



# Stars in their eyes

A first-time family cruise makes light work of keeping little ones entertained, finds Helen Ochyra

My daughters, aged four and six and usually at each other's throats, are standing with their arms around each other staring open-mouthed at two twirling acrobats far above their heads. A rainbow of disco lights sweeps across the theatre, glittering stars are projected on the wall and dancefloor, and my toddler son dances with sheer abandon to the live rock music. I raise a glass towards my husband, smile and take another sip of my negroni.

This is the Panorama Lounge on board MSC World Europa and, over several nights at sea, it has become our favourite spot. There are plush sofas to snuggle up on, spinning chairs for the kids to giggle over and light-up tables to rest our drinks on – all served to our seat, and included in our Premium Extra drinks package. It turns out, evening entertainment is what we've been missing.

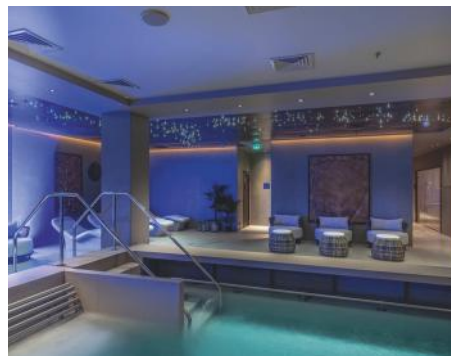
With three children under seven, I've spent the past half decade or so seeking a family holiday that actually works for all of us. On this Mediterranean cruise, it seems I might have found it. And not just because every evening is showtime.

## CLUB RULES

The other major draw is the kids' club. Opening daily at 9am and allowing us to leave our kids for as long as we like, right up until 11 pm, this is by far the ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## FAMILY HOLIDAYS | CRUISE



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Helen and family at Pompeii; the Pompeii ruins; MSC World Europa's Aurea Spa; Pizza & Burger restaurant

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most easy-access holiday childcare we've found. Some days, we drop the kids off for only an hour or two – time to shower, and to sit and drink coffee while it's still hot – while on others we leave them until lunch, hoping that eating with other children will alleviate their usual pickiness.

This is the other main reason why a cruise works so well for a young family: the food. In restaurants, we too often order dishes that go uneaten – a stray herb can make a toddler reject even the tastiest-looking pasta dish – but on *World Europa*, we have access to a buffet that barely seems to close (there are, in fact, two: La Brasserie and Il Mercato). The children can see the food and select for themselves. Sometimes that's plain pancakes or chips by the plate-load, but at others, it's chunks of rare beef, piles of cantaloupe, even a salad. With full board included as standard, there's no bill to contend with either – even when they declare themselves hungry halfway through the afternoon and grab three slices of freshly made margherita from Pizza & Burger.

### TASTER TRAVELS

At breakfast, our favourite spot is Hexagon, one of the (included) main restaurants. Here we sit on port days, discussing the other ships sailing by as we're served endless croissants, copious toast and perfectly poached eggs. And then it's off the ship and into a new destination.

Over the week we visit Pompeii, stroll around Valletta and call in to Barcelona to introduce the kids to churros. It's wonderful to be able to scratch the surface of so many places, and with such young children, a few hours in each is more than enough.

Back on board I find plenty to enjoy away from the family too. All Aurea-class cabins have access to the adult-only thermal suite, and I spend a glorious afternoon here, pummelling the tension in my shoulders in the hydrotherapy pool and soaking my weary toddler-wrangling muscles in the sauna. This features a large porthole-shaped window you can sit right next to, and I manage to nab it one day at sunset for a moment of blissful relaxation.

I also book a treatment for our day at sea, spending an hour being massaged on a table that sways soporifically as the ship makes its way across the Med.

### ROOM WITH A VIEW

One concern I had before cruising was that the cabin would be poky. I imagined us tripping over each other and not having enough space for our endless paraphernalia; we often struggle in hotels with few rooms designed to accommodate more than four. But the design of our suite – which can sleep up to six – is savvy throughout, from the bunk beds tucked behind a curtain to the wardrobe space and a seating area not compromised by the cot.

On our final night on board, we treat ourselves, booking dinner

at the Butcher's Cut steakhouse, a speciality restaurant that comes with an extra charge of €55 per adult but promises premium aged steaks and a change from the buffet. Our kids won't sit still for long, but it's just long enough for me to feast on a surf and turf of lobster tail and filet mignon, paired with a glass of zinfandel.

I'm disappointed the €12 kids' menu doesn't include steak (though not as disappointed as my six-year-old) and am not sure I'd pay so much to upgrade my dinner again, but there is chocolate lava cake to cheer us all up – then it's on with the show.

Back in the Panorama Lounge we pile onto the sofas once more and I ask the kids if they would want to go on another cruise. The answer is a resounding "yes!" We might just have found a family holiday that works. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**MSC Cruises** offers a seven-night sailing around the Mediterranean on *MSC World Europa*, from £6,742 for a family of two adults and three children sharing an Aurea Suite, departing from Valletta on July 22, calling at Barcelona, Marseille, Genoa, Naples and Messina. A Balcony Cabin for four on a July 11 departure costs from £4,908. [msccruises.co.uk](http://msccruises.co.uk)