



Sail Away

ON THE SAPPHIRE PRINCESS

In our last issue, we looked at the pros and cons of the various cruise routes out of Singapore. Here, VERNE MAREE gives her verdict on one of the more popular ones, the four-night round trip to Penang, Langkawi and Port Klang on the super Sapphire Princess.

They say you can divide the world into people who love cruising, and people who hate it. It's also been said that the latter are simply those who chose the wrong ship for their particular needs the first time they tried it. And everyone's needs are different, of course, depending on factors such as age, budget, tastes and so on.

With so many options to choose from (see Heidi Sarna's overview in our May 2015 issue), why did Roy and I choose this ship and this route?

Firstly, to take advantage of Singapore being a cruising hub: with the new Marina Bay Cruise Centre just a short taxi-ride from home, sailing round-trip is not only convenient but also saves the time, hassle and expense of air transfers. Secondly, I get miserably travel-sick, and the stability of bigger ships – this one takes 2,700 passengers – helps me to keep all that delicious food down. Thirdly, at around S\$800 per person sharing a

balcony stateroom – that's about \$200 a day, all in – the Sapphire Princess is more affordable than some others that ply these waters.

It's not just about the price, however: this is a truly gorgeous ship. Though the Princess line is in the "deluxe" rather than the "luxury" category, its beautifully designed Sapphire is in mint condition, with expansive decks, lovely public spaces and excellent facilities, including numerous pools, both indoor and out.



Sailing Away

Boarding is a straightforward and fairly quick exercise. Also departing today is a Celebrity ship, rather dwarfed by the floating behemoth that's going to be our playground for the next four nights.

Our 4pm departure is celebrated with the mandatory sail-away party in the main pool area, featuring vigorous line-dancing led by a red and perhaps unnecessarily furry Mr Octopus, together with a no doubt equally sweaty Mr Pelican. As Roy surprisingly refuses to join in, we watch the fun from the outdoor bar while I cheer myself up from a menu of no less than six different varieties of margarita.

Sleeping

We recommend our own cabin unreservedly: on Deck 12, and aft, its balcony is shaded – ideal for travel in the tropics – and it's not overlooked by any of the other cabins, which is the case with the lower decks.

Though not as big as in some other ships, our stateroom is quite large enough for comfort; but I certainly wouldn't recommend the option of sharing it with one or more of those short, noisy people.

The queen-sized bed is super-comfortable, and that's so important. Plenty of storage room is provided, including hanging space with lots of hangers (which makes my day); there's a safe, a big television and a mini-bar. Though the shower-room is very small indeed, as is the shower, it's well designed, with excellent water pressure that puts a smile on my husband's face. And though we never need to call on the services of the steward assigned to us, it's nice to know he's available at the other end of a phone line.

Demographics and Drinking

Sapphire Princess has been plying this and other routes in the region since November 2014, and I'd estimate a more than 90 percent Asian passenger list: mainly Chinese-Indonesian, Chinese-Malaysian, Chinese-Singaporean, other Southeast Asians, Japanese, Koreans and so on.



But with so many passengers, there is still a good smattering of Aussies, Europeans, Americans and other Westerners. It's easy to find them, too: they'll be at the bar – one of the many bars, usually one that's outdoors – or on a sun-lounger at one of half-a-dozen pools. As it's term-time, there are relatively few children on board; it's a good idea to check that aspect of things before booking.

A predominantly Asian passenger list means that many of the bars are conspicuously empty and the wine waiters sadly under-employed, though Roy and I are doing our level best to remedy that. Finding ourselves the only customers at the lovely Wheelhouse Lounge on several occasions, we spend hours chatting up manager Alex from Bulgaria. He's been in the cruise business for 21 years and is a mine of information (and gossip) about shipboard life.

The basic cruise price includes food, soft drinks and everyday coffee and tea – but not proper coffee and not alcohol. Happily, just US\$50 per person per day buys you the all-inclusive beverages option.





Dining

When you book your cruise, you're asked to choose between Anytime dining and Traditional dining. The Traditional option means you dine in the International restaurant at the same table at the same time with the same people for the duration of your journey: perhaps more convenient for families or larger groups. Most couples, though, might prefer to dine Anytime and wherever they like.

They suggest booking your dinner table ahead, but we never find that necessary on this cruise, except in the two fine-dining restaurants – Sabatini's and Sterling Steakhouse – for which you pay an extra US\$25.

On a short cruise like this, the same menu is served up at all five main restaurants: the International, the Savoy, the Vivaldi, the Pacific Moon and the Santa Fe; but the themed menu is different each night. For example, our first dinner is at the Savoy (supposedly British in décor and ambience), and the theme is Italian. The standard, by the way, is generally very good.

Speaking of Italian, top-notch thin-crust pizzas are served all day in Alfredo's Pizzeria, and at no extra charge. And on the last night, we enjoy a marvellous four-course meal at Sabatini's: a cone of crispy calamari for me and a perfectly creamy burrata for Roy; impeccably light manicotti stuffed with spinach and ricotta; a veal chop for Roy and lobster three ways for me. (A month later, I'm still racked with regret that I was too full to try the zabaglione.)

A stupefying amount of food is put away at the vast Horizon Court buffet, open from 5am to 11pm, and the standard is fairly good. We far prefer the more intimate International Café in the buzzy Piazza, however, where they serve great cappuccinos along with toasted sandwiches, patisserie and more.

We find the service fine on the whole, sometimes excellent, but unfortunately – perhaps due to the on-job training that's going on – decidedly inconsistent. That said, it must be a huge challenge to provide a uniformly good service experience for passengers from such a wide variety of cultures, especially given



the language constraints between them and a service crew representing dozens of different nationalities.

Entertainment

Shows tend to be better on bigger ships like this one, and here they offer a 35-minute performance twice-nightly. We manage to catch only two of them: Pianoman, and then a great performance from young Asian-Aussie duo Heart of Spades on “acoustic” violin and guitar.

The plethora of activities organised by the cruise director and his enthusiastic young team seem to go down well, though sometimes evoking shades of Butlin’s holiday camp with over-jolly exhortations to join in. A Latin music party held one evening on the huge Neptune Pool Deck is a huge success, however – everyone turns up. (Once again, Roy refuses to join the conga line, so I console myself with a couple of first-class caiparinhas.)

The Neptune Pool Deck also has a massive outdoor movie screen, where films are screened at advertised times: we catch bits of *Mary Poppins* and *The*

Judge, and concerts by the likes of Paul Simon and James Taylor.

But we have our best fun at the Skywalker’s lounge, where a good DJ operates from 10.30pm into the small hours. If you want to dance, a cruise ship has to be the best place to do it; no need for a taxi to get you home, and when the crew finishes for the night around 1.30am, they just leave you to it. We haven’t danced so much in years.

As for the casino, if gambling is one of your things, smoking had better be another. The one time we walk through the place, it reeks like an old ashtray.

Excursions

For both local Singaporeans and expats, this cruise is likely to be more about the ship than the ports. After all, to do Penang or Langkawi justice – and they’re both great destinations in their own right – you need far longer than the few hours allowed. Far better to take a few days to see them properly on some other occasion. We did our own thing in both Penang and Langkawi, being familiar with both places, but a first-timer might want to opt for one of the variety



of excursions offered at an extra fee.

As for the unattractive Port Klang, which is quite a distance from Kuala Lumpur, we see it as a good opportunity to stay on board and enjoy the ship’s facilities.

All this, of course, just underscores how lucky we are to live in Singapore and have so many travel options to choose from. Cruising is just one way to go, and it seems that the more of it I do, the more I like it. 🍷

princess.com