

Coastal delights

DESTINATIONS

FLORIDA | CRUISE

A coastline-clinging cruise reveals some of the US's best-kept secrets, finds **Jeannine Williamson**

As pelicans and gulls soar and swoop behind me – hoping for some tasty morsels thrown up in the ship's wake – I feel as if I'm in the centre of a wildlife documentary. To the left and right, graceful herons pick their way through the green and yellow marshland, flanking the banks as far as my eye can see, while cormorants perch on channel markers, their wings spread out to dry in the sun.

Welcome to life on 'the ditch', a wry nickname that doesn't do justice to the 3,000-mile Intracoastal Waterway, a navigable inland channel snaking along the coastline of the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean. It might be the longest of its kind in the world, but it's also a highly underrated way to see this part of America from a very different perspective.

MAZE OF WATERWAYS

I'm on the 100-passenger *American Independence*, one of American Cruise Lines' small ships that navigate sections of the waterway, which is made of up a maze of interlocking rivers, creeks, lagoons and canals that hug the inner coastline.

A couple of days previously, I had begun my journey on Florida's peaceful Amelia Island. This is a world away from the Sunshine State's theme parks and all-singing, all-dancing ➤

Sun setting over
Charleston waterfront

PICTURE: American Cruise Line

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5 OCTOBER 2023

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AMERICAN CRUISE LINES' COASTAL CATS SHIPS

In November, the first of American Cruise Lines' Coastal Cats ships will set sail on the Historic Isles and Golden Isles Cruise. The line specialises in small-ship US river and coastal cruises and is sold through Fred Holidays.

The 106-passenger *American Eagle* is the first of 12 hybrid catamarans with environmentally friendly technology, including electric power capabilities. Designed as 'go anywhere' vessels, American Cruise Lines says the Coastal Cats can sail on lakes, rivers, bays and coasts to combine the advantages of an ocean cruise with the stability of river cruising.

American Eagle and all its successors will feature 56 outside cabins – most of which will have balconies – in six categories. Solo clients will feel right at home, as these include single cabins with verandas. For travellers with a big budget, the largest cabins are the two Grand Suites, which feature a separate bedroom, living area and alfresco dining space on the balcony.

The vessel's facilities include two lounges, main dining room, cafe, fitness centre, games room, sun deck and watersports platform equipped with kayaks.

Forward Lounge,
American Eagle



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Colourful Charleston; Savannah, Georgia's oldest city; cannons in Charleston's Fort Sumter



attractions – perfect for any nature and culture lovers looking for a relaxing cruise with a difference.

After boarding, I grab one of the omnipresent snacks and a drink before joining fellow passengers in the cosy lounge for a talk by retired airline pilot Robbie Robinson. He's guest speaker on my week-long Historic Isles and Golden Isles Cruise and enriches the sailing through Florida, Georgia and North Carolina with his in-depth knowledge of the area. That afternoon, we learn about the history of 'the ditch', which was constructed to transport goods when there weren't many roads. The next day, it's a talk on Civil War history. Another educates us on 'Carolina gold' – the 18th-century rice crops that made Charleston one of the world's richest cities.

Later we stop at Jekyll Island, among the largest of the Golden Isles dotted along the Atlantic coast between Savannah in Georgia and Jacksonville, Florida. A retro sign welcomes us to a pristine estate that was once a 19th-century holiday playground for some of the US's richest dynasties, such as the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers – now a luxury resort.

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We gawp at huge mansions they humbly called 'cottages', which were built without kitchens as the wealthy occupants always dined in the clubhouse.

CHOICE OF EXCURSIONS

The *American Independence* offers a great choice of daily excursions. After our Jekyll Island trip, some passengers head off on a retired shrimping vessel for a first-hand experience of the industry that was once one of the most important in Georgia.

Plus, there's an overnight in atmospheric Savannah, with its moss-draped oaks and cobblestone waterfront streets, providing plenty of time to take a tour or two or



ABOVE: American Star in Savannah, Georgia PICTURE: American Cruise Lines

head off to explore independently. Film fans can seek out locations featured in *Forrest Gump*, *Magic Mike XXL* and the *Baywatch* remake. You can see Chippewa Square where Forrest sat and told his life story, but the famous bench is now in Savannah History Museum.

The cruise also visits smaller ports of call that you'd be hard-pressed to reach, even on the most ambitious of road trips. These include Hilton Head Island, which was cut off from the mainland until the 1950s – allowing wildlife to flourish among the low population of islanders. Particularly memorable is the small-boat trip on one of the lakes in Sea Pines Forest Preserve. I get incredible close-up views of alligators sleeping on the banks, turtles and a magnificent great blue heron with shimmering plumage. On the way back, we scale the island's iconic striped lighthouse, now an

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unusual circular museum packed with exhibits all the way to the top.

FRIENDLY LOCALS

Another unusual excursion takes me to charming Beaufort, frequently ranked as one of the US's best coastal small towns, where old homes are built with concrete made from sand and seashells. Locals picking up on our British accents are eager to stop and chat.

The all-American experience continues back on board, where satisfying southern food features widely. Think of any pie – and it's likely to make an appearance during the cruise. Turtle pie is a new one for me, but after seeing my alarmed face, the waitress explains it's a combo of chocolate, caramel and pecan nuts. It's delicious. Hungry for more? There are plenty of sweet temptations during the twice-daily fresh-baked cookie time.

Our final stop is Charleston, where I have a few hours before flying home. I stroll around the distinctive streets, where historic houses boast elaborate balconies and gas lamps glow in the doorways. While attempting to walk off the pie fest, I have time to reflect on a cruise that provides a unique taste – in every sense – of this lesser-known corner of the South. **TW**

ASK THE expert

Andy Hawke
product and sales manager,
Fred Holidays

“Florida is well known as a self-drive destination, but more and more customers are discovering how easy it is to take a coastal cruise as an alternative. Coastal cruising gives customers a different aspect of the region, with great scenery among the bays, rivers and canals. If they want to stay a little longer, it's easy for agents to extend the holiday, with perhaps a visit to one of Florida's theme parks or a trip further up the historical East Coast with a stay in Washington DC or Philadelphia. With American Cruise Lines, clients enjoy fantastic dining and service and a relaxing cruise experience.”



BOOK IT

The seven-night **Historic South and Golden Isles Cruise** from Amelia Island to Charleston, departing on March 24, 2024, on board *American Eagle* leads in at £6,995. The price includes flights, a one-night pre-cruise hotel stay, onboard meals and cocktail parties. fredholidays.co.uk