

Tales from a tall ship

Sailing from Spain to France on a luxury square rigger, editor Karen Pasquali Jones becomes a 'gentle tourist'



Looming 30ft over us, I took in every detail of the giant spider – its thorax, abdomen and long, spindly legs that seemed to cage us in to protect the 32 precious eggs perilously held protectively in a sac high above our heads.

And while it sounded like a terrifying encounter, it was impossible not to admire the beauty of *Maman*, the bronze, marble and stainless-steel sculpture by French-American artist Louise Bourgeois, created in honour of her mother, on permanent display at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain.

'How does that represent her mum?' my teenage daughter asked, letting out a shudder as she gazed at the oversized 1999 piece of art. 'I wouldn't make you into something so scary.'

But Bourgeois, who had to be rescued by her father at 21 after throwing herself into a river when she discovered her mother, Josephine, had died, was a huge fan of the arachnid. 'Like a spider, my mother was a weaver,' she explained. 'Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.'

It wasn't the only giant installation at the Guggenheim. Jeff Koons' *Puppy*, a behemoth West Highland terrier carpeted in flowers and plants, stands 43ft tall, weighing 16 tonnes, and has been guarding the entrance to the museum since it was bought for \$1.2m two decades ago.

It's now worth \$54m and is just one of the iconic pieces of art – including Rothko's *Untitled* and Andy Warhol's famous *One Hundred And Fifty Multicolored Marilyns* – we were able to see as part of an exclusive

after-hours guided tour included with our luxury cruise on board *Sea Cloud Spirit*, a three-mast full-rigged sailing ship.

We'd flown into Bilbao earlier that day to join the stunning windjammer, based on a 15th-century ship with traditional rigging and 4,100m² of billowing sails, that was introduced in the Middle Ages as trade between countries became bigger, more frequent and needed to cover more distance between destinations.

Elizabethan adventurers discovered sea routes where they could catch the winds and opened up new markets, trading English produce for luxuries such as furs, dried fruit, wine, silk, spices and tea.

GENTLE TOURISM

Now we were going to sail from Bilbao to Honfleur in France on The Fascination Of The Atlantic Coast cruise on board this luxurious tall ship that looked traditional but had a plethora of mod cons, such as a gym, sauna, and even two environmentally friendly engines, on board in case the wind had, well, gone. Built in 2021, Sea Cloud Cruises' third square rigger has everything you could wish for on board. A total of 69 balcony cabins offer spacious and luxurious accommodation for just 136 passengers being looked after by 85 crew.

As well as the wellness and spa area, there is a library, a lounge, bar and fine-dining main restaurant. But it's on the top deck where the romance of sailing under wind power, while watching birds soar overhead and dolphins play in the waves, that brings the magic of maritime history, luxury and sustainable slow travel to life. Sea Cloud Cruises has been pursuing the principle of



The giant sculpture looms 30ft tall. Photo: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

The harbour of Belle-Ile-en-Mer has fascinated artists and novelists. Photo: Getty



sustainable tourism – and slow travel – for more than 40 years. Being smaller than ocean liners, the windjammers can call into more remote destinations that bigger ships can't, and take travellers into the heart of a destination, even offering exclusive cultural events and opportunities such as the private viewing at the Guggenheim, where we could get up close to the art works without the crowds.

We were excited to see San Sabastian, the capital of Guipuzkoa, in the Basque Country, with its Plaza de la Constitucion, which was used as a bull ring in the Middle Ages. There are still numbered balconies there which were used as seats for spectators at festivities in the square. Belle-Ile-en-Mer is the largest of the French Atlantic islands in the south of Brittany where French novelists including Marcel Proust and Gustave Flaubert were inspired by the breathtaking rugged coastline.

Artist Henri Matisse was a frequent visitor and Claude Monet was so fascinated by the island he painted it 39 times. Constantly

attacked by pirates, islanders were forced to defend themselves and Henry II built a citadel in 1572 above the city centre of Le Palais to use as a prison and barracks until 1961. It is now a hotel with a history museum.

St Malo, on Brittany's north coast, flourished when sailors and merchants left on ships like ours to do trade with India, China, Africa and America, but the port was heavily damaged centuries later during World War II and 80 per cent of the city was destroyed by bombs.

The subsequent reconstruction has meant that St Malo has regained its legendary splendour, being rebuilt in the old style, though the half-timbered houses with stained-glass façade have all but disappeared. The House of Poets and Writers is one of the last.

LUXURY SHIP

Every port of call was fascinating, with guided tours, hikes and excursions on offer at each one, but it was the sea days that were the best, when >

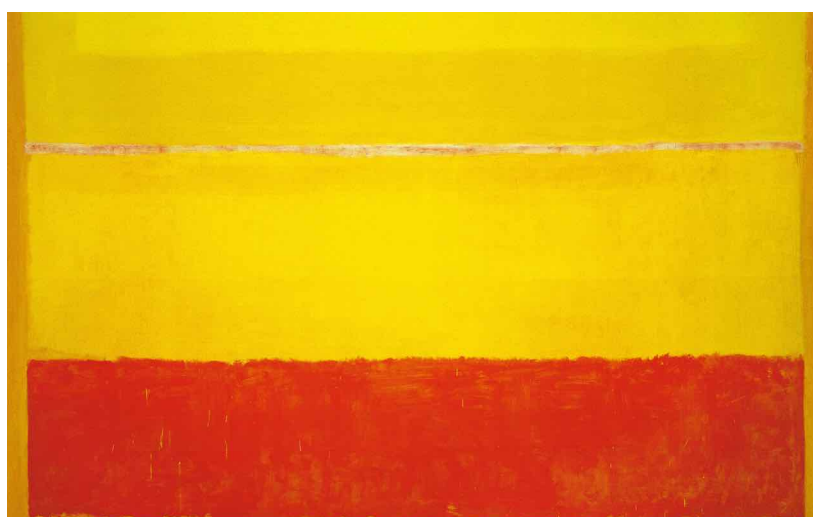


Jeff Koons' *Puppy* sculpture stands guard outside the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao



A swashbuckling
adventure awaits on
Sea Cloud Spirit

‘On sunny days we ate at the bistro on the top deck, it made me wish I’d packed clothes with elasticated waists so I could have seconds, and even thirds!’



Rothko's *Untitled* is on display alongside other iconic artists' work. Photo: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

we could stand, or sit in the classically styled steamer chairs, on the top deck. We'd watch, mesmerised, as the crew would brace the yards, clear the lines on deck and hit the rig (climb up the yards) to unfurl and trim the sails to catch the wind.

On sunny days we ate at the bistro on the top deck, with spectacular barbecue stations, salad bars, and desserts that were so delicious it made me wish I'd packed clothes with elasticated waists so I could have seconds, and even thirds!

Afternoons were spent lazing on giant sun loungers while my daughter went to the gym, running on the treadmill and doing reps while staring out to sea.

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS

We were sailing with award-winning wildlife and landscape photographer Michael Poliza, who snapped us and the ship from every angle, and talked about his travels to more than 180 countries, while celebrity Michelin-starred chefs Tristan Brandt (two stars) and Niklas Oberhofer (one star) prepared a special dinner in the main dining room for us one evening.

It was accompanied by wines from award-winning wine maker Roman Niewodniczanski who proffered taste after taste from bottles 3ft tall. But everything >



else on the *Sea Cloud Spirit* was the height of restraint and luxury including our cabin with its huge balcony, walk-in wardrobe, and bathroom with full tub and shower.

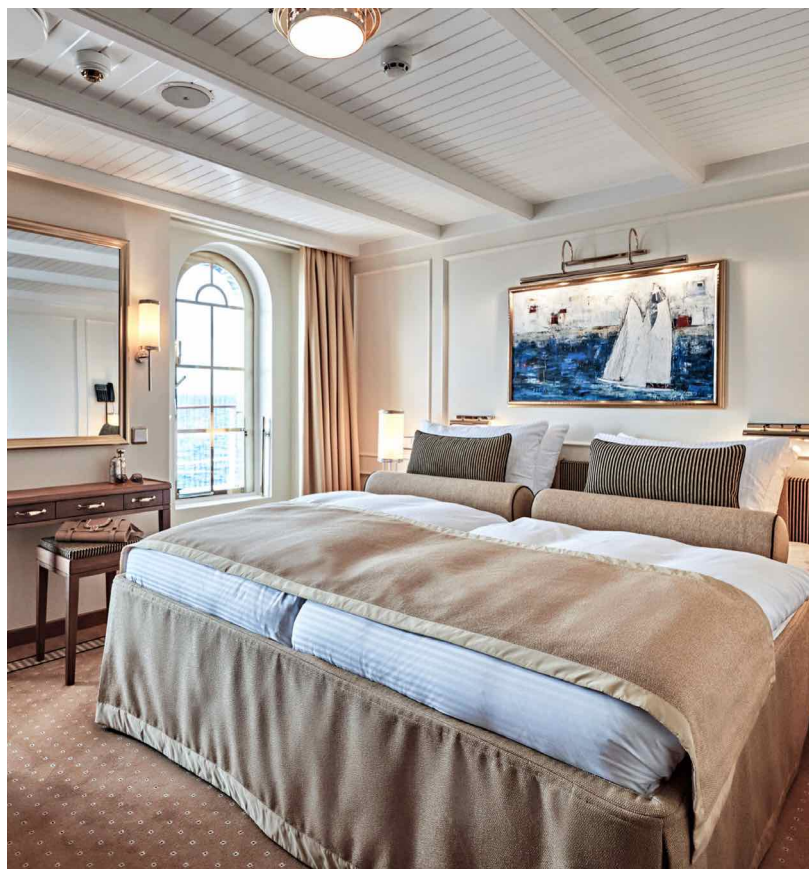
We had a flatscreen TV with free movies and hit shows, which came in useful when a storm meant we couldn't dock at Guernsey, and we spent the evening bucking and swaying on the sea.

My daughter and I headed back up to the top deck to watch the square rigger doing what she does best – harness the wind and slice through the waves as she headed towards Honfleur.

'This is amazing,' my daughter yelled as we tasted the salt spray and battled to stop the wind tangling our hair. It was a fantastic finale to a showstopping – and sustainably slow – swashbuckling adventure. ●

The details

An eight-night A Taste of the Atlantic Coast cruise from Bilbao to Honfleur on board *Sea Cloud Spirit* from May 28-June 5, 2024, calling at Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Belle-Ile-en-Mer, Guernsey and Honfleur costs from €5,035,50 per person for a double cabin. seacloud.com/en/cruises/the-diverse-atlantic-coast-scs-2420



Our cabin was more than ship-shape