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A TASTE OF  
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# Thailand

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ROME TO BARCELONA BY SEA  
THE CALL OF KANAZAWA  
LIONS AND LUXURY IN GUJARAT



# High Water Mark

AN INDULGENT MEDITERRANEAN VOYAGE WITH EXPLORA JOURNEYS EPITOMIZES THE YOUNG CRUISE LINE'S MISSION TO REDEFINE LUXURY CRUISING.

Words & photographs by  
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**FRESCO FABULOUS**  
The ornate ceiling of Palermo's Church of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria. Opposite: Explora II in Mahón's harbor, on the Spanish island of Menorca.

**BELLA VISTA**  
Cagliari's Poetto Beach. *Opposite, clockwise from top left:* A butler on the terrace of one of *Explora II*'s Cocoon Residences; a view of Cagliari from the city's cruise port; boarding the ship.



Through the hazy plexiglass of the cable car carrying us up to the medieval walled town of Erice, we watch the ship that brought us here grow ever smaller at its moorings beside Trapani's glinting salt pans. At the summit, a genuine frisson of adventure takes hold as we step through Erice's ancient stone gate, joining a modest throng of day trippers on narrow cobbled streets steeped in layers of Sicilian history, from Elymian and Roman foundations – Virgil knew this hilltop settlement as Eryx – to the crenellated Norman-Gothic bell tower of the Chiesa Madre.

The summer air is a few degrees cooler than on the coast, and the streets are void of cars, making for a pleasant morning walk. My daughter and I amble past the mottled limestone walls of houses with arched doorways and bijou wrought-iron balconies, pausing to admire frescoed churches or shops stocked with Sicilian ceramics and fruit-shaped marzipan. Down one lane we come across a small theater where a tenor is rehearsing for an upcoming recital. Later, we settle in for lunch on a stone terrace high above the Tyrrhenian Sea, relishing the views over iced cappuccinos and plates of *busiate* – the local corkscrew pasta – with prawns and pistachio pesto.

Erice is hardly undiscovered, but it is entirely new to me. Indeed, when we boarded the *Explora II* three days earlier in Rome for a seven-night cruise across the western Mediterranean, this corner of Sicily wasn't even on the itinerary. Today was meant to be a sea day en route to Sardinia, until a storm warning obliged Captain Pietro Sinisi to divert to the harbor at Trapani instead. The stop proves as delightful as it is unexpected.





**CRUISE CONTROL** Clockwise from below: The living room of the Owner's Residence, the largest accommodation aboard *Explora II*; strolling Corso Vittorio Emanuele, the main street through the medieval Sicilian town of Erice; a harbor-side lookout point in Mahón frames *Explora II*'s funnel; the ship in port.



**SEAS THE DAY** Clockwise from above left: Overlooking the aquamarine waters of southern Sardinia's Gulf of Angels from the cliffs of Cape Sant'Elia; a cabin detail; tartare of salmon and Brittany oyster at *Explora II*'s Marble & Co. Grill; the cruise line's culinary head, Franck Garanger.



**WELL ROUNDED** Above, from left: Tables at Fil Rouge; outside the Hauser & Wirth gallery in Mahón, Menorca. Opposite: Lounging at the ship's Atoll Pool.

It helps that our ship — launched last year as the second ultra-luxury vessel operated by fledgling cruise line Explora Journeys — favors long stays in port. As with our previous calls in Sorrento and Palermo, we have pretty much the whole day to explore Erice and Trapani's historic peninsula before heading back aboard to freshen up for dinner.

At each port, a selection of curated excursions can be booked for an extra cost, from a Sicilian cooking class with the Duchess of Palermo to yachting in Cagliari's Gulf of Angels. At Sorrento, where we tender ashore in one of the ship's lifeboats, a guided tour brings us to ancient Herculaneum — a town buried by the same A.D. 79 eruption of Mount Vesuvius that destroyed nearby Pompeii — followed by a tasting of evocatively named Lacryma Christi (Christ's tears) wines at a family-run vineyard on the volcano's slopes.

Mostly, though, we set out on our own — snacking on arancini and cannoli as we wander the piazzas and street markets of gritty, beguiling Palermo, or, on the Spanish island of Menorca, roaming the historic center of Mahón for four straight hours, with no particular agenda. In the Sardinian port of Cagliari on day five, my daughter, in need of a break from “the old stuff,” proposes a hike. A 15-minute cab ride brings us to the rocky shores of Cape Sant’Elia just south of town, from where we pick our way over thorny scrub and marble-smooth limestone to a secluded cove popular — though thankfully not packed — with local nudists. After a dip, we clamber up to the heights of the

cape, eventually finding a trail that leads us to sheer chalk-white cliffs with views over the Gulf of Angels and the eight-kilometer stretch of golden sand known as Poetto Beach.

And at no point do we ever feel rushed to hurry back to the ship, though returning invariably elicits a thrill. Built at a shipyard in Genoa, *Explora II* is a real beauty among midsize cruise ships, with a rakish silhouette, an elegantly terraced stern, and a navy-blue hull, dark as obsidian under the Mediterranean sun. With 461 suites, she's a near-twin of her forerunner, *Explora I*, which first set sail in 2023, and similar to the four other vessels set to join the fleet over the next few years.

While *Explora II* carries the flag of Malta and Explora Journeys is headquartered in Geneva, the ship's DNA is unmistakably Italian, from its stylish Manutti deck furnishings and Frette bed linens to artworks by the likes of Emilio Isgrò. As a matter of fact, the cruise line is part of the MSC Group, a global shipping giant founded in 1970 by Neapolitan ferry captain Gianluigi Aponte — now one of the world's wealthiest people. The deep-pocketed group also owns MSC Cruises, a major mass-market line whose newest vessels rank among the largest at sea. But Explora Journeys is something else entirely, created, as the company describes it, as “a transformative luxury ocean-travel experience... that redefines the luxury cruise category.”

The suites certainly impress. Starting at 35 square meters, they're among the most spacious in their class, adorned with neutral tones and residential-style touches like shelves filled



**SMOOTH SAILING**

*Explora II* at anchor off Sorrento. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A statue in Erice's Church of the Santissimo Salvatore; the ship's Lobby Bar; wagyu with Amarone sauce at Anthology.



with books, *objets*, and boardgames (though I could do without the plastic orchids). A welcome bottle of Champagne is a nice touch, as is the selection of premium spirits for the in-room bar.

Any concerns my daughter and I might have had about sharing a room for seven nights are quickly dispelled. Apart from a partitioned lounge area and walk-in dressing area, our twin-bed Ocean Grand Terrace Suite opens onto an extra-large terrace with a big daybed, so we never feel on top of each other during the voyage. The bathroom is a good size too, with ample counter space, heated floors, plush Frette towels, and jasmine-forward toiletries custom-crafted by master perfumer Alberto Morillas.

A sense of spaciousness extends throughout the ship, whose 10 passenger decks boast a wide array of facilities. For the high-rollers — who are more likely to book one of the expansive Residence staterooms, which come with butler service, bathtubs, and outdoor whirlpools — there's a cigar and whisky den, a small casino, and upmarket boutiques from Buccellati, Piaget, Panerai. Barista-poured fair-trade coffee and a pickleball court will appeal to millennials. Families can take advantage of connecting suites and a kids' club.

There's a spa, of course, with 11 treatment rooms and a thermal area complete with a sauna and steam room, a hydrotherapy pool, and even a Himalayan salt cave. The fitness center next door is outfitted with all sorts of Technogym equipment, though the best spot for a morning workout is the outdoor fitness area on deck 14, where rowing and cycling machines afford untrammeled views of whichever port the ship is approaching.

Then there are the pools — more than ▶ *Continued on page 102*



# MEDITERRANEAN

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I've ever seen on a cruise ship before. The main one, amidships on deck 11, is styled as a conservatory, with a retractable glass roof for cold-weather swims. Elsewhere, there are three smaller heated pools, including the signature Astern Pool, a half-moon of infinity-edged water perched eight meters above *Explora II's* wake. And that's not counting the slew of indoor and outdoor whirlpools.

The extravagance continues in the ship's food and beverage outlets. Passengers have more than a half-dozen bars and lounges to choose from, the most dramatic of which is the centrally located Lobby Bar, a double-height space with a towering back-lit bottle display. The six onboard restaurants are also diverse. On our first night, we dine on buttery escargot and slow-braised Black Angus *côte de boeuf* at Fil Rouge, the soigné French-focused dining room. Other venues, like the Marble & Co. steakhouse and pan-Asian Sakura, deliver superbly executed dishes alongside elegant wines. Even the buffet restaurant, Emporium Marketplace, impresses, with its free-flow Moët & Chandon, multiple live-action cooking stations, and a raw bar filled with oysters and crab legs. Meals at each are included in the cruise fare, subject to availability; the only exception is Anthology, the signature fine-dining restaurant, which serves seven-course tasting menus at an extra charge.

Could this be the best food at sea? Franck Garanger, *Explora Journeys'* culinary head, certainly thinks so. The Loire Valley-born chef honed his craft under the likes of Alain Passard and Thierry Marx before joining the cruise industry three decades ago; hired by *Explora Journeys* in 2022, he has helped shape the line's culinary trajectory from its earliest days. On *Explora II* alone, his team of 120 chefs represents the highest ratio of cooks per passenger in the industry, and he's able to source ingredients from the best producers in Europe — French farm-raised organic chicken, say, or Noire de Baltique beef from Norway. Eighty percent of the fish and seafood served on board is fresh, a figure far above the industry average. "It's really unprecedented," he says of the company's no-expense-spared approach to feeding its guests.



Clockwise from top left: Poolside lounge chairs; Calamosca Beach, Cagliari; *Explora II's* Sakura restaurant; one of the ship's lifeboat tenders.



"You know, we spend more on food than any other cruise line — I've been given carte blanche on this."

And so it is that we are kept well fed and entertained right through to our final port of call at Mahón, Menorca, the second largest of Spain's Balearic Islands. This deep natural harbor served as the base of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet in the 18th century, though today its long, sinuous channel — surely one of the world's most beautiful harbor approaches — keeps larger cruise liners at bay. *Explora II*, with her seven-meter draft and 248-meter length, is just small enough to make the passage. Happily, we're the only cruise ship in port.

Some passengers join tours to Fornells, a quiet village on the island's northern coast; others, like us, elect to prow around Mahón independently. After stopping for lunch at a quayside tapas tavern, we still have time to hop the yellow catamaran ferry to Illa del Rey, a tiny island in the middle of the harbor. It's

dominated by an old British-built naval hospital, now a museum, though the star attraction is an outpost of Swiss mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth, which hosts exhibitions by prominent contemporary artists like Mika Rottenberg and Cindy Sherman in a clutch of restored sandstone outbuildings.

Back on board *Explora II*, a pianist is playing the Steinway grand in the bow-facing Explora Lounge as the ship pulls away from its moorings. Soon enough, we're on a northwest course toward Barcelona, where we'll disembark the next morning. For now, though, the evening light is soft and golden, the Champagne is flowing, and our journey's end lies over the horizon. We're in no hurry to get there. 🍷

*After completing her winter season in the Caribbean, Explora II will return to the Mediterranean in April, with nine-night voyages starting from US\$5,550 per person, all inclusive (explorajourneys.com).*