

TRAVEL / YACHTING

IT'S A DREAM AT SEA

SUE WALLACE settles into life aboard SeaDream II for a week of “yachting, not cruising” and discovers exceptional service, and a little magic, makes life a breeze.

IT'S a clear, starry night aboard SeaDream II, which is anchored just off the coast of Italy in the shimmering blue waters of the Mediterranean.

Tucked up in a Balinese-style bed with crisp cotton sheets and a snugly duvet, I am trying to spot recognisable star formations in the skies above but with little luck.

As I drift off to sleep, the shoreline twinkles with tiny lights and a cool breeze picks up.

A night out on deck is just one of the magical experiences aboard SeaDream II, an elegant mega yacht where you won't find lengthy queues, bingo sessions or gala extravaganzas.

Instead, for a maximum of 112 passengers it's all about exceptional service from the 95 crew with an emphasis on casual comfort and refined elegance.

Ever since we stepped aboard this beauty in Nice — welcomed with a glass of champagne and chilled hand towels — we have felt at home.

Our seven-night itinerary sees us stopping at picturesque harbours and ports in France, Italy and Spain, disembarking in Barcelona.

Each port is vastly different ranging from a day in Monte Carlo amid big-buck boats owned by multi-millionaires to catching a tender boat to a quaint fishing village lined with seafood cafes and enjoying the best mussels I have tasted.

It doesn't take long to discover why the twin SeaDream yachts have taken out top accolades for their fine-tuned operation.

Owner Atle Brynstad, who spends four weeks a year aboard each of his two SeaDreams, aims to give passengers the feeling of being on their own private yacht, hence the company's mantra — “it's yachting, not cruising”.

Mr Brynstad says he strives for casual perfection with hand-picked staff who engage with passengers but never overwhelm.

A self-made man, who admits as a child he had few toys except for a red car, now has toys of a much bigger size.

He's passionate about providing a special type of experience for guests who won't forget their cruise it in a hurry — and he achieves it.

Weeks after reluctantly packing our suitcases we are still recalling special SeaDream moments.

It doesn't take long to adapt to yachting life, starting with coffee and croissants at the Top of the Yacht bar.

Breakfast is served later on deck with a wide selection of fruits, juices, healthy options and daily specials such as eggs benedict.

If you are looking for exercise you can stretch your legs in a yoga class one morning and a pilates the following and there's a fitness centre complete with treadmills, bikes and weights.

Great sea views somehow lessen the pain of 30 minutes on a treadmill trying to counteract the inevitable kilos added at each meal.

Chilled towels and bottled water await you when you have finished a workout.

A jog or walk around Deck 6 is also a great way to keep trim and it takes exactly 16 laps to clock up a mile.

There's also a small pool and jacuzzi and, if you love water sports, you can hop aboard a jetski or waterskis available from the lower deck marina.



You won't want to leave life aboard SeaDream II behind ... cocktails are served in the evening at the lounge.

“For a maximum of 112 passengers it's all about exceptional service from the 95 crew with an emphasis on casual comfort and refined elegance.”

animal activist Brigitte Bardot, where we stop at a wine shop and taste-test the cheeses and some precious drops along with olives and other treats.

Quaint shops filled with swimwear and beach clothes, art galleries and cafes keep us entertained before returning to SeaDream II for lunch, which is served on deck.

There's a great selection of hot offerings and delicious cold selections and a choice of tasty homemade ice-creams.

Dinner is always looked forward to and often follows a theme — Spanish, French and Italian cuisine are highlights.

Cocktail hour is held every night before dinner with champagne, cocktails and wines served with a selection of canapes.

It's a great way to meet fellow passengers and we are introduced to a Japanese writer living in New York, a Texan millionaire who loves “yachting” and a Swedish couple who have saved for years for their honeymoon.

Dinner is served in the elegant dining room or on deck by request, weather permitting.

The menus make interesting reading and decisions aren't easy. There's a selection of appetisers, entrees, palate cleansers and sorbets, main courses and desserts.

I glance at the healthy treat option, described as a confluence of Oriental and Western dishes, then go even further and opt for the dream raw cuisine.

Described as an epic form or vegetarianism I start with a watercress tang, the juice of watercress, pear, pineapple and lime, followed by shitake and pink grapefruit ceviche, which is a



LEFT: SeaDream II offers a great range of 'water toys.'

ABOVE LEFT: Starry nights ... a sleep out under the stars is possible on SeaDream yachts.

ABOVE: The Top of the Yacht Bar is perfect for cocktails and sea views.

RIGHT: SeaDream Yacht Club will offer cruises around Asia and Australia next year.



Travel notes

SeaDream Yacht Club
The seven-night cruise visited Nice, Monte Carlo, San Remo, St Tropez, Sete, Collioure and Roses.

The fare is all inclusive with gourmet meals, wine with lunch and dinner, open bar with select premium brands, onboard gratuities, use of water toys, fitness centre, golf simulator, extensive CD and DVD library and SeaDream's signature Champagne and Caviar Splash.

SeaDream Yacht Club will send a ship to Asia and Australia next year, with more than a dozen voyages ranging from seven to 15 days available from October 2013 through to April 2014.

For details see travel agents, or phone SeaDream Yacht Club in Miami, US, on toll-free 1800 217 902 (open until 11am Sydney time), or email inquiries to info@seadream.com or visit seadream.com

Rail Europe can organise seamless rail travel to all ports to connect with cruises.

We travelled from Montreaux in Switzerland to Nice in France in first class on the TGV to meet SeaDream II.

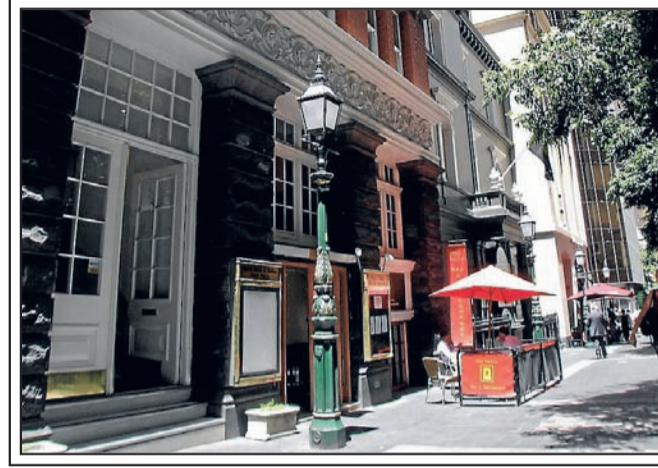
The train was on time, clean, efficient, served excellent food and featured comfortable seats. It's a great way to travel without the hassle of flying.

For information visit Rail Europe See raileurope.com.au

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SHORT STAYS

MELBOURNE



Melbourne escape ... Metro Apartments on Bank Place offer chic accommodation in the heart of the city.

Summer in city

METRO Apartments on Bank Place, in the heart of Melbourne's CBD, offers chic, affordable boutique apartment accommodation that lives up to the city's European charm.

Tucked away down an atmospheric cobbled laneway, the surrounding heritage-listed piazza introduces visitors to Melbourne's charming lanes and city precinct with its range of cafes, restaurants and enticing shopping.

Over summer there's plenty happening with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra performing free summer concerts in the park from February 13 to 23 and the St Kilda Festival on the beach from February 2 to 10.

Highlights of the city's summer calendar also include the Boxing Day Test, Chinese New Year's celebrations (February 10 to 12) Melbourne's annual Midsumma Festival (January 13 to February 3) and the Australian Open Tennis (January 16 to 27).

Metro Apartments on Bank Place offers 60 rooms, with a choice of either one-bedroom suites or studio rooms, as well as a unique spa room and a split-level, two-bedroom penthouse.

The suites include a fully equipped kitchen and laundry so guests can self-cater.

For bookings, phone 1800 004 321 or visit metrohotels.com.au

KAYAKING



See stunning scenery in Croatia on a kayak adventure.

Sea the world

SOUTHERN Sea Ventures, which is celebrating 25 years of sea kayak holiday experiences, has added four new destinations to its 2013, 25 Tropical, Mediterranean, European and Polar itineraries.

The tropical islands of Thailand's Koh Chang Marine National Park provide an exotic backdrop for a new eight-day 100km paddle around this famous archipelago. Out of the kayak, time can be spent snorkelling coral reefs rich in marine life, exploring pristine beaches and staying in simple beach bungalows.

Experienced guides bridge the gap to local cultures, through their strong connections with island communities.

It is priced at \$1695 per person for departure January 12 to 19, 2013. There's also a coastal adventure from southern Dalmatia to undiscovered Montenegro, priced at \$3250 per person for departure September 15 to 28, 2013.

Southern Sea Ventures kayak trips are either camping or ship-based. Visit southernseaventures.com or phone (02) 8901 3287.