

Cruises

A spa too far? The new face of cruising

On a cruise where you are pampered to within an inch of your life, is it possible to have too much of a good thing? Fiona McIntosh finds out

I was sitting in a seminar called “How To Look 10 Years Younger”. Two American women were chatting next to me. They were probably in their early 70s but it was difficult to tell. It was also difficult to tell if they were happy, excited, frustrated or bored.

One said to the other: “Look 10 years younger? Gah! It would take a miracle.”

Her friend patted her on the knee: “That’s why we pay for miracles, hon.”

A young, charming Venezuelan doctor strolled into the room and began an iPad presentation of “before and after” pictures of some of his patients. “Holy crap!” said one of the women, pointing at the iPad. “What did you do to her and how can I get some of that?” Well, hon, you’re in the right place, I thought.

There’s not a lot you can’t have done on this floating medi-spa. Dermal fillers, Botox, high-tech facials, laser teeth whitening... and that’s just for the face and neck. Book yourself in for a body composition analysis to (horribly) reveal your fat and muscle mass ratio; non-surgical fat reduction; acupuncture; and something that sounds borderline illegal – a zero gravity massage, which involves being massaged while strung up. Who knew this was the face of modern cruising? That you could sail from Southampton and, 10 days later, step off the ship looking so “refreshed”.

Not me. Then again, this was my first cruise and I knew nothing. I thought going on a cruise meant dressing up in a ball gown for dinner, then being coerced into organised “group fun”. As I am allergic to both of those activities, cruising had never held much appeal. But here I was, on the maiden voyage of Celebrity Beyond – apparently the “latest in the Edge Series” and quite the Big Deal – a 10-day cruise starting in Southampton and stopping at La Rochelle, Bilbao, Lisbon, Cádiz, Malaga and Palma Mallorca until we finally disembarked at Barcelona.

I was certainly excited about stopping

at the ports. The Guggenheim in Bilbao! Moules-frites in Île de Ré! People-watch-

ing from a sun lounger in Puerto Banús! But what about the three sea days held captive onboard? Just the thought of being stuck on a ship with thousands of other people made me anxious. I was travelling with my friend Sally, a fellow cruise virgin who was, unlike me, really excited: “It will be great,” she said. “Just think, 10 days of being looked after and not having to do boring stuff at home!” I guess.

When we arrived at the Ocean Cruise Terminal at Southampton, we couldn’t believe the size of the thing. Celebrity Beyond is vast and sat at the docks like an immovable resort hotel. It has capacity

for 1,400 staff and 3,260 guests, all of whom began making their way aboard in a steady stream. We walked past a glittering atrium and looked down to see a swanky gold cocktail bar. It was 11am, but already martinis were being shaken by liveried bartenders.

We walked past fancy restaurants with names such as Le Voyage, Raw on 5 and the Fine Cut Steak House. We carried on past a life-size theatre, through an art gallery and past casino rooms pinging with slot machines. There were shops selling diamond-studded Bulgari watches and £5,000 Chanel handbags, while on the swimming pool deck, complete with a giant elephant sculpture at one end, a DJ was pumping out crowd-pleasers.

Sally and I walked around in a daze, poleaxed by sensory overload. Where to even start? With our room, obviously. And this was when it began to make sense. We stepped through our cabin door into a bijou but cleverly designed suite with an ensuite bathroom, desk, two large beds, a flatscreen TV and enough cupboards and drawers to accommodate two middle-aged women who have over-packed. But the show-stopper was the full-height window at the end of the cabin, with two chairs and a table set with

a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

Press a button and the top half of the window whirled down, converting the space into a balcony where you could sit in the salty air and watch the sea surge and roll beneath you.

“Wow,” said Sally. “Just wow.”

Back out in the fray, it took us a good 24 hours to work out where everything was and not get repeatedly lost – helped by an enormously friendly crew, who gently steered us in the right direction without making us feel like muppets. As we were staying in an AquaClass Stateroom, we had access to the SEA

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◀ On Celebrity Beyond, you can book anything from a massage to laser teeth whitening



GEOFF PUGH FOR THE TELEGRAPH

▲ And relax!
Fiona McIntosh
settles in for 10
days of next-level
indulgence

Thermal Suite – which is like a Mayfair spa with sea views. It is a calm and beautiful space, kitted out with a series of steam rooms, a salt inhalation room, a hammam, a desert sauna, rainforest showers and heated sunbeds. We decided immediately that this was our new favourite place.

We also dipped into the extensive (and expensive) spa menu. My 100-minute Ocean Spa Wave Massage required me to lie on a heated and gently vibrating treatment bed while my therapist, Barbara, basted me in green gloop and wrapped me in foil like an oven-ready seabass. I then had a blindingly vigorous massage, which was so good that at the end I had to be physically helped off the bed.

Celebrity Cruises has also teamed up with Gwyneth Paltrow's outré wellness brand, Goop. As the Hollywood star is now better known for her vagina-scented candle range than her acting credits, we were a little concerned as to what we might find in our cabin after turn-down. But fear not, the partnership is very light touch – an edit of Goop skincare products in the spa shop, wellness TV programming and a "signature Goop Detox Smoothie" involving a lot of kale.

It was pretty evident from day one that there were several tribes of people (of all ages) on board. Foodies, gamblers and party animals could knock themselves out with non-stop entertainment in the clubs and bars downstairs. But up here in our sunlit spa eyrie, we were with our people – the ones who had come for relaxation and wellness when the ship was sailing, then sightseeing on port days. It was like a mash-up of our two favourite holiday types: the city break and the spa sojourn.

After that penny dropped, Sally and I let down our guard and relaxed, determined to have fun.

The facilities are admirably top-end, too. The fitness centre buzzed with new equipment, including Peloton bikes and a high-intensity, totally unforgiving

training programme from Australia called F45. But after 16,000 steps walking around Cadiz or Lisbon, we much preferred the yoga and evening stretching classes with the excellent onboard fitness instructor, Drazena.

There are 32 cafés, bars and restau-

rants onboard, including eight specialty restaurants and a complicated system dictating where you can eat according to what class you are in (yes, the class system is still alive and well on the High Seas). Not that I'm complaining, mind you. Our AquaClass status meant we could swerve the main buffet restaurant (good food but heaving and noisy) and instead dine in style for breakfast and supper in the private restaurant, Blu.

There were "clean cuisine" options and daily recommendations from our dedicated waitress, the delightful Fitri. Lobster with udon noodles followed by slow-cooked beef cheeks? Bring it on.

As we chowed down greedily, a woman on the table next to us gave us side-eye and said: "Well, we don't come on a cruise to lose weight now, do we girls?"

We were genuinely amazed at the quality of the food and service. Even seasoned cruisers told us the food at Blu was exemplary – how they managed to turn over all those covers so efficiently was miraculous. But irresistible three-course meals followed by cocktails at the Sunset Bar (Ibiza vibes; designed by Kelly Hoppen) meant this ended up being a wellness holiday for the mind rather than the poor old waistline.

This cruise was a genuine revelation for someone who had snootily never considered one before. There was no pressure to "join in" when you'd rather just relax and do your own thing, on land and at sea, and thankfully no taffeta ball gown required either.

We discovered the unexpected joys of sitting on deck, gazing out onto a horizonless sea, being rocked to sleep as the ship moved silently in the night and then waking up to a new city just as dawn was lighting up rooftops and gothic spires.

I didn't get it before, but I absolutely get it now.

Essentials

Celebrity Cruises (celebritycruises.com) offers sailings on Celebrity Beyond from £2,212pp, based on two people sharing an AquaClass Stateroom, departing throughout 2022

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◀ Fiona takes a load off her feet at the luxury onboard spa