

HIGHLIGHTS

Voyage of discovery

A mystery cruise combines excitement and intrigue on a sailing that's full of surprises, writes **Jeannine Williamson**

"We are leaving the port of Zeebrugge and after that, I have no idea where we're going," announces Captain Mikael Degerlund over the ship's public address system.

The prospect of – quite literally – being all at sea would normally be a cause for concern, but laughter ripples through the lounge. I'm on a mystery cruise aboard Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' *Borealis* and not knowing is all part of the fun.

Friends are intrigued when I tell them I'm embarking on a voyage into the unknown. Despite cruise director Anthony Cranny pulling our leg as we left Portsmouth two days before, when he welcomed us on board our 'Caribbean cruise', I guessed we wouldn't get that far (and back) in five nights. So I'd packed for UK-style weather and, thankfully, it was the right choice.

The element of surprise starts long before we board. All we know is we're visiting two ports and have a chance to sign up for suitably enigmatic excursions. One hints at seeing "key locations commemorating a tumultuous period", while another promises to explain how the port in question earned its nickname.

This is enough to fuel plenty of speculation as we spend our first day at sea. Some guests study atlases in the library, while others swap guesses about where we might be heading. Meanwhile, staff are sworn to secrecy or – like us – are completely in the dark. The position of *Borealis* on screens around the ship and on the cabin TV just shows a big question mark.

Next morning, all is revealed as we arrive in Zeebrugge, where one of the tours is a poignant visit to wartime memorials in Flanders.

Meanwhile, my excursion takes me on a scenic coach tour around Bruges with a stop in the pretty medieval Flemish town of Damme.

The following day, we dock in Hamburg, Germany's biggest seaport and 'gateway to the world', so-called for its seafaring history.

The rest of the sailing is a typical Fred Olsen cruise, packed with a busy daily programme, dedicated events for solos and good food and entertainment. With the added element of a mystery cruise, there's always plenty to talk about with fellow guests – so I'd happily book another one and venture into the unknown again.

BOOK IT: Fred Olsen Cruise Lines has a nine-night Captain's European Mystery Cruise sailing round-trip from Southampton on *Borealis* departing on October 16. Fares start from £1,499 per person, and the cruise will visit four countries, including ports not featured on any other Fred Olsen itinerary this year. fredolsencruises.com

