

Making waves on the *Med*

Empty nesters **Brian and Denise Claridge** enjoy a holiday afloat

THE *INDEPENDENCE of the Seas* is a majestic sight in the docks at Southampton as she prepares for the start of a two-week Mediterranean cruise. The 15-deck Royal Caribbean ship is 1112ft long and 185ft wide, and accommodates 4375 passengers.

There's enough leisure facilities onboard to satisfy all ages, including three pools (six whirlpools), fitness centre and spa, sports court, rock climbing wall, a wave machine for surfing, ice skating rink, nine-hole miniature golf course, outdoor movie screen, casino, nightclub, video arcade and art gallery.

It's no wonder *Independence of the Seas* was voted 'Best Cruise Line for Families' in the Cruise Critic Cruisers' Choice Awards in 2015.

There's even a shopping mall that occupies an entire deck called The

Royal Promenade, where you can shop for watches, handbags, jewellery, perfume, clothes and ship souvenirs. Afterwards, drop into the Dog & Badger (an English pub) for a drink, pick up a freshly baked pizza from the pizzeria, or enjoy an ice cream at Ben & Jerry's.

We loved our daily visits to the Café Promenade for a speciality coffee, with freshly made cookies and other delicious snacks. At night, the Royal Promenade comes alive with music and it's a lively atmosphere, especially on carnival night.

Our balcony stateroom was more than adequate and included a comfortable



La Croisette, Cannes

Royal King bed, telephone, shower sofa, TV, safe and private balcony. It's worth paying extra to have a balcony so you can relax in your own space and enjoy the sun and sea air, look for dolphins, and gaze at beautiful sunsets over a pre-dinner aperitif.

The interactive TV allows you to check your onboard account on a daily basis to make sure you don't spend your money too quickly.

It's hard to single out any particular restaurant that was our favourite, as they are all so different and the food is good wherever you dine. Apart from the five



The Solarium Pool



The Royal Promenade has a lively atmosphere



A Monk Parakeet in Malaga

complimentary restaurants included in the price of your cruise, there are a number of speciality restaurants where you pay a cover charge. They include Chops Grille, an upmarket steakhouse, Giovanni's Table, serving traditional Italian food, and Johnny Rockets, for American-style burgers.

To celebrate our wedding anniversary, which coincided with the date of the cruise, we booked a table at Chops Grille. The steak was cooked to perfection and with chilled champagne to celebrate the occasion and singing waiters round our

wasn't long before the audience in the packed theatre were singing and tapping their feet to such catchy numbers as *Summer Nights*, *You're the One That I Want* and *Greased Lightnin*.'

There were plenty of variety acts throughout the cruise, including a comedy juggler; a hypnotist mind-bender; and singer, Toni Warne, finalist from *The Voice*. We also enjoyed some colourful ice shows, including *Strings - A World Adventure On Ice*, with an international cast. All daytime and evening activities taking place round the ship are featured in

“At night the Royal Promenade comes alive with music and it's a lively atmosphere, especially on carnival night”

table to congratulate us, it was certainly a night to remember.

Although the ship is vast, it's impossible to get lost. Simply tap your stateroom number onto an electronic interactive map of the ship, which are situated next to all the lifts, and you will be shown the quickest route to your room. With 1817 staterooms onboard, it's an ingenious device and will also help you find restaurants and other public areas on the ship.

Royal Caribbean ships are renowned for their entertainment. We loved the shows in the spacious 1320 seat Alhambra Theatre, which stretches over two decks and is similar to a West End theatre with comfortable seats and plush carpets.

The highlight for us was *Grease*, the latest Broadway-style production to premiere on *Independence of the Seas*. It

the ship's daily bulletin *Cruise Compass*, which all passengers get in their stateroom at the end of each day.

The bulletin also reminds you what the dress code is for each evening, as well as restaurant opening hours and what shows are on. It also advises you about the weather forecast for the day, so you know whether to slap on the sunscreen and what to wear, especially if you're going ashore.

Days at sea allow you to do as little or as much as you like. There's a packed programme of activities including aerobics and fitness classes, arts and craft workshops, quizzes, bingo, art auctions, as well as talks about shore excursions, health and beauty issues and other topics.

There's a running track on the top deck where you can enjoy the invigorating sea air as you work out, but if you prefer



Arsmalaga African Art museum



Bovedas Cathedral, Malaga



A horse drawn carriage in Malaga



The Royal Promenade



A view of Notre Dame Le L'Esperence, Cannes



The Grease production



La Croisette, Cannes



Strings - A World Adventure on Ice

a leisurely stroll, head to Deck 4 where people walk round the deck at their own pace.

There's also a fitness centre featuring state-of-the-art exercise equipment, including a beauty salon and spa which offers massage, manicures and seaweed body wraps, as well as health and beauty treatments.

If you enjoy a challenge, you can surf or waveboard on a surf simulator, or join in a game of basketball, football or volleyball in the sports court.

There's plenty of bars and lounges onboard to have a drink, from cocktails at Olive or Twist, a stylish cocktail bar on Deck 14 with panoramic views, to the nautically themed Schooner Bar.

If you like Latin rhythms, then Boleros is the place for a refreshing Latin drink

Southampton so there are no luggage restrictions. Also, Carole can't fly at the moment for health reasons, so cruising is the perfect alternative and great fun."

Carole, 52, added: "We enjoy the freedom to do whatever we want and dine whenever suits us.

"We love the shows in the main theatre, as well as the entertainment in the bars and lounges. Our son, Dominic, has made lots of friends his age and enjoys all the leisure facilities and it's nice to know that he's in a safe environment.

"As he is a Coeliac and has to be careful what he eats, the waiters in our restaurant are extremely caring and provide him with safe food options each day."

"Having recently become empty nesters we welcomed the opportunity to relax on our own for two weeks"

like a Mojito or Caipirinha. If you fancy some late night music, then head to The Labyrinth, a two-storey Gothic nightclub set on two levels with a bar on each level. Other facilities include Casino Royale featuring electronic Slot Machines, Video Poker, Blackjack, Craps, Roulette and Caribbean Stud Poker and there's even a Wedding Chapel on the highest point on the ship.

Passengers, Paul and Carole Collins from West Somerset, were on the cruise with their 17-year-old son Dominic. This was their second cruise with Royal Caribbean.

Says Paul, 53: "We prefer a cruise rather than a land-based holiday as you get to see a different place each day, plus you get the chance to relax on a sea day. There's also the added bonus of only unpacking once. We like the fact that the ship leaves from

Our cruise almost at an end, the *Independence of the Seas* certainly fulfilled our needs and expectations. Having recently become 'empty nesters' we welcomed the opportunity to relax on our own for two weeks.

The itinerary covered some of our favourite places in the Med, including Malaga, Cannes, Barcelona, Palma De Mallorca, Valencia, Cartagena, Gibraltar, Lisbon and Vigo.

Our favourite place was Cannes, where we strolled along the Côte d'Azur, then browsed round the designer shops at La Croisette, reputed to be the most expensive shopping street in France, with brands like Dior, Chanel and Gucci.

In summary, the cruise gave us a chance to relax for two weeks, enjoy good food and entertainment and visit some fantastic places in the Med, without the hassle of airports.

■ 14-night Mediterranean Beaches on *Independence of the Seas* costs from £1499 per person. Price based on two sharing an interior stateroom, departing Southampton on July 15, 2017. For more information, call 0844 493 2061 or visit: (www.royalcaribbean.co.uk).