

# Culture cruise

A sailing on *Viking Mars* is less about the features on board and more about having richer in-destination experiences, says **Jeannine Williamson**

"hold and pull," repeats chef Gennaro patiently as my dough ball takes on a very uneven shape before sticking together. I try to imitate his dexterous moves and press down again with one hand and gently tug with the other before finally achieving a very approximate circle.

Next, I smooth on a spoonful of tomato paste, scatter over a handful of grated mozzarella and shred some basil leaves on top. Gennaro takes my finished effort and uses a huge shovel-like pizza paddle to pop it into the wood-fired oven glowing behind us. Minutes later, I'm sitting at a table in the main restaurant area of *Ciro a Santa Lucia*, tucking into the fruits of my labours.

Margherita pizza was first made in honour of Queen Margherita of Savoy when she visited Naples in 1889. It's traditionally ➤

*Viking Mars*

PICTURE: Adam Hillier

# DESTINATIONS

## CRUISE | EUROPE

### SELLING *tips*



Aquavit bar,  
Viking Mars

Any agents who have sold Viking river cruises will find it easy to sell the ocean product, as it's a comparable experience with similar features and inclusions.

🌟 Recommend cruises to city-break clients as sailings include long days and overnights in port with plenty of time to experience local life.

🌟 Emphasise the high number of inclusions such as Wi-Fi, drinks with meals, no fee for alternative restaurants, and a complimentary excursion at each port of call.

🌟 Viking is one of the few ocean lines where every cabin is outward-facing and has a walk-out balcony.

Spa on Viking Mars



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Infinity pool, Viking Mars; pizza in Naples; Penthouse Junior Suite, Viking Mars; Jeannine Williamson and her margherita pizza

PICTURES: Eric Laignel; Archimage; Shutterstock/ovalagency



made from dough that has been leavened for 18 hours and is adorned with red, white and green ingredients to represent the colours of the Italian flag. My misshapen attempt at the Neapolitan dish beloved around the world certainly isn't fit for a queen. But, even if I say so myself, it tastes delicious.

The Pizza & Piazzas tour – involving a stroll around the grand squares of one of the largest ports in the Mediterranean – is one of my highlight excursions on *Viking Mars's* inaugural cruise along the Italian coastline, after its christening in Valletta, Malta.

### IMMERSIVE EXCURSIONS

In addition to an included shore tour in every port – usually a guided walk and coach trip to provide an overview of the destination – Viking offers a really varied selection of immersive and authentic experiences off the well-trodden tourist track.

Earlier in the week, I'd opted for a wine tasting at the Murgio winery, where vines grow in the rich volcanic soil in the shadow of Mount Etna on the island of Sicily. On the scenic drive we stopped to visit the 'honey capital' of Zafferana and sampled sweet treats produced by bees that gather orange blossom nectar.

Slightly less palatable was a stop at a roadside stall, set at the foot of imposing solidified lava flows, to sample the bright red Fuoco dell'Etna, or Fire of Etna, liqueur, which lived up to its scorching name. Our return to *Viking Mars* may have been a tad unsteady.

“The theme that runs through Viking's DNA is that all the ships – with the exception of two – are identical, and deliberately so

After setting off last summer on its maiden season in the Mediterranean, Scandinavia and northern Europe, *Viking Mars* repositioned to sail around Asia, Australia and New Zealand, and will return to northern Europe this year and the Mediterranean in 2024. It was one of two new vessels launched last year to join Viking's steadily growing ocean fleet, which will soon become nine-strong with the debut of *Viking Saturn* in April.

While most new ocean ships provide a talking point with new facilities or design features, the main theme that runs through Viking's DNA is that all the ships – with the exception of *Viking Orion* and *Viking Jupiter*, which have planetariums – are identical, and have deliberately been kept that way since Viking launched its ocean arm in 2015. Essentially, whichever itinerary clients sail on, they will be on the 'same' ship.

### 'UNDERSTATED' TRAVEL

Viking chairman and founder Torstein Hagen was on board for *Viking Mars's* inaugural cruise. “We are ➤



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FROM LEFT: Wintergarden lounge on *Viking Mars*; Naples, Italy PICTURES: Eric Laignel; Shutterstock/Sean Pavone

a very different animal from other cruises lines," he said. "We are very clear on what we focus on and we are not one of the lines trying to be everything to everybody. Not so many of us have butlers with white gloves at home, so we don't have them on our ships. We say that people should explore the world in comfort in an understated way.

"I am proud of the fact that there are only nine buttons on the TV remote controls, the showers are easy to operate and the toiletries come in large containers that are easy to read."

### LESS IS MORE

There is no waterpark, casino, omnipresent ship's photographer, intrusive loud music, art auction, sail away parties or intrusive announcements on this adult-only vessel. Indeed, the things that *Viking Mars* and its sister ships 'lack' are in fact strong selling points for clients looking for a culture-rich cruise with

like-minded travellers. Some of my favourite moments were sitting on the wraparound promenade deck, or on my balcony, and enjoying the views as *Viking Mars* slipped peacefully in and out of port. And everyone gets the same view, as all of the sea-facing staterooms come with balconies.

In public areas it's also refreshing to find that facilities you might expect to pay for are free. These include the thermal area in the Nordic-themed spa where, if you're brave enough, you can sit in a snow grotto after warming up in the sauna.

The lack of 'nickel and diming' extends to the complimentary alternative dining venues, the Chef's Table and Manfredi's. The former serves alternating tasting menus, including a wonderful twist on British classics, including Scotch eggs, fish and chips, and roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, created for Viking by guest chef Karen Burns-Booth. Manfredi's

## fast fact

The 930-passenger vessel *Viking Mars* was named in Malta in May 2022: the event marked a double celebration as last year was the 25th anniversary of Viking, which began with river cruises in Russia and grew into the world's largest river cruise line.



"I am proud of the fact that there are only nine buttons on the TV remote controls and the showers are easy to operate

serves imaginative Italian dishes, including steaks that carnivores in our group said were among the best they'd ever tasted.

It was my last taste of Italian food before heading home, and probably the only time I'll ever get to make a real Neapolitan pizza, with its distinctively soft, rather than crispy, base. My own margherita might be long gone, but its creation was one of many unforgettable memories that I will savour for a long time. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**Viking Cruises'** seven-night Italian Sojourn sailing from Rome (Civitavecchia) to Venice (Chioggia) on *Viking Mars*, departing on March 23, 2024, and calling at Naples, Sicily, Crotone, Bari and Sibenice, leads in at £2,990.

**Viking Cruises'** 14-night Viking Homelands itinerary from Bergen to Stockholm on *Viking Mars*, departing on June 20, 2023, and calling at Mariehamn, Gdansk, Bornholm, Berlin, Copenhagen, Alborg, Oslo, Stavanger and Eidfjord, leads in at £7,090. The price includes flights, all meals, wine with lunch and dinner, shore excursion in every port, Wi-Fi and gratuities.

[viking.com](http://viking.com)