

Anything is Possible

Cruising the Baltic Sea with Crystal

By Lisa Codianne Fowler

Everyone looks glamorous. It's like being in a movie, and we are all stars. The Captain's Welcome Reception is some combination of senior prom night and the scene from the film "American President" when Annette Benning joins Michael Douglas at the White House State Dinner. Fanfare, photos, free-flowing drinks and hors d'oeuvres, clinking glasses, muted laughter, dancing, and ah... dinner. For this special night we choose caviar followed by Maine lobster, and request a side not listed on the menu — to which our server responds, "Of course. Anything is possible."



It's our second evening aboard the 940-guest, 50,000-ton Crystal



Symphony, a veritable floating six-star resort. Since my husband Patrick had never been on a cruise, he didn't realize the champagne and fresh fruit awaiting us in our deluxe stateroom were not par for the typical cruise ship course. Nor were the spacious accommodations with comfy sitting area, full bath and sprawling, private verandah overlooking the sea. But with each passing moment, meal, activity and staff encounter, it became crystal clear.

We visit the Crystal Cove piano bar — they're playing our song, "Unchained Melody" and we dance, even though there is no dance floor. Afterward I sit with the pianist for a photo — "do you mind?" I ask. He laughs, "Of course not. It's my honor and your ship. Anything is possible."

A late night stop at the casino finds us meeting, among other intriguing guests, the irreverently funny Raymond. He asks us how to operate the slots, then affectedly goes off on the Faberge and the Romanoffs, "They're a bit like the Addams family, aren't they?" Earlier, many of us attended shipboard lectures on various cultural aspects of Russia, with a focus on St. Petersburg, one of our ports of call.



Others include Stockholm, Helsinki, Denmark, Tallinn (Estonia) and disembarkation at Dover.

Hey, it's 6 a.m. Didn't we go to bed at midnight? Patrick is headed to the top deck to watch the tug pull us into Stockholm. I'm still sleepy, but his excitement is contagious. It's a misty morning, we glide past islands, sailboats, craggy rocks, forested hillsides, then open fields... the scenery changes constantly.

Stockholm, Helsinki and Copenhagen each hold their famous charms, but what interest could the tiny city of Tallinn in a strange sounding country like Estonia hold? Plenty. Following a painful half-century of Soviet rule, the people of Estonia threw off the shroud of domination and embraced the Western ways they so coveted. Through narrow cobblestone streets are designer shops mixed with art galleries and cafes. Elderly women wearing scarves attend church services, and outside, an informal street choral group sings "Hallelujah" in various melodies and harmonies... then breaks into "Oh Susanna."

Days at sea are no less fascinating. Seminars by international notables, a fitness center, two swimming pools and Jacuzzis, a beauty salon and lavish spa, live theatre, Broadway shows, movies, the Creative Learning Institute and the Avenue of the Stars — a fine collection of duty-free shops — keep even the most fidgety traveler captivated. The Computer University@Sea provides hands-on classes as well as Internet access for checking e-mail. We avail ourselves of the library to brush up on each port of call prior to arrival.

If it's Wednesday we must be in Russia. As our feet touch Russian soil for the first time, we are greeted by a small Russian band playing the Star Spangled Banner, then "When the Saints Go Marching In." Since St. Petersburg celebrated its 300th anniversary it has undergone major renovations. It seems a bit grey, though our guide points out the new bright colors of the buildings. We drive over the bridge of Catharine's Canal (named for Catharine the Great – wife of grandson of Peter the Great who had her hubby killed so she could rule the land) to see the Academy of Russian Ballet; among its graduates were Barishnikov and Nureyev, and the 18th century Church of St. Nicholas, patron of seamen, painted in the colors of the sea.

The greatest highlight is the Hermitage, where Catharine the Great launched the now famous art museum with her purchase of a private collection of 225 paintings. The museum now houses three million pieces of art. If you spent just one minute viewing each one, it would take nine years to see them all.



After a festive lunch complete with caviar, vodka and Russian performers at the opulent Hotel Astoria (where former President Bush stayed) we stop at a market where vendors are hawking their wares. We are briefly inspired to redecorate our entire home in a Russian motif, but fortunately, we're out of time and rubeles.

Dinner at the Crystal Dining Room this evening is naturally Russian-themed. The swanky restaurant features a daily changing international menu. The Jade Garden presents inventive Asian cuisine with selections from Wolfgang Puck's Chinois, and Prego specializes in

Italian. Daytime dining is as varied and includes sumptuous breakfast buffets, an elegant afternoon tea and a luscious ice cream bar. Lunch is offered at several casual eateries in addition to an array of themed buffets, grandiose spectacles of creativity in presentation and cuisine.

Late night libations and gourmet snacks are served at numerous venues; our favorite is the Connoisseur Club where we enjoy aged port and Cuban cigars. Daniel, the resident connoisseur, lights each cigar ceremoniously with a cedar stick. "This is art!" I exclaim. Daniel's response, "It has to be art. It's a cigar. It took ten years to make." He also explains that Crystal employees are genuinely cheerful and accommodating because they are treated "...like gold." He'll be attending a staff party later at 2 a.m. We, on the other hand, enjoy sunset from the deck (10 p.m. to 10:35 p.m.), then pop into the Starlight Club where there is not only dancing, but also male dance partners for single women.

Our final morning we wake up to a magnificent view of the White Cliffs of Dover, the subject of many a poem, song and of course, film. This majestic backdrop seems too beautiful to be real. And so our journey ends as it began, like a marvelous, dreamlike movie,, where anything is, well, you know.

If You Go:

Crystal Cruise Lines also operates Crystal Serenity, a 1,080-guest, 60,000-ton vessel and offers cruises to virtually all parts of the world, including trans-Atlantic, trans-Pacific and trans-global crossings. For complete details, visit www.crystalcruiseline.com.

