

By Mira Temkin



Delectable cuisine. Fascinating ports. Pampering at sea. These are the hallmarks of any cruise. But Holland America takes it all to whole new latitude. We departed out of San Diego aboard

the 1848 guest ms Oosterdam to the Mexican Riviera for seven nights, porting at Cabo San Lucas, Mazatlan and Puerto Vallarta. I discovered what "Signature of Excellence" meant at every knot.

Every Stateroom, a Gracious Retreat

When I walked into my stateroom, I was immediately impressed with the spacious accommodations and yes, even a bathtub! A plush Euro-top Mariner's Dream Bed with premium linens that made for an incredible night's sleep defined "Signature" touches. Coupled with the lull of the ocean, I slept somewhere between heaven and earth. Other sophisticated amenities included large flat panel TV (so I didn't miss a beat on CNN) with DVD player, massage showerhead, lighted magnifying mirrors, and salon-quality hair dryers. A variety of Elemis Aromapure "Time to Spa" bath amenities made me a real believer in these wondrous bath rituals.

Verandah or Not?

As an open window to the world, a private verandah is a pure delight. I loved sipping morning coffee, reading in the afternoon and taking in the night breezes. I believe having a verandah gives you an even richer cruise experience. Sometimes you can upgrade to a verandah if there's space available on embarkation day. I say, go for it!

As You Wish Dining -- More Flexibility

Most cruise ships offer traditional dining with pre-set times. Holland goes one better by giving guests real choice with their

new "As You Wish Dining," now available on most ships. You may opt for traditional seating or make a reservation in the main dining room. Better yet, if you're not sure when you want to eat, just come to the dining room and wait for the next available table. I loved these options because it gave us such flexibility and a chance to enjoy different dining companions every night. Interestingly, many of our dining companions gleefully told us they were on their fifth or sixth Holland cruise.

"Many of our return guests request the same cabin, the same steward and the same table in the dining room every year," said Doug Hernandez, Hotel Director of the Oosterdam. "They know Holland will deliver the same consistent, high quality standards they've come to expect every time."



The Pinnacle Grill -- Intimate and Elegant

This reservations-only, sophisticated steakhouse features Sterling Silver beef, inspired seafood dishes and select wines rated "Excellent" by Wine Spectator. Surrounded by images of Rembrandt's "Night Watch," exquisite hand made pewter chairs, Bvlgari® china and Riedel® stemware, Chef Brad Carter has created a contemporary American menu fusing elements of continental cuisine. Bone-in Rib-Eye steak with sun-dried tomato steak sauce and lamb rack chops



with apple-spice chutney, coupled with a magnificent tableside presentation of seasonal greens, were divine. This superb meal was topped off with Baked Alaska and a Crème Brulee trio of vanilla, chocolate and coffee. Perfection, indeed!

The Greenhouse Spa -- Relax to the Max

This world-renowned spa brings you all the services you would expect. But their thermal suite and hydrotherapy pool, reminiscent of an opulent Turkish bath, was something I did not. This proved to be the ultimate in relaxation. How could I not try one of their treatments? I chose the Elemis Aroma Stone Therapy. As the penetrating heat of volcanic basalt stones were placed on key energy points, I drifted into a world of pure bliss and felt the stress melting away.

More Signature Touches

Holland enhances your cruise with many innovative experiences. The Culinary Arts Center, presented by Food & Wine



Holland America -- Signature of Excellence at Sea



Magazine, is a state-of-the-art demonstration kitchen offering interactive gourmet cooking lessons taught by their own Master Chefs or culinary guests. I always find the art auctions fascinating. While I don't always come away with art, I do come away with having learned something, in this case about Peter Max, who's painted the Statue of Liberty every year since 1976.



On Deck for the Cure™

On every cruise, Holland America supports the Susan Komen Breast Cancer Foundation by sponsoring a 5K walk around the deck. With 500 cruises throughout the year, Holland has raised \$400,000 since the campaign launched in March, 2007 with more than 500,000 guests participating. By making a \$15 donation, guests get a pink T-shirt, pink wrist band and pink lemonade party after the walk, not to mention a tremendous sense of pride.

Always a New Adventure

What I like best about cruising is new experiences at port. I wasn't brave enough to try the latest Canopy Adventure -- called Zip Lining -- where you swing from treetop to treetop in the dense wilderness. But Shore Excursion host Simon Bradley told me this is their most popular excursion, followed by the Dolphin Encounter, Pirate Ship Sail and Whale Watching. I did ride in a Dune Buggy across the rugged Baja desert, watching cacti and desert terrain pass me by and kayak around Kaktus Island. After that, I was just happy to relax on my verandah, looking out at the sparkling blue waters and reflect -- now this is cruising!

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What's Ahead for Holland

The Mexican Riviera has become such a popular itinerary from San Diego, Holland has expanded the number of 7 and 10-day offerings to more than 40 departures through 2008. Holland's newest ship, the Signature Class ms Eurodam will make her North American debut in Canada and New England in the fall of 2008. Holland America's line of 13 world class ships offers nearly 500 cruises to more than 320 ports throughout the world. For more information about Holland America, call 1-877-SAIL-HAL or visit www.hollandamerica.com.

Rhythms of the Night -- Amazing adventure to a land untouched by time

When I signed up for this Puerto Vallarta shore excursion, I really didn't know what to expect. Jokingly, I describe my experience as "Survivor" -- with catering! We boarded a catamaran for a delightful 45 minute ride. This mystical journey took us to Las Caletas, the former hideaway of movie director John Huston, accessible only by boat. As we approached Las Caletas, we could see the flickering torches and swaying palms, hear the songs of the jungle and smell the fragrant incense. We were escorted to our table on the beach and dined by candlelight on a buffet of island delicacies. Then the rhythm of the drumbeat beckoned to the pyramid stage for a mesmerizing performance of ritual dance and music. It ended with the steps of the pyramid -- all ablaze! Still speechless by this visual and culinary feast, we boarded the cat for our return sail to the ship, made even better by an open bar and romantic dancing. And no one got voted off the island!