

Savour at sea

Destination-inspired dining offers first-time cruiser **Emma Blackmore** a taste of life on the ocean as she joins an agent fam trip around the Iberian Peninsula

do you know the secret?" says a voice drifting over from the side, marked by a Dallas accent. We're perching at the Sky Bar, overlooking *Seabourn Ovation's* pool deck, while the band sings *Come Together* with the beaming Portuguese sun as a natural stage light.

With a single nod, bartender Vin pours my new companion a Woodford Reserve and Coke in a short glass. I shake my head in reply to his question.

"You can order caviar and champagne at any time of the day. You can even enjoy caviar while wading through the sea in the Caribbean," he says, grinning.

As a first-time cruiser, I need all the tips I can get, and his enthusiasm is infectious. Then again, who wouldn't be excited about all-inclusive caviar on tap?

SUITE LIFE

Unlike my new friend who joined in Barbados at the start of this repositioning cruise, I boarded *Ovation* in Lisbon along with 12 UK agents for the first leg of a 15-night Bay of Biscay sailing. ➤

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | SPAIN & PORTUGAL

ASK THE agents



Danielle Muldoon,
specialist cruise concierge,
Six Star Cruises

"I would sell Seabourn to over-40s looking for something in the ultra-luxury market, with fine dining and top service. Guests on Seabourn are well travelled and looking for intimate, yacht-like cruising."



Rita Boka-Jones, cruise
concierge consultant,
Deluxe Cruises

"It's cosy, relaxed luxury – inviting rather than overwhelming. The ease of life on board is its strength. I'd sell this to clients who are used to five-star hotels and want to switch to cruising."



Alana McEwan, cruise
expert, Cruise Kings
"Of all the cruises I've done, this one stands out for its service and the food. Value for money is its strongest selling point. It completely exceeded my expectations."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Travel agent group on board Seabourn Ovation with members of Seabourn's UK team; The Retreat; chef Jes Paskins (centre) and ship crew during the caviar 'sail-in' PICTURE: Eric Laignel



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Over five days, we would hug the Portuguese coastline while en route to Porto, then cross to northern Spain for stops in A Coruña, Gijón and Bilbao, before finishing our voyage in Bordeaux.

I don't wait long to put my newfound knowledge to the test. That evening, a knock on my suite door reveals a silver tray of Kaluga Queen caviar paired with Melba toast, egg white, red onion and sour cream. The tray is arranged on my balcony and the caviar's saltiness mingles perfectly with the sea breeze as we sail in to Porto.

This is luxury that is indulgent and unhurried: the Montaudon Champagne is free-flowing, toiletries are sapphire-scented Molton Brown and, at turndown, pillows are adorned with Valrhona dark chocolate.

My suite host Nana, from Indonesia, seems to anticipate every need before it arises. On embarkation day, she delivers raspberry macarons and a selection of hand soaps – small touches that quickly wash away any travel fatigue from the airport queues as passengers got to grips with new EES regulations.

EPICUREAN EATS

Formal night in the main dining hall arrives in a blur of black suits and shimmering dresses. Equally elaborate is the five-course menu featuring lobster, oxtail ravioli and pan-fried turbot, served with lemon mashed potato and asparagus. "As we sail around, we use as many local ingredients as possible to really taste the region," executive chef Jes Paskins tells our table as we finish our chocolate ganache cake.

"Witnessing this level of personalised service makes you really understand what keeps the guests coming back again

The ingredients he's most excited about? "Fresh bass, mackerel, oysters, sardines and local Spanish cheese," he says. "Then, in France, I'll be looking for pâté, rillettes and saucisson, before moving into dishes like beef bourguignon and coq au vin."

Discussion of food has quickly become our daily routine and our next culinary outing takes us to poolside dining venue Earth & Ocean. There's pomegranate salmon crudo and tomato tapenade bread, followed by sea bream escabeche with lime-dressed artichoke, perfectly paired with a crisp glass of Riley's Rows sauvignon blanc.

"Luxury comes from the service, don't you think?" says Martin Cross from The Sovereign Cruise Club. We have both noticed the waiter providing blankets for guests now that the temperature has dipped. "Witnessing this level of personalised service makes you really understand what keeps the guests coming back again," he adds.

At Mediterranean-inspired restaurant Solis, navy and amber interiors house an extensive open wine ➤

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | SPAIN & PORTUGAL

BEYOND THE
port



PORTO, PORTUGAL

Encourage clients to admire the blue-and-white tiled Chapel of Souls, stroll past Porto Cathedral towards the Douro River and sip local wine overlooking Luís I Bridge. Stop for lunch at lively Bolhão Market.



A CORUÑA, SPAIN

See the world's oldest functioning lighthouse, meander through the charming squares and medieval churches, or visit nearby Santiago de Compostela, famous for its Romanesque cathedral and lively plazas.



BILBAO, SPAIN

Clients will want to explore the Guggenheim Museum, historic churches and riverside promenade. Wander through Casco Viejo's narrow streets, filled with pintxo bars and boutiques, before ending the day with a rich slice of Basque cheesecake.



ABOVE: Seabourn Ovation sails around the Greek island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea

display and we tuck in to a comforting mix of panzanella served tableside, sea bass baked in a thyme crust and a layered strawberry coupe dessert.

Evening entertainment is a mix of live music, theatre and comedy, ranging from singer Ricardo Afonso to comedian Jeff Stevenson and musical cast Seabourn Six. Most nights end with cocktails and live melodies from in-house band Fifth Avenue.

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

By the time we reach Bilbao, indulgence has become routine, but I don't linger for too long over my delicious in-suite breakfast. Soon, we spill ashore to explore Bilbao and I'm surrounded by a sea of Helly Hansen jackets walking past Puppy, the towering floral sculpture outside the Guggenheim Museum.

Beyond the futuristic gallery, we follow the sycamore-tree-lined banks of the Nervión River towards the Old Town. Tour guide Ava points out Bizkaia Bridge – the world's oldest transporter bridge, still ferrying passengers via its suspended gondola – and the striking white arches of modern Zubizuri Bridge.

From there, we continue towards Plaza Nueva, a neoclassical square filled with bustling pintxo (tapas) bars, before arriving at the Gothic Cathedral Basilica of Saint James, an important stopping point for pilgrims journeying to Santiago de Compostela.

At Berton, a pintxo restaurant included in the excursion, guests share monkfish, prawns and stories from previous voyages. One couple are disembarking in Dover to reunite with friends they met on a sailing, while another pair from Belgium tell me it's their first time travelling with Seabourn. "They have Duvel

by the bottle, so he's happy," she laughs, nodding towards her husband and his love of Belgian beers.

Sampling the region's culinary heritage is central to many of the shore excursions. In Gijón, at Llagar Castañón, owner Marta guides us through her family's cider-making traditions, theatrically pouring the Asturian cider from above shoulder height – to aerate the drink, she insists – before serving it with local Cabrales cheese.

Beyond the brewery, fishing boats and yachts sway gently in Gijón's marina, the Roman baths tucked beneath the Old Town offer a glimpse into the city's ancient past, and the nearby Playa de San Lorenzo beach curves around the bay.

Back on board, I'm ordering a cappuccino at Seabourn Square coffee bar when I hear the familiar Dallas accent again. I tell him I'm disembarking later that day in Bordeaux after one final highlight: a caviar 'sail-in' on deck as we journey along the Garonne River, while cruise director Nick Martland sings Michael Bublé classics. Taking a sip from his coffee, he says: "At least you know the secret now." **TW**

BOOK IT

Seabourn has an eight-day Tides & Treasures of The Atlantic Arc sailing from Lisbon to Dover on Seabourn Quest, departing June 11, 2027, priced from £3,144 per person based on two people sharing an Ocean View Suite. Includes dining, premium spirits, Wi-Fi and gratuities. Other sailings include the eight-day Italy, France & Tunisia cruise on Seabourn Ovation, from £4,589 per person based on two sharing a Veranda Suite, departing April 30, 2027. seabourn.co.uk