

# Zip, zip, hooray

Fred Olsen is adding a shot of adrenaline to its Caribbean excursions, discovers **Mike Walsh** on an agent fam trip



Zipline at Morne Coubaril Historical Adventure Park, Saint Lucia

PICTURE: Kenneth Taylor

**H**old on tight – you don't want to end up as lunch."

These were the words of advice from Andre, our safety instructor, as I prepared to jump off a platform high up in the trees above a river in Saint Lucia.

With one hand gripping the harness and the other the overhead cable, I stepped forward into thin air.

In an instant, I was flying. Brushing through a canopy of mango, coconut and banyan trees, I picked up speed and was soon hurtling thrillingly over the river below, before touching down, Tarzan-like, on the next platform.

I had held on tightly, but Andre's advice had been in jest. The zipline at Morne Coubaril Historical Adventure Park is extremely safe and there are no fearsome creatures waiting to devour participants in the unlikely event of a brush with water.

This zipline flight was just one of a sequence of eight at

the park, part of an excursion offered to passengers on Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' sailings in the region. Yes, you read that right. The ex-UK cruise specialist has been quietly peppering up its on-shore options with soft-adventure activities in a bid to broaden its appeal beyond its loyal older clientele. That shift is set to continue when its Caribbean fly-cruises – which went on sale this month as part of a new 2022-23 programme – resume next year, using Havana as a new turnaround port from January 2023.

## MUD FOR IT

Our next Saint Lucian stop required a different sense of adventure – a willingness to get covered in mud. Not any old soil, of course, but warm, geothermal mud with reputed therapeutic qualities.

Sulphur Springs Park at Soufrière has been a tourist attraction since the 1980s but the opening two years ago of ➤



### top tip

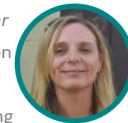
Watch video highlights of the Fred Olsen Cruise Lines and Caribbean Tourism Organization mega-fam trip at [bit.ly/focl-cto2019](https://bit.ly/focl-cto2019)



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Food stall in Marigot, Saint Martin; the St Kitts Scenic Railway; Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' Braemar PICTURES: Shutterstock; Mike Walsh

### AGENTS' VIEWS

"I'd recommend *Braemar* to customers who've been on bigger ships but are now looking for something smaller and quieter. The crew make it so special – they treat you like family."



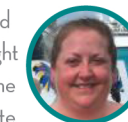
**Julie Collings, formerly Thornton's Travel**

"I'd recommend this for older passengers who are reasonably active and for whom dining is important. And with *Braemar* being a smaller ship, getting off and on for excursions is so much easier."



**Anne Knight, Flamingo Travel**

"With smaller ships, Fred Olsen sailings get you right into the destination. Some of the excursions are quite active – the line has some work to do to change perceptions that it is only geared towards older passengers."



**Debi Phillips, formerly Newell's Travel**

three new mud pools has greatly enhanced its appeal.

I slathered my skin with the squishy brown stuff and sank into the enveloping warmth of the water. As sulphur steam rose from the surface, I marvelled at this volcanic phenomenon that provides such a rugged contrast to Saint Lucia's beautiful beaches – while silently wondering if the mud would ever come off.

In truth, few of my fellow Fred Olsen passengers had opted for this dermatological delight – and even fewer for the zipline adrenaline rush – but no matter. The adventurous options were there for those who liked them.

### HIT FOR SIX

In Antigua, a popular excursion – or tour, as Fred Olsen prefers to call them – was the Island Safari. This was a sightseeing drive, but instead of being transported in an air-conditioned minibus, we were carried in the back of an open-sided Land Rover, which made for another exciting hold-on-tight experience.

Our tour took us along bumpy roads through rural Antiguan villages, the island's rainforest and on to English Harbour. This is where the British navy was stationed in the 1700s and where Nelson's Dockyard remains a big attraction.

Elsewhere, our guide, Trevor, pointed out two sights associated with a local legend: the Sir Viv Richards Cricket Stadium, and the street in capital St John's where



### CAROL HAY

#### business development director, CTO UK & Europe

"Cruising is a fantastic opportunity for visitors to sample the Caribbean and decide which destination they would like to return to for a longer stay by having experiences that allow them to distinguish one port from another, which is why we were pleased to work with Fred Olsen on its Caribbean mega-fam.

"There have been many changes across the Caribbean over the past 12 months and destinations are readying themselves to receive visitors. Emphasis will be placed on testing prior to and on arrival, completion of health records and having adequate travel insurance in place.

"That said, we eagerly await the return of tourism. We know there will be stricter travel guidelines, but the benefits will include more outdoor experiences, beautiful beaches for social distancing and an abundance of wellness activities."

the West Indies batting superstar grew up. This was followed by a swim at the beautiful and deserted Turners Beach.

### TRACK STAR

In St Kitts, the mainstay of Fred Olsen's day-trip options – and that of most cruise lines – is the stunning St Kitts Scenic Railway. This is a more traditional tour experience and one eagerly lapped up by my fellow *Braemar* passengers.

The narrow-gauge track was built in 1912 to transport sugar cane, but when that industry folded, the railway was transformed into a tourist attraction. ➤





### FRED OLSEN CRUISE LINES' BRAEMAR

Being an older ship, *Braemar* may lack a certain wow factor when moored alongside gleaming new-builds – despite a dry-dock refurb in 2019 – but on board its old-school charm is unmistakable. With capacity for just 929 passengers but no shortage of space, it has a distinctly British ambience. The public areas are light and comfortable, and pleasingly lack the excessive glitz of modern ships. The food and service in main restaurant Thistle was unfailingly good, but it was trumped by speciality dining venue The Grill. I also lapped up the entertainment in the Neptune Lounge – a singer, magician and band – plus there's a good gym, pool, library, blackjack table and Wi-Fi throughout (from £26 per hour). But beyond the facilities was something else: a tangible sense that crew and passengers alike had found their home at sea.

**Book it:** A 16-night Islands of the Caribbean sailing on *Braemar*, departing Southampton on December 6, 2022, starts at £1,799 based on two sharing an interior cabin, including flights from Barbados. [fredolsencruises.com](http://fredolsencruises.com)



PICTURE: Mike Walsh

ABOVE: Agents on Turners Beach, Antigua, during Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' mega-fam

The 18-mile journey provides magnificent views of the island's lush interior and spectacular coastline, whether you are seated upstairs in open-air carriages or downstairs in air-conditioned comfort. The remnants of brick chimneys, scattered across the island on former plantations, are a reminder of the sugar cane era that spanned 400 years. The chimneys were used to boil the cane juice, before it was fermented and crystallised into sugar.

The journey was enlivened by the train's four singers, who periodically regaled passengers with the likes of Christmas carol *Joy to the World* and calypso song *Shame and Scandal in the Family*.

In Barbados, more soft adventure was on offer, this time underground. Harrison's Cave is a network of caverns packed with spotlighted stalagmites and stalactites. The attraction has been lavishly modernised in recent years and helmet-wearing visitors are carried through the 1.5 miles of passages by tramway.

One stalagmite-stalactite pair – still some four metres apart – are due to fuse in 20,000 years' time. Free entry was promised for any visitor who returns then.

### ADVENTUROUS EXTRAS

Other adventurous excursions during the cruise included river tubing in Grenada, deep-sea fishing in St Kitts and racing in an America's Cup yacht in Saint Martin. These sorts of options complement the mainstay sedater tours, such as rum tastings, museum visits and cookery demonstrations.

“It's been great for agents to experience a small ship in the Caribbean and see the variety of excursions and destinations

The *Braemar* passengers I spoke to liked the diversity of tours offered by Fred Olsen across the six Caribbean islands, even if take-up of the more energetic options was rather limited.

But for Fred Olsen, it's all about giving passengers more choice in ports of call. Three years ago, the line introduced rib boat excursions to “take passengers even closer”, and each of its four ships now carries two of these boats. Kayaking is also offered in some destinations.

And the options aren't limited to set tours. Kate Wooldridge, the line's sales services and communications manager, explained: “Our destinations team in Ipswich can create bespoke excursions for individuals or groups. Agents just need to contact us.”

Referring to the seven cruise specialist agents on the mega-fam, Wooldridge added: “It's been great for them to experience a small ship in the Caribbean and to see the variety of excursions and destinations.”

Like the nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves that abound in Grenada, Fred Olsen is making a good job of spicing up its Caribbean cruises. **TW**