



PICTURES

CALL OF NATURE

Pristine reefs and paradise islands
await on a sustainable sailing
through Central America

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I'm swimming through a real-life kaleidoscope. Iridescent angelfish in electric blue and gold, elegant 'rock beauties' in jet black and lemon yellow, and vibrant parrotfish in fuchsia and lime are my companions as I snorkel above bright pink corals. To my left, the coral drops away to reveal a deep blue abyss – a huge, gaping cavity that we've been told plunges 125m deep. My stomach lurches with vertigo.

"Welcome to the Great Blue Hole," says our guide Stephen, as I pop my head out of the water. "You're in one of the most pristine places on the planet."

And pristine it is. I'd seen this Unesco-listed wonder on a map – a giant splotch of indigo framed by a ring of aquamarine – but exploring it from the inside is something else. The water sparkles like sapphire, bubbles rise like champagne fizz around me and my ears crackle with the sound of fish nibbling.

Stephen tells us about the origins of this striking spectacle, which sits in the Belize Barrier Reef – the largest reef in the northern hemisphere – and was formed from a collapsed cave following the last ice age. Today the 'hole' measures 300m wide and 125m deep, with nurse sharks, hammerheads, stingrays and groupers all weaving through its waters.

We might not see any sharks, but I glimpse enough to understand why oceanographer Jacques Cousteau named it one of the world's top 10 sites for diving when he came here in 1971. Divers can dart between the millennia-old stalactites and stalagmites, and it's nothing short of entrancing.

PARADISE FOUND

It was far from the only nature encounter on our cruise, though. We were sailing the coast of Central America on *Sea Cloud Spirit* – a three-mast, 136-passenger windjammer operated by



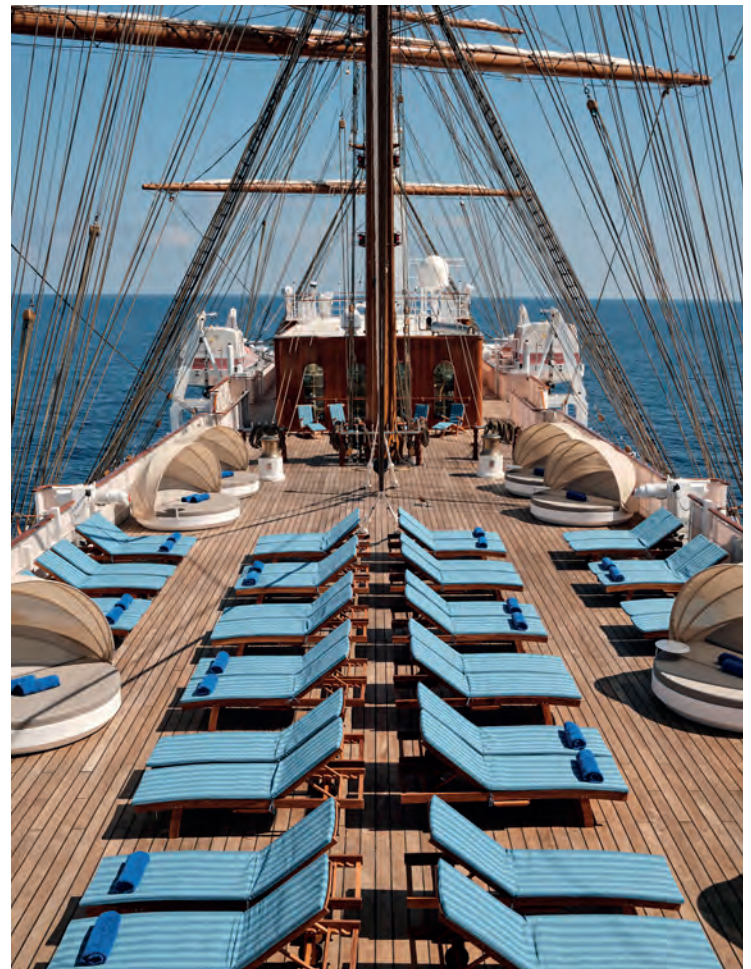
German line Sea Cloud Cruises, and the largest ship in the world where the crew still climb the rigging to raise the sails.

Our voyage took us from Panama City to Miami via Honduras, Belize, Mexico and the Bahamas, exploring one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet. Across 16 memorable days, we passed tiny islets filled with colourful wildlife and vibrant snorkelling spots home to fleshy, brain-shaped corals, as onboard marine biologist Stephen Weston talked us through the ecosystems and filled the gaps with insightful lectures.

Cruising on a smaller ship offers access to places the bigger vessels can't get to, with Zodiacs and local tenders taking us ashore. One such place is Guanaja, a remote, quintessentially Caribbean island off the coast of Honduras, where we eyed parrots in shades of scarlet red and apple green, and kayaked beside tropical fish on water that could have been poured from a bottle of turquoise curaçao. It's about as close to paradise as you can get – all leafy palms, floury white beaches, swinging hammocks – and a quieter, serene alternative to the island of Roatan, where many of the bigger ships dock.

Likewise in Panama, we headed out on a small boat to explore Bocas del Toro, an archipelago of 200-plus isles that's home to the country's first national marine park, Bastimentos. Here we saw blankets of emerald mangroves and learned about their importance within the ecosystem – from storing carbon to filtering out nitrates and phosphates from the water – and got a glimpse into local life, with passing fishermen floating in wooden boats besides bright-hued houses built on stilts. ▶

Opposite: The three-masted *Sea Cloud Spirit* has capacity for 136 guests
Clockwise from above: Brain-shaped coral in the shallows; tropical fish add flashes of colour along the Blue Hole's reefs; passengers can take in the views on sailing days from the ship's spacious sun deck



PICTURE: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK PHOTO/VELVET/FISHRICH CAREY

REVIEW



SEA CLOUD SPIRIT

Launched in 2021, this is the third and biggest ship in Sea Cloud Cruises' fleet, retaining all the glamour of original ship *Sea Cloud*. Its 69 staterooms are split into six categories, all with either windows or balconies looking out to sea. They're all generous in size and elegant in design – think mahogany furnishings, marble bathrooms and elegant hues of cream, gold and royal blue. There's plenty to keep guests busy, from the Lido Bar to the spa, gym, library and top deck, with sun loungers and daybeds.

The focus is on sustainability, too; when it can't sail due to wind conditions, the engine uses a low-emission, diesel-electric hybrid system. The food is superb, with a buffet-style breakfast and lunch, while dinner rotates between four-course menus and buffets on deck, with meat and fish cooked to order on the grill.

But it was the crew's passion for sailing that really blew me away above all else. As a German line, it's worth noting you might be one of only a few Brits on board – but if you're a sailing enthusiast or simply want a serene escape from it all, this is the ticket.



PICTURES: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK COLOURS; GRAFIS/ISTOCK; MODA/OCEAN; ALAMY/ALPINE GUIDE



CULTURAL CAPERS

There were more glimpses of local culture to come. On an excursion from Belize City to the ancient Maya site of Altun Ha, Belizean guides told us about life in the country, from its history as a British colony to its modern-day culture.

We delved much further into its past on arriving at the site, a millennia-old Maya city right in the heart of the jungle, that operated from 200BC to around 900AD. It was once home to the largest piece of jade in the Maya world, which is now stored in a bank vault in Belize City.

We were told about the blood-letting rituals and hallucinogenic ceremonies that once took place here, and how the city lay abandoned for 1,000 years until locals stumbled upon it in the 1960s, bringing it back to the world's attention. It was a fascinating stop that left me craving a little more in the way of history.

I didn't have to wait long; a few days later, we arrived in Mérida, a colonial-era city in the northeast of Mexico that's the capital of the Yucatán province and a hotspot for cultural exploration. As we explored its candy-coloured buildings, elaborate squares and opulent renaissance cathedral, we learnt more about the arrival of the conquistadors, hearing how their tortuous efforts to convert the local Maya people to Catholicism forever transformed the Indigenous culture, making for one of the most moving – and memorable – excursions on our voyage.

The journey is just as big a part of this cruise as the ports, though; Sea Cloud Cruises puts a lot of emphasis on sailing, and

Clockwise from above left: Spy vivid macaws on the island of Guanaja; colourful houses on stilts line the oceanfront on the coastlines of the Bocas del Toro archipelago; Mérida's Parque de los Hidalgos; the Maya temple of the Sun God in Altun Ha

for good reason. Its first ship, *Sea Cloud*, was built as a private yacht for ultra-wealthy American businesswoman Marjorie Merriweather Post in the 1930s. It later played host to royals, diplomats and other notable guests, and the line retains its strong sailing heritage today.

Every morning on at-sea days, we watched as members of the crew strapped on their harnesses and clambered up masts that tower 58m tall, becoming tiny dots as they unfurled the huge, bright-white squares above us.

Once the sails were up, we drifted serenely watching the ocean stretch off into the horizon without another ship in sight. Then spent days reading on deck as seabirds swooped overhead and ripples glimmered under the sun. In the evenings, we indulged in lavish dinners accompanied by a live pianist and stared up at stars covering the sky in a sprinkling of glitter.

It's a magical experience on a ship that's as much about the sailing as it is about the ports of call – and when the time came to get off and bid farewell to this enchanting part of the world, I definitely wasn't ready to say 'adios'. **CT**

✦ For more on small-ship sailings, go to cruiseandtravel.co.uk

GETTING THERE

Sea Cloud Cruises' 16-night Magic of Central America cruise on *Sea Cloud Spirit* is priced from €9,235, including all meals with sommelier-picked wines and beers, a five-course gala dinner, daily afternoon tea, soft drinks, gratuities, use of watersports facilities and a welcome bottle of champagne. Sailings around the Caribbean islands and Europe are also available; a seven-night Canaries cruise in spring starts at €3,155. seacloud.com