

Feast your eyes

MEDITERRANEAN

The Mediterranean is a prime spot for a first taste of cruise travel, finds **Agnete Westphal Johansen**

I accidentally bumped into another visitor as I walked across the square, distracted by the beauty of Florence's Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. The colossal building – better known as the Duomo – towered above the horde of photographers trying to get the best shot. Intricate details lent themselves to the lens, from marble in shades of white, green and red to murals of religious scenes. It was almost too much to take in.

As our tour guide Natalie explained, art is taken seriously in Florence – so seriously that near the top of the cathedral, set above the 12 apostles, white marble sculptures depict Florentine artist Michelangelo alongside the cathedral's architects, Arnolfo di Cambio and Filippo Brunelleschi.

I was in the Tuscan capital as part of my first cruise, on *Sun Princess*, the latest ship from Princess Cruises – and Florence proved to be a spectacular stop-off. The cobbled streets were filled with sculptures that loomed over me as I wandered through the city on a ➔

Florence's Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore – better known as the Duomo

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Kuba Puchajda



FROM LEFT: Magical cocktail at Spellbound; *Time Unfolding* statue by Thomas J Price in Florence; olive plantation, Provence; decadent dessert at Love by Britto
PICTURES: Shutterstock/RaffMaster, JeanLucHard; FoodSensation@msn.com; C Trantina

shore excursion. As I entered the Piazza della Signoria, I was startled to find an imposing golden statue of a young woman staring fixedly at her phone, ignoring all the wonders around her. This modern work by British sculptor Thomas J Price, named *Time Unfolding*, reflects today's obsession with phones – so I decided to put mine away for a moment. No picture could do Florence justice anyway.

MAGIC MOMENTS

Florence's masters were not the only artists I encountered during my cruise in the Mediterranean. Back on board *Sun Princess*, I made a beeline for Love by Britto, a cubism-meets-cuisine speciality restaurant on deck 17.

Devoted to all things amorous – fitting for the line that gave us *The Love Boat* – the restaurant is spearheaded by Brazilian-American pop art specialist Romero Britto, known for his bold and colourful style. Created in collaboration with Princess's head of culinary arts, Rudi Sodamin, the aim is to immerse guests in a perfect blend of art, beauty and soul, serving up whimsical dishes designed to be enjoyed with a loved one.

I opted for a melt-in-the-mouth rack of lamb with a pistachio crumb, accompanied by a Heart of Glass, a rosemary-infused cocktail with peach

ask the expert



Rosbert Gracias,
shore excursions manager,
Sun Princess

"We pride ourselves on having a positive impact on local communities through our Local Connections shore excursions, where we work with families and communities to bring authentic experiences that reflect the true essence of each destination. In Tuscany, we have a Local Connections Tuscany Farmhouse Experience, where guests can immerse themselves in a family-run estate with farmers Davide and Francesca. They'll enjoy a horse-drawn carriage ride and tours of the truffle plantations, followed by the opportunity to experience some delicious homemade Italian cuisine."

and raspberry notes – poetically served in a glass heart.

As the setting sun shone through the windows and bathed the restaurant in a pink glow, I took a sip alongside couples enjoying an intimate dinner. With a menu and a view like this, how could you not fall in love?

Later, I headed to Spellbound, an immersive Victorian-inspired bar and magic show. Created in partnership with Magic Castle, the US counterpart to the UK's Magic Circle society, the exclusive experience combines the talents of magicians and mixologists.

Behind an inconspicuous black door were four mesmerising rooms, each filled with illusions – in one room, a piano appeared capable of playing by itself, while in another, magicians played sleight-of-hand card tricks at the bar as I sat down for a Houdini-inspired cocktail. As it arrived, presented in a mysteriously smoking box, I had never felt more certain that the art of magic is real.

LIQUID GOLD

I learnt about another type of magic – that of producing olive oil – at Provence's Moulin de la Coquille. The 40-hectare olive farm is engulfed in a sea of green, from the grey-green olive trees to the tall forest separating the property from its neighbours.

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When I was there, the olive trees were swaying gently in the breeze, but Aurélie Sirvent, the owner of Moulin de la Coquille, explained that the mistral – the strong northwesterly wind that particularly affects the Provence region – plays a crucial role in the cultivation of the olive trees by carrying the pollen from tree to tree so that they can bear fruit. As such, running a successful olive farm is no easy feat.

“Each tree only produces olives every other year,” explained Sirvent. It is therefore important for olive farmers to establish other revenue streams. In addition to the vast olive grove, the farm grows lemon, pomegranate, almond and fig trees – and some of these products are infused into its olive oil products.

I was presented with a variety of olive oils to try. The first was made from a blend of the farm’s five olive variants: aglandau, grossane, salonenque, verdale and picholine. As I tasted it, I was delighted by the different notes dancing across my taste buds – herbs and earthy artichoke, finishing with a hint of pepper.

I returned to the ship with a new-found appreciation of the time-consuming work that goes into producing olive oil. As I approached

Sun Princess for the final time, I smiled to myself and reflected on all the arts I’d encountered on this Mediterranean cruise – from creative gastronomy to wizard-like mixology. Not bad for a first-timer. ●

BOOK IT: A seven-night sailing on *Sun Princess* from Barcelona to Naples starts at £619 per person, cruise-only, based on two sharing, for a September 20 departure. princess.com

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&
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Sun Princess Princess Cruises



Launched in 2024, *Sun Princess* can accommodate 4,300 guests and is the first ship in the Sphere Class. Standout features include the Dome, a glass structure housing a theatre and indoor-outdoor pool. In the piazza atrium, which spans three decks in the centre of the ship, guests can enjoy performances while surrounded by ocean views.

The 2,157 staterooms include 123 Mini-Suites, 80 Signature Collection Suites and 12 Premium Deluxe Balconies which are part of the Sanctuary Collection. Guests booking a luxury stateroom enjoy exclusive amenities such as private dining and relaxation areas, as well as the Princess Premier bundle, which adds reserved theatre seating, fitness classes, and more.

With 30 restaurants and bars, *Sun Princess* offers high-end and casual dining galore. Three venues are included in the cruise-only cost, while speciality restaurants – from a steakhouse to an Italian trattoria – carry varying cover charges. The Princess Plus package includes two casual dining experiences per cruise, while Princess Premier upgrades that to unlimited casual and speciality dining.

Entertainment is plentiful. In the Princess Arena, guests can enjoy mesmerising shows, while Princess Live! offers fun-filled quizzes. For those who prefer wellness and relaxation, a visit to the Lotus Spa is a must.