

The rest is history

Delve into swashbuckling seaports such as Saint-Malo, Honfleur and Guernsey on a Fred Olsen cruise, recommends **Cheryl Robertson**



Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' Borealis in Saint-Malo Port

© Fred Olsen Cruise Lines

From the ramparts of the walls cosseting the French city of Saint-Malo, I wondered – did its 17th-century plundering pirates look out across the same calm seas that I now gazed upon? Did they, together with the privateering corsairs stealing on behalf of the French crown, also get lost in its narrow cobbled alleyways? And was the city's most famous explorer, Jacques Cartier – the first European to navigate the St Lawrence River, and credited with giving Canada its name – among them? Saint-Malo's strategic position on the Brittany coast meant that merchant ships travelling through the English Channel had to pass by, presenting perfect opportunities for swashbucklers of every kind. On the 12th-century granite ramparts, an enormous statue of corsair René Duguay-Trouin, born in Saint-Malo in 1673, keeps that era alive. He captured hundreds of ships on behalf of Louis XIV.

HISTORY LESSONS

History abounds in northern France, and cruising on Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' Borealis allowed us to embrace it. For example, Mont-Saint-Michel, one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in the country, is a reachable tour option from Saint-Malo.

Swashbuckling ensued at Honfleur too, a medieval town of colourful half-timbered houses,

where Jean-François Doublet, born in 1655 and later a privateer for Louis XIV, made his living. He stowed away on a ship aged seven, was shipwrecked on an iceberg and purportedly had a brief encounter with a mermaid – according to a tourist office audio guide that allowed us to learn about the port's historic sites while meandering through its cobbled streets.

Tours from Honfleur include visits to Second World War D-Day sites, Claude Monet's house and gardens at Giverny and the medieval city of Bayeux, home of the famous tapestry depicting the 1066 Norman Conquest (though it's worth noting the Bayeux Museum is due to close for renovations from September 2025 until spring 2027).

NATURE RULES

When it comes to ocean-going cruises, nature is still the boss. On our Discovering Normandy & the Channel Islands cruise in May, we were scheduled to anchor at St Mary's in the Isles of Scilly – but high waves would have made tendering unsafe, so Borealis was redirected to Saint-Malo in France. Passengers were briefed upon boarding the ship at Southampton and some were clearly disappointed – one couple even refused to get off at any of the other ports as a form of silent protest – so it's worth reinforcing to clients the unpredictability of the

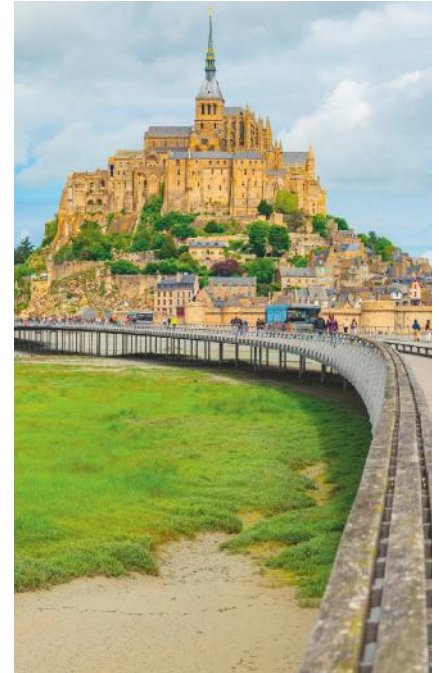
DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | NORTHERN FRANCE



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: St Peter Port, Guernsey; Mont-Saint-Michel, Normandy; a Terrace Cabin on *Borealis*

PICTURES: Fred Olsen Cruise Lines



top tip



"The fabulous port of Honfleur is a highlight, and a trip to Monet's water garden is not to be missed. Trying the local seafood is also an absolute must, with the classic *moules marinières* a personal favourite of mine."

**Simon Egerton, entertainment manager,
Fred Olsen Cruise Lines**



weather in these parts, and prepare them for the idea that the cruise line may need to chart a different course if things don't go to plan.

Our first port of call therefore became St Peter Port in Guernsey. Despite lingering bad weather, the tender boats took guests ashore to explore the town or take the guided excursions.

The Channel Islands were the only part of the British Isles under German occupation during the Second World War, and much of this history is explained at La Valette Underground Military Museum. A pair of striped pyjamas in a glass case were a poignant reminder of this horrific period.

Saint-Malo was next, again accessed via tender boats, followed by a day at sea en route to our last port at Honfleur, where the ship docked on the quay.

ALL ABOARD

A full day at sea gave us cruising first-timers the perfect opportunity to explore the ship. Of course, it meant no more excuses for not

doing Pilates or hitting the gym, but there's always a reason to be found – we took a tour of the bridge instead, where the second officer showed us the ropes.

Refurbished when it joined the Fred Olsen fleet in 2020, *Borealis* offers a relaxed, traditional style of cruising. It has 702 cabins and can take around 1,350 passengers. We had a bracing southwesterly wind but hardly felt it until we got up to the sun deck.

There's an elaborate central atrium, an eclectic selection of art throughout the ship, and bars such as the Morning Light Pub & Lounge, where guitarist Howard Johnson crooned before dinner. There was also entertainment in abundance in the Neptune Lounge and a choice of elegantly decorated spaces in which to relax, notably the Botanical Room and the Earth Room. The family-friendly swimming area with a pool, Jacuzzis, bars and sunloungers had a retractable roof that was useful for rainy days.

From our Terrace Cabin, we opened sliding doors onto the

ship's wraparound promenade deck and walked in the fresh breeze – sometimes getting sprayed in the process. You certainly feel connected to the ocean here.

INSIDER INSIGHT

Back in the bar on the main deck, our sommelier enlightened us about the cava that had been flowing generously day and night – perhaps it was the second fermentation that explained why the sparkling Spanish wine had been going down so well.

Beyond the wine lesson, there was plenty more in the way of enrichment. In Normandy, historian Julie Ackroyd gave a

talk on the Normans, while in Guernsey, Anthony Court – a civil servant in the Guernsey government – and his wife Katie spoke about their homeland and the history of some of the other Channel Islands, including Brecqhou, Sark and Alderney.

"We try to get speakers from local communities to talk to guests on our ships," entertainment manager Simon Egerton told us. "It makes the experience much more personal."

That's just one of many reasons to sail in this historically significant region – and what's more, you can get there from the UK without even needing to board a plane. **TW**

BOOK IT

Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' *Borealis* and sister ships *Bolette* and *Balmoral* are small enough to navigate shallower waterways. Cruises that visit Saint-Malo and Honfleur include the seven-night Dramatic Coastlines of France & Britain voyage, departing from Liverpool on July 18, 2025, priced from £1,149; a 13-night French Rivers with Normandy & Bordeaux sailing from Rosyth on July 20, 2025, priced from £1,999; and an 11-night French Rivers with Normandy & Bordeaux from Newcastle itinerary, departing August 28, 2025, priced from £1,699. fredolsencruises.com