

Taking flight

Orange groves and authentic
culture await on a Med fly-cruise
fam, finds **Jo Fernández** ➤

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Iness_Ja-luz

AGENTS' views



"I've noticed the staff-to-customer ratio and general attentiveness; any problem

is resolved quickly. I also appreciate the efforts to reduce waste, from toiletries on demand to purifying seawater for drinking."

Charlotte Mitchell,
travel consultant, **Perfectly Packaged Holidays**



"I absolutely love the food, particularly in the Colours & Tastes speciality restaurant.

The Asian fusion dishes are out of this world. The £15 per person supplement, when pre-booked, is great value. If the fluffy bao buns are on the menu, I would highly recommend them."

Carrie Purnell,
senior travel consultant,
Ocean World Travel



"The staff are so welcoming. From the captain to the cleaners, everyone makes you

feel at home. A waiter even recognised me from 2017, when I was last on board a Fred Olsen Cruise Lines ship. *Balmoral* has been recently refurbished, plus it feels homely and is small enough to get into the heart of ports."

Caroline Fenech,
director, **Cannon Travel**



arm sunshine, blue skies and palm trees welcomed me to Valencia, the Spanish city that combines

futuristic architecture and centuries-old traditions, as well as being the birthplace of paella. My dad was from Valencia, and his aromatic, sizzling pans of home-cooked paella were the best.

So it was an ideal starting point to join a group of agents to experience Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' Mediterranean fly-cruise programme on a Spain and Italy sailing. The flight-inclusive range has proved popular since launching last year, with nearly half of its fly-cruise bookings from new customers.

Having been told by a well-travelled passenger on the flight from London that 'Fred', as she fondly referred to it, was her favourite cruise line, I wanted to see why.

ORANGE SKIES

Our 1,250-capacity ship, *Balmoral*, spent a laid-back two nights in Valencia's port before setting sail, which meant I had two full days to explore. The near-constant sunshine in Spain's third-largest city means evergreen orange trees thrive, providing shade to the urban streets, sweet-scented blossoms and enough fruit to supply more than half of Spain's orange exports.

In homage to the city's citrus history, our first shore excursion took us to Huerto Ribera, a family-run organic orange grove 40 minutes south of the city. Our

"We dipped rustic bread and salty white cheese into our homemade mayo, pleased with our efforts

guide Ana walked us through the lush grounds of the handsome 19th-century finca, established in 1870 and still occupied by the Ribera family.

Although orange trees were originally imported from China to be cultivated ornamentally, Spaniards fell in love with the zingy, citrusy fruit. Learning about the history of these oranges was fascinating, but sampling them brought Ana's stories to life, as the excursion culminated in a tasting of varieties ranging from sweet clementines to juicy navel oranges. However, don't try to eat the fruit that grows in Valencia's streets as it's sour.

DOWN TIME

After settling in on *Balmoral*, the line's smallest ship, we lounged on rattan sofas on the top deck, swapping stories and soaking up the sun. This was the perfect time to browse the Marquee Bar's cocktail menu: among my tipples of choice were sweet 'cocobanana' mocktails (a refreshing blend of coconut milk, pineapple juice and banana) and maraschino cherry-topped piña colodas.

Later, we cooled off in the small oval-shaped saltwater pool – though clients will find a larger pool



FROM FAR LEFT: The agent fam trip group; *Balmoral* moored in Mahón port, Menorca; Valencia's Old Town; Propriano, Corsica; writer Jo making mayonnaise in Menorca PICTURE: Fred Olsen Cruise Lines/rico; Jo Fernández

at the aft on deck seven. Despite the ship's smaller size, there's plenty of space to spread out, with thoughtfully designed, peaceful public areas such as the library-like Earth Room and the pretty plant-themed Botanical Room lounge.

MAKE A MEAL

The following day's port call was Mahón, the attractive capital of Menorca. I'd never visited the easternmost Balearic island and had intended to revel in its coastal charms with a swim in a sparkling bay. However, my head was turned by a shore excursion to a cheese-making farm that revealed Menorca's rural interior, with surprising amounts of greenery framing the sun-drenched fields and whitewashed houses.

In this pastoral bliss, we learnt how to whip up creamy mayonnaise (known locally as 'Mahónnaise', as the popular condiment comes from this island) by blending simple, high-quality ingredients: olive oil,

salt and egg yolks. Once it was sufficiently aerated, we dipped rustic bread and cubes of salty white cheese into our handmade mayo, feeling pleased with our efforts.

Back in Mahón, we strolled through the well-kept streets, which were heady with the enticing smell of garlic, as locals and tourists enjoyed tapas on its shaded terraces. We passed handsome Georgian buildings from the 18th-century British occupation of Menorca, the opera house – said to be the oldest in Spain – and the 13th-century church of Santa Maria, which presides over the old town.

Mahón is an atmospheric place made for lingering until the sun goes down – and on certain itineraries, *Balmoral* stays here until late, so clients can do just that.

LAND AND SEA

While there was plenty of entertainment on board – from quizzes to quaits – getting close to nature in each destination

was a rewarding aspect of this smaller-ship cruise. Our final excursion was a speedboat ride from the petite port of Propriano in Corsica. The experience was undeniably glamorous, as we zoomed around the bay with sea spray in our hair, but it felt much deeper than that.

As we zipped past the protected Belvédère-Campomoro coastline, the rock formations where the sea meets Corsica's forested hills were so weathered that each resembled an animal. I spotted a lion with a rocky mane here, an elephant's stone trunk there – and discovering and discussing each shape was an enjoyably mindful experience. Above us, seabirds soared over shoals of sea bream darting in unison under the clear green-blue water.

Exploring this nature reserve up close was a true highlight – a natural high to go with my low-stress cruise. **TW**



WHAT'S NEW?

✿ Fellow Fred Olsen Cruise Lines ship *Borealis* will be adult-only from this year.

✿ *Borealis* has also just emerged from a dry-dock refurbishment, with the most significant addition being Fresco, an open-air, Mediterranean-inspired lounge and dining venue.

✿ The line's Freedom Fare – one step above the basic category – now covers tips and selected beers and wines with meals.

✿ Fred Olsen Cruise Lines is also introducing a Chef's Table experience across its fleet, which costs £100 per person and can be booked on board.

BOOK IT

Fred Olsen Cruise Lines'

11-night Amalfi Coast, Italian Riviera and Corsica sailing on *Balmoral* costs from £2,149 per person, based on two sharing an interior cabin. Includes transfers and flights from London or Manchester, based on an October 8 departure. fredolsencruises.com