



SPRING CRUISES

A SEA AS BLUE AS A SMURF

A spectrum of South Pacific blue does funny things to the mind

By OLIVIA STREN

In M.F.K. Fisher's 1943 memoir, *The Gastronomical Me*, the famed food writer refers often to ocean crossings and how her sojourns on the high seas played on her moods, tastes, life choices and world perspective. At one point, she observes: "Everyone knows, from books or experience, that living out of sight of any shore does rich and powerfully strange things to humans. ... They do things calmly that would be inconceivable with earth beneath them: They fall into bed and even into love with a poignant and desperate relish and a complete disregard for the land-bound proprieties; they weep after one small beer, not knowing why; they sometimes jump overboard the night before making port. And always they eat and drink with a kind of concentration which, according to their natures, can be gluttonous, inspired, or merely beneficent."

With this philosophic disclaimer in mind, I board the Silver Shadow, a 382-passenger Silversea ship, ready for my first nautical journey, a 10-day cruise across the South Pacific. Silversea, a family-owned Italian company, is known for its more intimate vessels. Unlike the 1,000-passenger cruise ship — teeming with magenta-shouldered Freedom-55-ers who cling to umbrella cocktails as they might to life rafts, and excessively cheerful staff luring you into games of water polo — Silversea is eminently civilized. With ocean-view suites and marble bathrooms, its ships feel more like buoyant boutique properties than floating amphetamine cities.

The itinerary — we board in Tahiti, head to Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas, then spend several days at sea before dropping anchor in Oahu, then Maui — reads like Captain James Cook's diary. The dramatic landscape in French Polynesia also has a storybook feel, with its lush, beflowered mountains climbing out of implausibly blue waters towards matching skies. What struck me about finding myself in the middle of nowhere, the ship bobbing like some giant's bath toy atop an endless expanse, is that all you see is a spectrum of blue, which varies from shades of ink to cobalt to baby blanket to Smurf.

And should you board a Silversea ship, be prepared to behold about as much water in the oceans as you experience Champagne on deck. While food and beverage is included, you'll be hard-pressed (at least, I was) to find a persuasive argument why not to imbibe it at all times. Proof of Fisher's point that being at sea somehow inspires one to eat and drink with unusual focus. This could also be because there's little else to do. (Yes, there are lectures and water-volleyball games, there's a spa, theatre, gym, casino and ballroom dance lessons, but doing nothing also seems to qualify as a perfectly respectable activity — and, therefore, the one I chose.)

Indeed, by Day 2, I managed to toss discipline and ambition (except an ambition to recline) overboard. By Day 4, maybe it was the constant diet of sunshine and Champagne, but I felt as thoroughly relaxed as I felt stupid. It's interesting — or maybe just embarrassing — to note that while confronted with the vastness of the ocean, I might have spent the time contemplating the profound — the ephemeral nature of existence, perhaps. Instead, I focused on



SILVERSEA

Only when you're far enough from shore to see nothing at all does all discipline and ambition evaporate.



whether to go sweet or savoury at the next morning's breakfast buffet. Or whether I'd spend the afternoon sunbathing on Deck 10 or reading on Deck 8. While I honed those skills yacht-side, I also dispensed with all the side effects (i.e. guilt) that accompany idleness on *terra firma*. My intense laziness was only encouraged by Silversea's staff (there are more staff than passengers) who are almost creepily attuned to your every whim and seem alarmed should you try to do anything for yourself — unfold your own dinner napkin, say, or carry your own plate from the buffet to the table. Short of eating for you, they'll pretty much take care of everything.

When we finally approached land

in Hawaii, its green mountains surging from sun-gilded waters, I felt a thrill, as if I'd personally discovered the islands. I found myself shouting "Land! Land!" with crazed excitement, as if I were a scurvy-ravaged oarsman in the age of Magellan.

Fisher knew all about women at sea approaching land: "I have seen them misbehave. ... Then, as land

approached and they felt nearer to something they loved, or at least recognized, their eyes cleared, as if they were throwing off an opiate, coming into focus again."

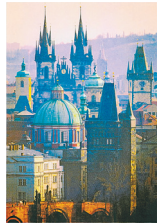
True enough, approaching shore with all its associated demands — work, emails, carrying my own plate, drinking liquids that aren't Champagne — I realized what I had so temporarily, and cheerfully, lost at sea: sobriety and the ability to exert myself in the slightest. But I'm not a member of royalty and don't have plans to wed a tycoon. So, as for my chances of living that life on land: I think I've missed the boat.

The next South Pacific cruise aboard the Silver Shadow, a 12-night voyage, sails from Los Angeles on Feb. 7 and arrives in Tahiti 12 nights later. Prices start at US\$3,838 plus airfare. Olivia Stren was the guest of Silverseas (silverseaships.com).

Weekend Post

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"We're now in Prague, after travelling in Germany, Austria, Czech Republic and back to Berlin tomorrow. "Highlight: Prague and seeing the Pope, plus Jurys Inn, near Prague's Old Town. "Lowlight: a McDonald's Hotel near Salzburg. Terrible food (not a McMuffin!). Terrible price." — Helen MacDonald



WEB WAVES

Allthingscruise.com, which emphasizes in its press release that it isn't tied to any cruise company or travel agent, launched last week as a one-stop service for experienced and neophyte cruisers. It includes what it describes as reviews of specific cruises, videos, user feedback and information for anyone planning a cruise. It also says it will have a roster of cruise bloggers (three when we checked late this week), the most noteworthy of whom is Cynthia Boal Janssens, past president of the Society of American Travel Writers and a keen cruiser. She is currently writing a daily diary about her trip to the Galapagos Islands. Another blogger is posting daily missives from aboard the Queen Mary 2. The site also has what it calls cruise e-cards, an easy way to send phone numbers and ship information to family and friends.

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