

The magnificent
Norwegian Epic

EPIC adventure

Brian Claridge and his family enjoy a cruise on one of the biggest ships in the world

OUR CHOICE for a recent family cruise was the seven-night Western Med fly/cruise on *Norwegian Epic*, departing from Barcelona, with visits to Naples, Civitavecchia, Livorno, Marseille, Palma and back to Barcelona.

Apart from the colourful places en route, there was enough entertainment and onboard

facilities for all ages. As the biggest ship in the Norwegian fleet and third biggest in the world, the *Epic* is more like a floating city. It boasts more than 20 restaurants, bars and lounges, one of the biggest spa and fitness centres at sea, a huge aqua park with swimming pools, hot tubs and water slides, sports deck, ten-pin bowling alleys, Las Vegas style casino, huge LED screen, rock climbing, abseiling and even an ice bar.

The *Norwegian Epic* certainly lives up to her name in terms of size and construction – 1081ft long with 19 decks, she weighs 155,873 tonnes and has capacity for 4100 passengers.

As expected with a ship of this size there's accommodation to suit all budgets and requirements, from deluxe owner's suites to oceanview,



inside and balcony staterooms for families, couples and solo occupancy, whilst hidden away at the top of the ship is The Haven, an exclusive enclave of luxury and private suites and villas reserved for a privileged few.

With its own private access via a glass elevator and dedicated concierge, this is the largest 'ship-within-a-ship' area at sea and features 67 suites, villas and penthouses, private pool and gym, as well as an exclusive lounge and dining room. The pool area is a private oasis, with

Above, plunge hires onboard *Norwegian Epic* and, right, partying at Spice H2O

hot tubs and luxury poolside furniture, including daybeds and private cabanas.

Our 'New Wave' balcony staterooms were compact and the design contemporary with curved walls and dark wood fittings. Features include comfortable bed, sofa, flat screen TV, coffee maker, safe and an unusual bathroom design. The shower and toilet each have their own sliding glass door and the vanity basin is housed in the bedroom, which takes some getting used to.

Both our staterooms had a private balcony, which was useful for sunbathing, dining or simply relaxing and watching the world go by. With this being a relatively short cruise and no formal nights to worry about, we had little to unpack and were soon ready to explore our new home for the next seven nights.

Passengers on *Norwegian Epic* are a mix of nationalities, including Spanish, German, Italian and Brits. After the customary lifeboat drill – an essential requirement on every cruise, we joined the Sailaway Party at Spice H2O, a lively bar at the back of the ship. It's a beach club by day with pool, sun loungers and



a huge LED screen showing various forms of entertainment throughout the day. After sunset, a dance floor rises from the pool and transforms the place into a night club where, you can boogie into the early hours.

With more than 20 restaurants on board, it's difficult to know where to dine. There are two main restaurants – Manhattan and Taste, as well as a self-service buffet in the

Garden Café. In addition, there is an excellent selection of speciality restaurants ranging from French and Italian bistros, to Chinese and Japanese restaurants and Brazilian and American-style steakhouses. A nominal cover charge applies for dining at these restaurants and pre-booking is recommended, due to their popularity.

We liked the flexibility of Freestyle Dining, where we could dine when and where we wanted. This breaks the boundaries of traditional cruising and there's none of the formality of dressing up for dinner. This relaxed attitude towards cruising has become popular with past and present passengers I spoke to.

Our favourite speciality restaurant was Moderno Churrascaria, a Brazilian steakhouse, where succulent cuts of meats are brought to your table on large skewers by traditionally dressed 'Gouchos'.

You can eat as much as you want by displaying a Green for 'Go' card next to your plate. When you've had your fill, flip over your card to Red for 'Stop.' A word of advice: Make sure you're hungry before you go to Moderno so you can try

The Aqua Park is a focus for families



as many of the delicious cuts of meat that will be put in front of you. A self-service salad bar is included within the cover charge of this unique dining experience.

We also enjoyed *Cirque Dreams & Dinner*. It's the first circus at sea and takes place inside the colourful Spiegel Tent, which occupies two decks. A three-course dinner is served during the two-hour performance. We dined on 'Surf & Turf' whilst watching a fast-moving and colourful show of acrobats, contortionists and tightrope-walkers from all over the world, with some audience participation for good measure. The cover charge includes circus and dinner and is excellent value.

If you're worried about putting on weight during a cruise, you can work off any excess calories in the 24-hour fitness centre, take part in any of the organised keep-fit activities, join a dance class, or walk up the steps from one deck to another without taking the lift, although it's tempting to get in the lift as soon as you hear the doors 'ping' open.

Nightly entertainment on *Epic* is virtually round the clock and includes a lavish theatre, comedy venue and the biggest casino at sea. One of our favourite shows was *Blue Man Group*. Painted from head to toe in blue body paint, the energetic and mesmerising performers are renowned throughout the world for their



unique form of entertainment. Taking place in the Epic Theatre, the interactive show combines mime, comedy, music, paint and a finale that has to be seen to be believed. We also enjoyed *Legends in Concert* with tribute artists

performing the hits of Tom Jones, Adele and Tina Turner. In the words of the Marvin Gaye song: 'Ain't nothing like the real thing' however the performers did a realistic impression and it was a very entertaining show.

We had one day at sea and with temperatures nudging 80 degrees F, we grabbed our beach towels and headed to the biggest Aqua Park at sea.

Then it was off to the Mandara Spa, one of the largest spa and fitness centres at sea. Totalling more than 31,000 square feet, it's the equivalent of 11 tennis courts. Here we enjoyed a relaxing 75 minutes Full Body Massage, then immersed ourselves in the Hydrotherapy Pool which was an invigorating experience. The prices



are good value and it's worth looking out for the special offers throughout the cruise.

There's a daily programme of onboard activities, covering everything from talks on port visits, to health and beauty advice, along with quizzes, bingo and dance classes, which are all listed in the ship's daily newsletter, delivered directly to your cabin each day.

Apart from enjoying all the

activities onboard *Epic*, we called at some beautiful places during our week-long cruise.

Departing from Barcelona with its Gaudi architecture and vibrant Las Ramblas district, we cruised to our first port of call – Naples with its 2800 year history and Roman ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum. From here, we cruised to Civitavecchia (Rome) with the world-famous Colosseum, Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica and Trevi Fountain.

The next day we arrived at Livorno – Italy's third-largest seaport, which serves as the gateway to Florence with Michelangelo's statue of David; and Pisa with the Leaning Tower.

Next, we cruised to Marseille – the second largest city in France,



with an abundance of restaurants and bars, opera house, art galleries and museums.

The following day we arrived at Palma on the island of Majorca (Mallorca), with its intriguing maze of streets and Bellver Castle, a 14th century Gothic style castle. Our cruise sadly at an end, *Epic* set course for Barcelona where we disembarked the next day.

Find out more

- Prices start from £903 per person, based on two people sharing an inside stateroom and flying from London Heathrow on September 28, 2014.
- For more information, call 0845 201 8900 or visit (www.ncl.co.uk).