



# Ready, set, sail

Harry Kemble reports on the restart of UK cruising from on board MSC Virtuosa



**I**ugging their face masks down under their chins, a group of bemused British passengers stand speechless on MSC Virtuosa's vast promenade, before remembering the welcome drink they've just been handed.

The Union Jack being beamed across the LED sky dome overhead is enough to dazzle them, as if they have just been ushered onto an intergalactic spaceship rather than MSC Cruises' flagship, the first to sail in British waters for 14 months.

I chat with some of the passengers holding their flute glasses. They each say that after months locked down, the chance to cruise along the south coast was too good to pass up.

Almost 550 passengers on

Virtuosa's maiden voyage have never cruised before, including Cardiff couple Kayla Murphy and Daniel Thomas, both 27, who tell me they were encouraged to book by the all-inclusive fare on Virtuosa's UK sailings.

"I was talking to people at work, and they said it was all-inclusive," says NHS midwife Kayla. "That is pretty much the reason we did this."

Daniel, a software designer, adds: "We looked at other things to do and other holidays but [a cruise] seemed to be safe in the way that it was run."

The pair took advantage of the line's discount offer for NHS workers on bookings made before June 30, getting 25% off their fare through Swansea-based agency Cruise Nation. ➤





## MSC VIRTUOSA

Virtuosa will hold a special place in the hearts of UK cruise fans by virtue of being the first vessel to resume operations, but MSC's flagship has plenty of slick features that catch the eye too.

Rob, the world's first humanoid bartender, can be found at the MSC Starship Club, near the 112-metre promenade and LED Sky Dome that runs through the heart of the ship.

There are five speciality restaurants. My £97 'trilogy' dining package allowed me to eat at three places outside the main dining restaurants. I plumped for Vietnamese-French venue Indochine, where the Dining Experience menu (£54), offered crispy squid, pork belly and *che bao mau*, a milkshake dessert with a twist – red kidney beans. All the dishes were eclectic and huge.

Hola Tacos debuts on the 6,300-passenger vessel and will soon replace Hola Tapas on its three sister ships.

Elsewhere, kids' club Doremiland is open to children aged up to 17. Activities include Lego, Nintendo, PS4/5 and, for over-sevens, drones. Masks must be worn by children over six and MSC wristbands – worn by all passengers – help crew keep tabs on numbers in Doremiland.

**Book it:** A seven-night round-trip sailing on *MSC Virtuosa* departing from Southampton on July 31, calling at Portland, Belfast, Liverpool and Greenock, leads in from £949. [msccruises.co.uk](http://msccruises.co.uk)



### SMOOTH SAILING

The most noticeable changes to the cruise experience come before arriving at the port and during embarkation. All guests must have travel insurance with Covid-19 cover. The word 'Covid' must be clearly stated in the policy or, as I personally discovered, you will be escorted to a small office next to the City Cruise Terminal and asked to buy a new policy from Europ Assistance for £22.

Many passengers' embarkation takes slightly longer because of this, but it doesn't mar the experience. MSC staff and port officials had spent two months intensely preparing for what was always going to be an unusual embarkation, and their hard work paid off.

After returning to the cruise terminal, we file into a second area and are met by officials in what look like hazmat suits, ready to test us. The nasal swab test is something we've all experienced before, and MSC's pre-boarding instructions include the need to take a PCR or antigen lateral flow test within 72 hours of embarkation, but clearly this is a marked change from what's normally seen in a cruise terminal.

Once on board, life is much like it was before the pandemic. Sure, masks must be worn while moving around; you must remain in your bubble; and temperature checks before meals in the buffet or one of the five main dining restaurants are the norm.

We wear wristbands throughout the cruise. These not

“Life on board is much like before the pandemic, though masks must be worn while moving around and you must stay in your bubble

only let us enter our cabins and order drinks, but can also be used to trace in the event of a Covid outbreak, though it's important to note that no cases were reported at the cruise terminal or on the ship during the voyage.

Even the MSC Aurea Spa is open to passengers, although the thermal area – where a sauna room, a steam room and whirlpool bath are normally available – is temporarily closed.

### PORTLAND CALLS

Our sailing includes two sea days and one port of call – Portland, Dorset – where three shore excursions are available.

Group numbers on shore excursions have been cut. Instead of the usual 45 people per group, there are 30 of us to ensure social distancing can be maintained.

Our trip to the Cerne Abbas Giant and to Minterne House, the home of the Churchill and Digby families



ABOVE AND LEFT: *MSC Virtuosa*'s features include robotic bartender Rob in the MSC Starship Club, the Savannah Aquapark, an LED Sky Dome and F1 Simulators **INSET:** Harry Kemble **PICTURES:** Anthony Devlin/Getty Images for MSC Cruises

since 1620, is around 45 minutes' drive away.

We are allowed off the coach to take pictures of the Giant, before driving on to our second destination. We must sit in our bubbles and exit the coach individually to avoid bumping into people in the aisle.

As in most indoor settings right now, we wear masks when moving around inside the country house and on the coach, though we can remove our face coverings when eating or drinking. However, our hosts at Minterne may have wished we had masks on after we reacted with mock horror to the cream tea served – with cream piled over the top of the jam!

Later, back on *Virtuosa*, I meet Mandy, a 52-year-old driving instructor from Bristol. She admits both she and her 59-year-old husband, Jeremy, avoided the shore excursion because they were concerned about being cooped up on a coach with people

“First-time cruiser Jo tells me: 'I'd never fancied a cruise before but the ship looked amazing. I've not been disappointed'

outside their bubble, although they would have explored Portland independently had it been allowed.

And Kayla and Daniel, who also chose to remain on the ship throughout, tell me late on the third day after groups had returned to the ship that they had mild cases of "cabin fever".

The excursion provides a break from the ship after two nights and a sea day on board, even if it does explore a part of the country

many of us have visited before.

Excursions are available in other ports around the UK, with 39 options including walking tours, city sightseeing and scenic drives.

Whether passengers are keen to take up organised excursions in rather more familiar ports of call remains to be seen, but when it comes to life on board, this maiden voyage undoubtedly proved the appeal of a UK cruise.

Just speaking with new-to-cruise passenger Jo, 51, demonstrates what the line has accomplished in just two months. "I never fancied a cruise before," says Jo. "I thought it would be a lot of people and you would not be able to find space. But the ship looked amazing online and [the sailing] was only four days. I've not been disappointed."

As we disembark, returning our wristbands in the process, this time it's me rubbing my eyes – in disbelief at the long-awaited and very welcome return of cruising. **TW**

## DESTINATIONS

### UK RESTART | CRUISE

#### NEED TO KNOW

✳ Passengers sailing on *MSC Virtuosa* must present a negative Covid-19 test result – either antigen or PCR – at their embarkation port. The test must be carried out by a trained professional and taken within 72 hours prior to departure.

✳ Travel insurance is mandatory and must clearly include Covid cover on the document. If your policy falls short in this regard, you can buy Europ Assistance cover for £22. Call your insurance supplier from the port if you think your insurance does contain Covid cover to help you understand where the necessary details are on the document.

✳ Once you've presented your test result and travel insurance cover, all passengers must take a nasal swab test in the port before boarding. The experience is swift but the sight of officials in PPE is slightly unnerving if you are not expecting it.

✳ Remember to bring a UK adaptor. Cabins are fitted with a mix of European and US sockets plus USB ports. You can borrow one from guest services for a refundable deposit of £30, but the line's stocks are not endless.

