the rest of the day at leisure. Complimentary shuttles throughout the day at all ports made solo exploration easy for more independent travelers like me.

St. Petersburg, where we docked for three nights, was undoubtedly a highlight. As cruise guests, we didn't need Russian visas so long as we stuck to group excursions. The Hermitage Museum is, in my opinion, even more breathtaking than the Louvre. Our guide nimbly

navigated a path to the collection highlights, including a whimsically over-the-top mechanical golden peacock clock, a hall of Rembrandt paintings, and Madonna and Child masterpieces by Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael. The grandeur of the space — patterned parquet floors, intricately carved columns, gilded gold-leaf ceilings, Russian mosaic malachite and lapis lazuli vases — nearly overshadowed the works of art.

In Helsinki, Finland, I tried reindeer and Arctic cloudberry for the first time, and in Klaipėda, Lithuania, I toured an amber workshop while other cruisers visited a Soviet nuclear weapon site. I have an affinity for my namesake and watched the ancient tree resin transform through careful craftsmanship into a glowing gem believed to have powerful healing properties.

I found Riga, Latvia, incredibly charming, with the largest concentration of art nouveau buildings in the world. There are plenty of impeccably preserved Mikhail Eisenstein structures but also clusters of simple 19th century wooden houses, some of which now house popular restaurants and pubs. Through many years of occupation and oppression, Latvians have struggled to keep their nationality, and I was moved by their patriotism.

Back aboard the *Explorer*, it was hard not to overindulge. The Champagne started flowing at breakfast, and my mom literally ate lobster every day (always perfectly prepared, might I add). With six distinct restaurant experiences plus room service, it was impossible to get bored. Afternoon tea was served daily, too, including a particularly delightful chocolate-themed service. I tried to work it all off with yoga and boot-camp classes in the fitness center. I found the beautifully appointed Canyon Ranch spa, complete with an aromatic steam room, sauna and hot tub, the ideal place to relax after a strenuous day on shore.

Although a long daytime excursion might have you ready to call it an early night, the entertainment was always worth staying up for. An international cast of dynamic singers and dancers performed carefully choreographed numbers, from Broadway favorites to Parisian cabaret. Other activities included karaoke, swing dance, and daily organized trivia, puzzles and sporting games to help forge connections between guests. I can't imagine a more luxe cruise experience — that is until Regent's next ship, *Seven Seas Splendor*, debuts in 2020. 🍷