

Cruise convert

Caribbean fan **Tamara Hinson** braves the waves for her first cruise of the islands

Although I've been to several Caribbean islands, I'd never arrived at any of them by ship. Perhaps it was the fear of falling in love with one island only to be whisked away to the next, but I hadn't yet got on board with the idea of a Caribbean cruise – until now.

After a week sailing the high seas with Silversea Cruises on the recently stretched 608-passenger *Silver Spirit*, I'm a convert.

I can't deny that Silversea's reputation as one of the world's most luxurious cruise lines wasn't a factor. Floating away from a palm-fringed Caribbean island is significantly less painful when you have a butler on hand to top up your complimentary minibar. But even more compelling was the fact that the

Caribbean draws UK cruisers back year after year, and I wanted to see why.

SEA STAYS

The cruise I've signed up for starts in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and finishes in Puerto Rico. Our first stop is Samaná in the Dominican Republic, but first I've got two days at sea – something I'm dreading. Surely all waves look the same after an hour or two?

The first surprise comes when my issue of *Daily Chronicles* – the newsletter delivered to passengers – slides under my door. A packed timetable of events starts at 7am (a sunrise walk with fitness instructor Ana) and lasts until 11pm, when DJ Bart takes to the decks. ➤



SILVERSEA Silver Spirit

With capacity for just 608 passengers, *Silver Spirit* feels cosy and luxurious. It's small enough to slide straight into smaller cruise ports, but there's still a huge sense of space, with a bigger 'beach' area and more room on the pool deck since it was stretched.

Some of my favourite new areas included: Tor's Observation Library on the top deck, with its sleek, curving bar and floor-to-ceiling windows; and the Zagara Spa, with its outdoor whirlpool and acupuncture suite in addition to nine spacious treatment rooms.

I also loved the dining options – there are eight restaurants, only two of which have cover charges – including Seishin for Japanese cuisine and Spaccanapoli for Italian.

The best bit? I could order my favourite dishes from specific restaurants from the room service menu, at no extra cost.

Silver Spirit is sailing in the Mediterranean, northern Europe, Africa and the Indian Ocean this year and next, adding Asia in 2020. silversea.com



The next two days pass in a whirlwind of onboard enrichment, pampering and gentle workouts. I book an Elemis facial at the Zagara Spa and sign up for golf putting competitions. I make friends at the nightly catch-ups for solos, gargle my way through wine-tasting masterclasses with the ship's sommelier, attend a talk about Fabergé eggs and learn about the geopolitics of the Dominican Republic at a lecture by Dr Ed Lynch, a professor of political science at Virginia's Hollins University.

By the time the Dominican Republic slides into view, I feel perfectly at home, but still jump ship for my pre-booked excursion – a horse ride to the bottom of the spectacular Salto El Limón waterfall – before a tour of the island, with its squat, colourful houses and rolling banana plantations.

LUXURY LIVING

On St Barts, I make a beeline for Shell Beach after a recommendation from a fellow passenger. It's a short, pleasant walk from the harbour and

“On Dominica I discover geographic marvels such as Champagne Beach, where I swim through warm bubbles of volcanic gas

allows me to get a glimpse beyond the main tourist drags.

I pass a tiny church where a wedding is in full swing, before ambling past delicately hued houses and ancient buildings made from local stone. At Shell Beach, I unpack my snorkelling gear and dive into the glass-clear water, floating above shoals of angelfish.

Gustavia, St Barts' capital, is people-watching heaven. Superyachts jostle in the harbour and Vilebrequin-wearing locals offload their cash in the boutiques.

But Tortola, the largest British Virgin Island, is even flashier. I join fellow passengers for a hike to its highest point and our guide points out Necker Island, along with nearby isles owned by the Rockefellers and Google co-founder Larry Page.

We head back to the ship via Cane Garden Bay, where I take up position at a quiet end of the beach, marvelling at the dive-bombing pelicans plucking their dinner from the water.

NATURAL BEAUTY

Next, Dominica is a breath of fresh air – it's less polished and seems somehow more 'real'. Excursions include visits to its rainforest, which covers the interior, and a volcano-themed exploration of the island.

I discover geological marvels including Boiling Lake, a flooded fumarole filled with water heated by an underground pool of molten lava, and Champagne Beach, where I swim through warm bubbles of volcanic gas.

My final stop – I'm disembarking early – is Saint Lucia. The ship pulls



FROM FAR LEFT: Enlarged pool deck, *Silver Spirit*; horse ride to Salto El Limón, Dominican Republic; Diamond Falls Botanical Gardens, Soufrière, Saint Lucia; and Marigot Bay, Saint Lucia

PICTURES: David Pou/Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism; Shutterstock

into Castries' bustling harbour, and stepping into the colourful chaos of Saint Lucia's capital is a shock to the system. My advice? Jump in a cab (ideally booked at the cruise terminal's information centre, to avoid being overcharged) and head to the sulphur springs of Diamond Falls Botanical Gardens, or for a hike through the island's 19,000 acres of rainforest (the Barre de L'Isle trail is the most easily accessible).

A taxi cost \$50 to take me to Marigot Bay (and back), a small curve of snow-white sand and the setting for 1967 film *Dr Dolittle*. It's

one of the island's quieter bays, split into two sections: the south side, which is accessible by road and has a small supermarket, hotel and restaurant; and the north side, just across the water, and inaccessible to vehicles. A near-constant water taxi service will ferry you to the other side for a couple of dollars.

When it comes time to leave, the thought of returning home to cold weather and a butler-free existence makes me long for life back on board. It might have been my first Caribbean cruise, but I don't think it'll be my last. **TW**

BOOK IT

A seven-day Caribbean cruise on *Silversea's Silver Shadow*, from Fort Lauderdale to San Juan, departing on December 3, costs from £2,970 including flights, transfers, one night in a hotel pre-cruise and one free shore excursion in each port, for bookings made by June 28.

Silver Spirit has moved from the Caribbean and is sailing in the Baltic, the Med and Indian Ocean this year. A nine-day cruise from Dubai to Mumbai, departing on November 10, costs from £4,860 including flights and transfers. silversea.com

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