

## A STAR IS BORN

Where to begin? I could start by saying that in a long travel career as a cruise specialist I have been privileged to see some amazing new ships, and participate in some truly memorable launches and/or inaugural sailings. Then, blitzing all before it, there was this one - the *Viking Star*, and I am cruising for 8 days in the Baltics, from Warnemunde (the port for Berlin), Germany to Stockholm, Sweden on her maiden voyage.

The popularity of cruising is such that a handful of elite European shipyards are turning out something new and wonderful every few weeks but, there is a "cookie cutter" element, and even after customised fit-out and branding by the various cruise lines, an expert can usually discern the originating shipyard. So, just when we thought there was nothing new under the sun, out of one of those shipyards - Fincantieri in Italy - comes the *Viking Star*, and with it, a whole new way to cruise. To get the technical stuff out of the way, she is of the new Venice Class - less than 1,000 passengers and less than 50,000 tons. *Viking Star* carries 928 passengers and at 48,000 tons has the highest passenger to space ratio at sea - a whopping 54%. This is the precise reason I have seen the merest fraction of my fellow 927 passengers over the past week. The ship is extremely fuel efficient, and totally emission-free, with not even a bucket of scrubbing water being discarded.

Often we make distinctions between the "hardware" (the ship) and the "software" (its crew), and many times when one is wanting, the other more than compensates, and we judge accordingly. No such judgements are necessary here: the *Viking Star* hardware is incredibly beautiful, and its crew outstanding.

Liberal use of leather, natural timber and stunning soft furnishings, create a warm, welcoming and homely ambience where, always and everywhere, I feel like a guest in a stunning (and definitely multi award winning!) Nordic country house. This ship could be completely crewless and "serve yourself" and one would still be swooning. BUT, the crew - many of them Indonesian/Filipino are also superb, and bursting with pride and happiness to be working on this new wonder of the sea.

So what of the mind(s) who conceived this floating..... I hesitate to say "palace" because it infers unattainable glitz. There is nothing unattainable nor glitzy about *Viking Star* - quite the opposite. To step on board is to be enveloped in a welcome so warm, and a level of comfort so great, that the effect is surely equivalent to a stint in a wonderful wellness centre. It doesn't feel like a hotel - those can sometimes be a little impersonal. Instead, as incredible as it is, it just feels like a beautiful home: and one you never want to leave. There is nothing ship-like about this experience, nor does it feel like a cruise, and we learn that this is a deliberate strategy by Viking Founder Torstein Hagen and his associates to have us re-focus on the destination aspect of cruising, rather than the ship itself. After all Mr. Hagen declares the Viking passenger to generally be a "thinking" cruiser, rather than a "drinking" cruiser!

So let's look at what **is not** on board:

To begin with there is no **Purser's Desk**. Certainly there is a place to go if you lose your room key perhaps however, it is located in the Living Room, and is probably the best workplace at sea!. There is no **casino**. There are **no children under 16**, ergo no kids' club/activities. There are **no Art Sales, no Bingo, no Photography**. There are **very few announcements**. Instead of one large dining room, there are several smaller restaurants, and **none of them surcharged**. The ship is completely **non smoking** save for one tiny (beautifully furnished of course) area on the Sun Deck.

The resultant passenger demographic is that of thinking, curious travellers who enjoy a holiday with like-minded people, in pleasant surroundings.

In taking the concept of river cruising to the seas, there is much emphasis on **what's included**, for example wi-fi is included, one free excursion in each port is included, as are beer wine and soft drink with meals. Alternate dining is included, and there are no additional charges for port taxes and the like. Therefore from a purely financial viewpoint, the *Viking Star* value proposition is impossible to ignore.

So what's it like to actually set sail and cruise on this beautiful newcomer to the sea?

The first surprise comes on arrival at the dock, where check-in is done by roving staff with IPods, fitted with a passport scanner. This whole process seems "virtual".

Rooms are spacious and beautifully decorated. Lots of blond wood, and leather, contrasted with varying shades of smoky blue. Perhaps you could say its a "modern Nautical" theme. There is plenty of seating and desk space, and a coffee table worthy of special mention - stylish oval top covered half in fabric and half in navy leather. Oh my!! The beds are superb with pillows like clouds, so restful sleep is assured. The bathrooms are amazing, very spacious with a large separate shower, a rain-showerhead, and a seat!!! Toiletries are full size Freya. Stacks of sensible drawers for storage (why did it take so long for someone to think of doing this?). But the piece de resistance is the heated floors!!!

All cabins are outside, with good sized and well furnished balconies - I just have to remember to use mine!

As I move around, despite ample opportunity to do so, I find myself completely forgetting to look at the sea, because I have forgotten I am on a ship, there is so much inward looking to be done and enjoyed. Instead I move from beautiful room to beautiful room in this wonderful "home".

Among the public areas, the bi-level Explorer's Lounge is surely worthy of a decorating award, with its leather furniture, stunning soft furnishings (including faux reindeer rugs), and fireplace. It was interesting to see many of my fellow passengers, instinctively remove their shoes (or not!), and put their feet up by the fire to read a book. An expertly curated collection of decorator items is displayed throughout in beautiful cabinetry. By the way, a very common activity during our cruise, is upturning furniture, cushions, china and homewares to check their provenance - we all want everything for our own homes!

The Wintergarden with its almost incidental swimming pool, is simply stunning, and a very popular place to relax under the spectacular wooden "tree", to swim, sunbathe, or just read a book from the randomly placed (and well stocked) shelves. I accidentally discover the "tiles" around the pool are actually leather! Traditional high tea is served here each day (an eye-watering selection of teas by the way). Nearby, the enticing smell from the cooked to order hamburgers at the Pool Grill says "stay away if you can". These are routinely pronounced "the best I have ever eaten", by all who try them.

At the ship's stern is the beautiful Aquavit Terrace where, it would be easy to spend one's entire cruise, not least because it gives way to the well heated, and very popular infinity pool - the first at sea, and what a vantage point for the always entrancing wake vistas!

The tri-level ship's Atrium is beautiful. A Steinway here, a classical guitarist there, and incredible LED art which changes from time to time, are just some of the highlights. There are so many empty places to sit, read, and chat, and some very clever "interactive" coffee tables. Some cruise ships offer tours of art-work, memorabilia and so on: *Viking Star* could easily offer a furniture tour!

Even the spa has turned the concept on end with a marvellous complex which not only houses a superb spa pool and surrounds (fireplace included!), but saunas, steam rooms, and what else but a snow grotto to plunge into! How very Viking, and what fun - and no surcharge!!

I can't believe I am mentioning the ship's laundrettes! But with their state of the art machines (automatic detergent dispensers!)/dryers, and leather couch and TV, and plenty of that staple of all laundromats at sea - shipboard gossip - a visit is far from a chore. I even saw a man asleep on the couch in the laundry near my room!

Lifts and stairwells are cleverly located - sometimes in the same area, but often separate, and with no "ding ding dinging" when your elevator arrives, if you are chatting it's easily to miss it. No one seems to mind. Oh, and all handrails are covered in cream leather!

There are dozens of places all over the ship, from top to bottom, indoor and outdoor, to sit in peace. Those seeking solitude have less to fear than those seeking company, with that massive passenger to space ratio ensuring there is more than enough space for a full complement of 928 to seemingly disappear. Conversely, for those who can't sit still, there is a marvellous fitness centre, and a great collection of outdoor equipment on the Sports Deck. There is also a beautiful (and complete) Promenade deck.

Entertainment is plentiful, and includes evening production shows, in the Star Theatre, "outdoor" movies in the Wintergarden, and a range of TED talks on rotation in two smaller annexe theatres. In keeping with the Viking credo, there are wonderful enrichment lectures which illuminate upcoming port calls.

There are several shops - one of them a massive perfumery. Inventory and prices are excellent.

There are five very different and outstanding dining venues, along with Mamsen's Deli, and the Living Room cafe, and several great bars. From the Chef's Table with its 5-course degustation menu paired with wine, to the absolutely fantastic World Cafe where the word "buffet" seems wildly inappropriate, the food on *Viking Star*, when combined with wonderfully attentive service is reason alone to choose this ship. Manfredi's Italian restaurant is extremely popular, with its signature dish of Florentine steak a much talked about topic around the ship. Each venue is beautifully furnished with complementary crockery and flatware which, as with the furniture is frequently turned for brand checking. Orders are taken on iPads. At each venue entry there is the customary hand-sanitiser dispenser except these gently "spray" rather than "glob", and look as if they were the winning entry in a prestigious design contest. Nearby are extremely stylish and sleek hand-washing stations for those preferring an old-fashioned hand-wash.

So who is the genius behind the Viking brand? His name is Torstein Hagen. A nuclear physicist I am told, who actually began his cruising interests with ocean ships but sold them and later, foreseeing the boom in European river cruising, purchased the KD Rhine line in Germany - the genesis of Viking river cruises. With this foray into ocean cruising, he has come full circle. Bless you Torstein Hagen, I want to meet you and shake your hand (actually I could have done so after you addressed us today, but was too shy!)

So, the negatives - there have to be some right?

After a struggle I have come up with just two in so far as the ship is concerned:

1. A magnifying mirror would be handy in the bathrooms.
2. The design of the closet makes it a little tricky to access one of the doors.

Overall, there is an issue with availability, with 2015 more or less sold out. In 2016, with the arrival of the second ship, almost 80% of space is gone. By 2017 there will be four ships, and more space however, I predict it will sell quickly when made available in mid June this year. Viking has a ready-made and very loyal customer base from its river cruising. For now, itineraries are confined to the Europe, including the Baltics and they are all wonderful.

*Viking Star* I cant recall the exact moment I fell in love with you - it might have been when I discovered the heated floors in my bathroom, or perhaps the leather cover doorhandles in my room. Either way, I am hooked!

Get on it! - this is a ship worth changing your holiday plans for.