

Pure shores

Laura French sets sail on a Fred Olsen cruise to see the Indian Ocean in a different light

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I'm being hypnotised. Not by a swinging pendulum, but by a glorious sunset - ethereal shades of pink, violet, red and orange casting translucent rays onto the rippling sea below, colouring it a bright, violet-amber as the ship drifts gently back and forth.

It's so peaceful I almost forget where I am, taken away by the swishing sounds of the sea and the buzzing hum of the engine towards the distant horizon.

But forget I can't, for I'm in one

of the most beautiful regions on earth: the Indian Ocean, sampling Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' 880-passenger *Boudicca* on a fam trip designed to showcase its range of fly-cruise itineraries.

That ocean might be more associated with honeymooners in resorts than 60-somethings on cruises, but that's exactly why I'm here: to put preconceptions to bed and find out what this part of the world has to offer cruisers who want something a little different.

► MAURITIUS

Our cruise began in Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius. Home to a vibrant mix of cultures, this city is worth some time in itself, with a handful of sights to browse nearby including the Pamplemousses Botanical Garden, featuring an array of exotic displays including a pond of giant lily pads.


Then there's Ile des Deux Cocos, a private island surrounded by water so clear, calm and sheer cerulean it looks

like a Pixar creation. Fred Olsen offers excursions to both, as well as tours of the north and south of the island.

But most memorable for me was the Tea Trail, a full-day excursion that took us from a grand French colonial house to a working tea factory where we saw the entire process of making tea from scratch. Think grassy smells of tea leaves blended with the piercing, nigh-on-deafening screech of grinding machines. It was followed by lunch



→ on a colonial-style organic vanilla farm where creamy ‘vanilla chicken’ was followed by the tastiest vanilla ice cream, all served in verdant, hilly surroundings (from £105 for a full day).



HOW TO SELL

The Indian Ocean isn't often associated with cruise, but this is an easy, relaxing and good-value way to tick off lots of islands in a short time, giving clients a taste for each place without the time commitment.

► **THE SEYCHELLES**

Next on the itinerary was Praslin Island, a lush, forested chunk of land framed by idyllic beaches and the second-largest in the Seychelles, once used as a hideout for pirates before being settled by the French in the 18th century.

Today it's well known among wildlife enthusiasts for Vallée de Mai, the rainforest and Unesco World Heritage Site home to the enormous coco de mer, a towering palm endemic to the Seychelles that bears the biggest seeds in the world – great, woody things twice the size of my head.

Wandering through the rainforest gave us a chance to glimpse these impressive structures up close from beneath a canopy of lush, fanned-out palm leaves as the sunlight streamed through and the iconic black parrot perched overhead in the trees.

Fred Olsen pairs a visit here with a stop at Anse Lazio. A regular contender on TripAdvisor's list of the world's best beaches, this colourful scene is about as close to paradise as you can get – all white sand and rippling turquoise water, framed by

ABOVE:
Agents at Pamplemousses Botanical Garden, Mauritius

BELOW:
Port Louis, Mauritius



Candy-coloured houses, historic monuments and dishevelled shopfronts line streets full of tropical music

huge granite boulders and deep green palm trees; the half-day trip costs £76 per person.

From here we cruised past the aptly named Silhouette Island to nearby Mahé, the biggest of the archipelago and a symphony of dramatic green hills, exotic flora and sprawling colonial homes alongside the country's capital, Victoria. Here, candy-coloured houses, historic monuments and dishevelled shopfronts line streets full of tropical music. Life centres around the local market – an overpowering fusion of seafood, meat, herbs and spices, complete with whole fish laid out in large, fleshy slabs, wide eyes glaring up at us.

Our visit here was part of a full-day excursion that combines a guided tour of the city with other intriguing stops. Among them was Cap Lazare, a rustic restaurant set beside a

secluded, sandy bay, where Creole-inspired coconut curries and a giant red snapper were served against a backdrop of bright blue sea that we had to ourselves. The eight-hour trip costs £116 per person.

Our fam itinerary ended here, but the cruise continues on to Zanzibar and French island Mayotte – home to the Indian Ocean's largest lagoon with striking fish, coral reefs and dolphins.

All itineraries then feature a day on Reunion Island, where hiking and helicopter excursions take place over volcanic landscapes, before returning to Mauritius for the final hurrah.

► **LIFE ON BOARD**

In between ports we had plenty of time on days at sea to lie back and enjoy the facilities on board, which include two outdoor pools, a gym, cafe, five restaurants and several bars.

The brand clearly knows its market and does a good job of catering to it – the average age across Fred Olsen is 67 – with simple, traditional entertainment, food, decor and a British home-from-home feel. Restaurants span formal, à la carte dining to buffet service – think soups, salads and classic British dishes alongside more exotic takes such as lobster risotto on formal night, when passengers get out their glad rags for a black tie evening. →



PICTURES: MAURITIUS TOURISM AUTHORITY; SEYCHELLES TOURISM BOARD

AGENTS' OPINIONS



Jade Bartram,
Bolsover
Cruise
Club

"The ship had such a friendly, relaxed atmosphere, and the staff were amazing. The dining options were great too – from outdoor barbecues and buffet service to sit-down meals and alfresco dining at The Grill."



LEFT:
Coco de mer tree,
Vallée de Mai,
Seychelles

RIGHT:
Mamoudzou,
Mayotte

BELOW:
Boudicca,
Mayotte



Gerald Buck,
ROL
Cruise



The standout food for me was at The Grill, an outdoor restaurant specialising in seafood and steak, available for a £20 supplement. There's also a white-glove premium afternoon tea at the panoramic bar The Observatory, available on certain days for an £8 supplement, and a more casual, complimentary afternoon tea served every day.

Anse Lazio on Praslin Island was amazing. It's the most idyllic beach I've ever seen – over half a mile of perfect, fine white sand and gorgeous turquoise waters."

Entertainment was simply done and suited to the market, ranging from ballroom dancing and yoga classes to cabaret-style shows and a Seychellois band playing local music. The Marquee Bar out on deck offered an impressive list of gins alongside margherita-making sessions, and there's an all-inclusive drinks package available for £15 per night, offering house wine and beer and half-price cocktails.



My favourite part was the welcoming, friendly atmosphere on board; staff were smiley and enthusiastic

Decor-wise, things are a little garish and dated in places, but all rooms are being refurbished this month in a more contemporary style. My balcony suite was spacious, light and airy, with French doors, twin beds that could be pushed together and a welcome bottle of sparkling wine on arrival.

My favourite part about the whole

cruise was the welcoming, friendly atmosphere on board; staff were smiley and enthusiastic and the relatively small ship size meant it had an easy-going, low-key feel that Fred Olsen prides itself on. This isn't the type of ship that goes all out with extravagant onboard facilities, West End shows and 10-course lunches, but when you're cruising to some of the most mesmerising places on the planet – and watching that colourful sky ablaze each evening – will you need them?

Book it: Fred Olsen's 14-night Indian Ocean Islands & Zanzibar fly-cruise costs from £2,999 per person based on a December 13 departure, including flights from Gatwick, Captain's Drinks Party, gala dinner, activities and all meals.

fredolsencruises.com



Debbie Byrne,
Planet
Cruise

"My highlight was having dinner at The Grill restaurant as the sun set. The food was superb and the setting was perfect. I'd sell this cruise to customers who appreciate smaller, more intimate ships and want to see the destinations a larger vessel can't call at."



TOP TIP
Check out some of the photos from the fam trip at campaign.beeliked.com/16781