



Treasure Island

Fresh from a refit, *Island Princess* is ready to take on the world

@Katie_McGonagle

THE SANCTUARY

THE SANCTUARY

Even clouded in a sheet of rain, Venice is as beautiful as ever. Despite the gloomy spell cast by grey clouds overhead, the Grand Canal can't fail to impress, offering one of the most exciting sailaways anywhere in the world.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that we're looking back on the Italian port from the comfort of the new couples' massage hut in

The Sanctuary, one of dozens of extra features installed on *Island Princess* during a six-week spell in dry dock at Monfalcone shipyard last year.

The retractable glass doors and neutral decor of the couples' treatment room are no doubt even more impressive when the sun is shining, but it's still a nice addition to the relaxed vibe of the top-deck retreat.

After a season sailing the Med following its refit, *Island Princess* has crossed the Atlantic to cover the Panama Canal - along with *Coral Princess*, it is one of the line's only two Panamax vessels - and Alaska sailings from Anchorage to Vancouver. But before the ship left European shores, *Travel Weekly* took a trip around the Med to check out some of its new features.

► CHANGING ROOMS

The most fundamental transformation is the addition of 121 staterooms - comprising 15 suites, 53 balcony, 43 ocean-view and 10 inside - to its former total of 987 cabins.

To accommodate the new staterooms, some of the ship's facilities have been shifted around: the teen centre has moved from deck 12 to 14,



➔ the youth centre has lost its outdoor space, the gym has been relocated from deck 14 to six, and The Sanctuary is now entirely on the top deck rather than split between decks 15 and 14.

While most of those changes will barely register with anyone but the most eagle-eyed repeat passengers, there are a few upgrades that do make a noticeable difference to the cruise experience on *Island Princess*.

Buffet restaurant Horizon Court's new layout means diners flow through much more smoothly, with queues kept to a minimum even during busy breakfast and lunch services.

There's also a new interactive screen in the theatre, adding excitement to onboard shows; new carpets and upholstery in public areas; extra space for boutique shops, the art gallery and Platinum Studio photography; and an upgraded Shore Excursions Desk, improving the overall passenger experience and giving some areas of the ship a fresher look.

▶ **DRINKS AND DINING**

If James Bond sailed with Princess Cruises, I imagine he'd spend most of his time in Crooners Bar, where the easy-going piano music and upholstered leather chairs complement the biggest martini menu I've ever come across. Think silky smooth



If James Bond sailed with Princess Cruises, he'd spend most of his time in Crooners Bar

It makes a nice change from the dark-wood decor of the British pub-style Wheelhouse Bar, or the travel-themed Explorer's Lounge, which has a great vibe when there are comedy or music acts on stage, but can lack atmosphere at other times.

Princess Cruises maintains its reputation for elegant table-service dining too, with main restaurants Bordeaux and Provence offering a choice of anytime or fixed-time dining in the evenings. The food was invariably excellent, offering an enjoyable balance of crowd-pleasing favourites with daily



versions with Kahlúa and cream, fruity twists straight from the tropics full of coconut rum and banana liqueur, and even chocoholics' favourites with hints of coffee or peppermint.

ABOVE: A Mini-Suite
LEFT: Crooners Bar
BELOW: Sabatini's



A seven-day Voyage of the Glaciers cruise on *Island Princess*, departing Vancouver on May 11 and calling at Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway, Glacier Bay national park, College Fjord and Anchorage, starts at £639.

A week-long Mediterranean & Aegean cruise on *Royal Princess* starts at £765 for a June 11 departure from Athens. The itinerary takes in Santorini, Kusadasi in Turkey, Valletta in Malta, and Messina, Naples and Civitavecchia (for Rome), in Italy.

Both prices are based on two sharing an inside stateroom and include meals, 24-hour room service and entertainment. princess.com



LEFT: Movies Under the Stars



RIGHT: Couples' treatment room, The Sanctuary

→ specials reflecting the regions we sailed through, and always-knowledgeable waiting staff keen to recommend the right wine or tempt us into a decadent dessert.

These are also the places for à la carte breakfasts and afternoon teas, if passengers fancy something a little more special than the buffet, with everything from extra-fluffy pancakes in the morning to well-presented cakes and sandwiches in the afternoon – a real delight.

Among the other relaxed dining options are pub lunches in the Wheelhouse Bar, pizza by the slice in the lido deck pizzeria, burgers and hot dogs at the Pool Grill, unlimited ice cream at Swirls, plus coffee and pastries at La Patisserie, all supplemented by expansive daily buffets at Horizon Court.

But the speciality restaurants – Italian at Sabatini's, and Deep South-inspired fare at the Bayou Café and Steakhouse – are the real highlights and well worth their \$25 cover charge. Sabatini's combines a warm, homely atmosphere with MasterChef-worthy meals that go far beyond the usual interpretation of Italian food to include regional specialities and unexpected flavour combinations. My delicate sea bass covered in courgette 'scales' with polenta gnocchi was as light as a feather, although the same couldn't be said for the rich tiramisu I polished off afterwards.



The Sanctuary is exactly as it sounds, offering a calm escape from the ship's day-to-day bustle

The Bayou Café and Steakhouse served up some heftier portions – it was clear we were in for some serious steak when the waiter brought round a trolley displaying the various cuts on offer, with some the size of a dinner plate or several inches thick – but they were every bit as succulent as you'd expect, especially paired up with some classic Deep South sides.

▶ TIME TO RELAX

While the lido and pool decks can get busy and somewhat noisy at times, especially now with the additional passenger numbers, The Sanctuary is exactly as it sounds, offering a calm escape from the day-to-day bustle of the ship.

The collection of relaxing sunloungers and cabanas is in prime position for watching the sights drift by when close to shore, or enjoying the peace and quiet on sea days, and come with waiter service and a host of

little extras that really add to the experience.

It books up early on sea days so it's vital to reserve a spot, with entry prices from \$20 per half-day or \$125 to reserve a cabana.

The adult-only Lotus Spa is another worthy contender for some down time, offering an array of soothing spa treatments, ranging from hot-stone therapies and acupuncture to seaweed

wraps, moisturising facials and cellulite-reducing massages.

But perhaps the most easy-going activity of all was Movies Under the Stars, a chance to enjoy current hits as well as classic flicks from the comfort of the top-deck loungers – with a cocktail in hand, a movie classic on-screen and the stars overhead, it's the perfect end to a perfect day at sea. **TW**

Behind the scenes

"Princess Diana was the godmother of our first *Royal Princess*," says master chef Alfredo Marzi. "I met her four times, and I really put my heart into cooking for her. I actually met Diana when she was pregnant with William, and then I met Kate when she was pregnant with George, so those were very special moments for me."

Alfredo's eyes sparkle as he talks about his brushes with real-life royalty, but he's just as passionate when it comes to describing day-to-day life in *Island Princess's* below-deck kitchens.

With about 200 kitchen staff and the same number of waiters and bartenders, this is an enormous operation – and some of the figures involved are staggering. The team keeps three



weeks' worth of food onboard – which equates to more than \$1.5 million at the start of our *Med* cruise – but with passengers going through an astonishing 7,000 croissants and pastries, plus 700 bottles of wine every day, it's easy to see how the amounts soon stack up, and a timely reminder of how much effort goes in behind the scenes.