

Gone with the wind

A shoulder-season sojourn through Italy and Croatia on a renovated yacht puts the wind in Laura French's sails

Flecks of rose and peach dapple the sea as the silhouette of Mount Etna rises above the horizon. Clouds hover in ominous swathes of violet, ruby and pink, lulling me into a trance as the sunset puts on its nightly show.

It's not just the view that's hypnotic. A violinist plays a smooth, tender accompaniment that stirs my soul, and there's a buzz about the evening that continues for hours as the full moon rises and the sky turns dark and moody, stars glinting like dust in a sunbeam.

We're gathered on the deck of Windstar Cruises' recently renovated sailing yacht, *Wind Surf*, enjoying the daily sailaway, and by now I've become used to the routine. Each afternoon, the crew raises the sails to flutter bright white in an almost ceremonial display. Then we glide along serenely, propelled by both wind and engine power as the coast

slowly shrinks away and we gear up for an evening on board, indulging in four-course meals and cocktails as musicians continue to play at the bar.

COOLER CRUISING

It was October and I was here to experience Windstar's Classic Italy & Dalmatian Coast cruise in the off-season – it's one of several autumn and winter Mediterranean sailings introduced by the line in 2023 and growing in popularity – and it was the perfect time to come.

We started in Rome, followed by our first stop in Sorrento. I'd long wanted to visit this historic, cobbled town, a gateway to the Amalfi Coast and synonymous with limoncello, but tales of overcrowding and intense heat had put me off coming in summer.

October was the ideal solution: although the streets were still busy, the climate was a

GRAND VOYAGE



FROM LEFT: Walking along a crater of Mount Etna, Sicily; Windstar Cruises' ships access places that larger vessels cannot PICTURE: Shutterstock/InnaLu

perfect 18C, blue sky overhead without the humidity of peak season.

We strolled through the narrow cobblestone alleys, exploring the Cloister of San Francesco – a 14th-century, lemon-yellow edifice framing a leafy courtyard – and the elaborate, marble-columned duomo. In between we ducked into limoncello shops, indulged in silky gelato and ambled beneath the town's fragrant citrus groves.

From Sorrento, we sailed overnight to Sicily, docking in the small port of Giardini Naxos. Here we joined one of the line's excursions to Mount Etna, weaving through scenic mountain roads as tree-carpeted slopes came into view and the cloud-capped peak of Europe's most active volcano emerged above.

Afterwards, we hiked around one of its four main craters, meandering between ashy volcanic sand and gunmetal-grey boulders, lava fields sloping off into the distance in lunar-like fashion. It was a memorable way to see this unique island – once again, with a fraction of the visitors and temperatures that we might have seen in summer.

CROATIAN CHARM

It was Croatia I was most looking forward to, though, having never been before – and it didn't disappoint. After a day at sea, we docked in Dubrovnik,



Wind Surf Windstar Cruises

Sleeping 342 passengers, *Wind Surf* is one of Windstar Cruises' three sailing yachts, with an elegant design featuring touches of blue, gold, cream and teal across the ship. The vessel was renovated at the end of last year – so much of it feels new and glossy, with its lobby, reception and main restaurant among the areas revamped.

It has a relaxed, small-ship vibe including an open bridge policy, but the real highlight is the food. The line works with the James Beard Foundation, offering daily-changing menus created by acclaimed chefs at main restaurant Amphora, alongside French cuisine at Stella Bistro and outdoor dining beneath the stars on deck at Candles.

Breakfast and lunch are served buffet-style at Veranda (the same spot as Candles), with a daily theme inspired by the locale, while the Yacht Club Cafe serves coffee, sandwiches and snacks. Cocktails, champagne, wine and other drinks are served at the Compass Rose Bar on deck and the indoor lounge, while a small pool and two Jacuzzis come with a pool bar.

Accommodation spans elegant, simple staterooms up to three suite levels – with swish, spacious Broadmoor and Sea Island Suites added in the renovation – and facilities are impressive for a small ship.

I sampled the fitness centre and spa, indulging in a Himalayan salt scrub that had me leaving the ship feeling even more Zen. This ship is all about relaxation, with an emphasis on the pure magic of sailing.



PICTURE: Gill Stose Photography



GRAND VOYAGE

FROM LEFT: The colourful fishing port of Rovinj, Croatia; Skradinski Buk waterfall in Krka National Park PICTURES: Shutterstock/ecstk22, Andrew Mayovsky

where the ship anchored a short tender ride from the Old Town. Larger ships tend to dock at Gruž Port, where guests must get a shuttle bus into the city, so this is a key selling point for small-ship lines such as Windstar.

I was immediately charmed by this glossy, Unesco-listed city, where stone archways crouch above cobbled backstreets. We climbed the 13th-century city walls, getting a bird's-eye view of the surrounding terracotta rooftops as the sea stretched beyond in perfect blue. Then we wandered the Stradun, the city's main thoroughfare, where honey-coloured buildings perch above a shiny cobbled street and cafe patios sit beneath emerald-green shutters.

Just as enchanting was Split, where we docked a 10-minute walk from the historic part of the city and got lost in Diocletian's Palace – a Roman-built marble behemoth, where labyrinthine alleys lead to courtyard cafes and swanky boutiques.

Keen to see more of Croatia, we booked an excursion from here to Krka National Park, located approximately a 90-minute coach ride away. Here waterfalls crash into cerulean pools in bursts of foaming white, mirror lakes glow opal between oak and bamboo trees, providing a postcard-pretty snapshot into the country's nature.

fast fact

Windstar's two other sailing yachts, *Wind Star* and *Wind Spirit*, are also due to be renovated soon, while the line is launching its fourth motor yacht *Star Seeker* this December and its fifth, *Star Explorer*, in late 2026

SMALL-SHIP PERKS

But it was the small fishing port of Rovinj, our next stop, that turned out to be my favourite. Windstar is one of just a handful of cruise lines to come here – ours was the only ship docked that day – so we had its colourful cobblestone lanes largely to ourselves.

It was peaceful and serene to wander along its quiet streets, with elegant galleries and craft shops housed in peachy pink and lemon-yellow buildings. Climbing to the top of its church bell tower provided a picturesque panorama of the surrounding town and sea, and in the middle of it all was *Wind Surf*, floating happily in the distance with nothing else around.

That's really the appeal of this small sailing ship. Docking closer to ports than the bigger vessels and sailing to places many others can't is Windstar's *raison d'être*, and it played out throughout our voyage.

It came to a crescendo in Venice, where our journey ended. This is one of the only vessels still small enough to sail through the city's waterways (larger ships were banned in 2021). It meant we were able to meander right past St Mark's Square and dock at the Marittima terminal, a few minutes' train ride from the city centre.

Windstar is all about doing things a bit differently, and that was the real magic. It's a balm for clients who want a week of blissful escapism where they can switch off, slow down and forget about everything else beyond the glimmer of the sea. I felt re-energised from sailing aboard this sleek, leisurely ship – a reminder of the calming, restorative power that being on the open water can bring.

BOOK IT: A seven-night *Classic Italy & Dalmatian Coast* cruise on *Wind Surf* departing October 7 or 15 costs from £3,242 per person, including all meals, soft drinks and port fees. A choice of excursions is offered in each port for an extra fee. windstarcruises.co.uk