

Cruising the Italian Riviera on Voyager

Monaco to Venice

From the magic of Monaco to the romance of Venice, the Radisson Seven Seas Voyager circumnavigated the Italian Riviera for seven days. Each day brought a new and wonderful destination which is only available on a cruise ship that plys the azure waters of the Mediterranean.

The Seven Seas Voyager is the newest addition to the Radisson fleet, and proudly boasts a majority of balcony suites, along with a very modern and tastefully decorated interior, with heavy influence on rich hardwoods, granite and marble. Artwork adorns every public space, and beautiful arrangements of flowers greet the passengers each day.

While the itinerary of the ship constantly changes, what remains a unique standard aboard is the professional staff. I have yet to experience any better service available from the attentive crew which Radisson has aboard their ships. The crew would always greet you and many would remember your name with a few days. The captain and his staff take care of all your needs, and make sure that the cruise is a memorable one.

Flights to Europe. The flight and from Europe is long. Figure on anywhere from 7.5 to 8.5 hours, depending on prevailing winds, from the East Coast. Economy on Delta is cramped and uncomfortable. If you can get a Business Class upgrade, get it. I was lucky on the way over, getting an isle seat next to an empty window seat, so there was plenty of room to stretch out. I found that working on my portable computer melted the time away faster than the in-flight movie. For some reason, the flight home seemed to create the most jet-lag, which took a good five days to readjust. I highly recommend not drinking on these long flights, even though it's tempting while in Business Class (since it's free).

Restaurants. Compass Rose is the main dining room in which most people will dine. The food is good and the service is average. For breakfast or lunch, try the Pool Grill or Verandah. The Pool Grill will have a few grill outs which were incredibly good (everything from steaks to grilled tuna made to order). The specialty restaurants Latitudes and Signatures require reservations which are nearly impossible to get after the first day (when everybody makes reservations). Since these restaurants offer seating of between 40-50, space is very limited. I found the reservation system frustrating, and many passengers never did get to eat in either specialty restaurants. I finally got reservations for Latitudes, and had a wonderful dining experience, and the food was excellent. I did eventually get a reservation for Signatures for the last night, but by then most passengers were eating in Venice for the evening. I opted to eat at Verandah for the last night, and found it to be my favorite. The service in Verandah was the best on the ship, and the food was served in a combination of buffet and entree order. While you were eating, a group of costumed troubadours played Italian music. I wished I had eaten there every night, since reservations were not required and the mood was more festive.

SPA. Getting reservations for a message takes some patience, or better yet, make plans early. Since I'm flexible on time, it took a few days to plan a message when the SPA wasn't fully booked. I had a full body massage which was very relaxing. The standard for massages is the SPA at Little Palm Island, where at the end of the massage you are greeted with a bowl of strawberries and fresh, cool water. There's no upselling on this ship, which is nice. Larger ships try to sell you everything from vitamins to massage lotion at the end of your massage.

Suites. The Suites on this ship are outstanding. The bathrooms are gorgeous, and lined with marble. I had a penthouse suite which had a small sitting area, bar, balcony, double bed, desk, and bathroom with shower and tub. The room is equipped with dual voltage. This suite had a generous walk-in closet, complete with an umbrella, safe, hairdryer, iron, and lots of hanger space.

Embarkation. Embarkation was smooth and efficient. In the classic Radisson Seven Sea's style, you are always greeted with a glass of champagne when you board the ship. Immediately upon going onboard, you are issued a key card for your shipboard charges and room key. At the same time, your digital photo is taken and your credit card is swiped to establish your credit account. After that, you are free to roam the ship until your cabin is ready. On this cruise, I got onboard shortly after 12 noon, but the cabin wasn't ready until 2:30 p.m.. In the interim, I had a lunch on the pool deck, then changed into more comfortable clothes and took ship photos.

Disembarkation. The last day of the cruise is always the worst, yet Radisson makes the disembarkation process smooth and painless. After spending a week on a cruise ship, the last thing you want to do is leave, and return to real life. The night before, they request you set out your luggage (with colored tags which signify your time of departure from the ship). Throughout the night, luggage is collected, and taken off the ship. Most of the bars stop serving at 12:30 p.m. and your credit account is tallied and delivered to your room by 6:00 a.m. You are requested to be out of your cabin by 8:00 a.m. and can wait in any of the public areas until your color departure is called. Generally, this is within an hour, and you're off to the airport or post-cruise hotel.

Touring. I take a number of tours whenever I cruise to sample the tour operators and local port destinations. On this cruise I took the Pompeii tour and then the Naxos/Tauromina (Greek Theater) tour. The other ports of call I visited and explored on my own. There's a good balance between doing some touring on your own, and having a more structured visit. Tours are generally more moderately paced, while doing your own exploring allows you to focus more on specific areas of interest. The benefit of a tour is that the guide has a great deal more local knowledge of the area, along with its history and culture.

Languages. On this cruise, you'll experience French, Italian, Greek, and Croatian languages. It helps to have a basic knowledge of the greetings, but you'll find most people are very helpful, even if they don't speak any English. The common unit of currency, the Euro, makes moving between countries a breeze, and since the Euro is almost the same as the US Dollar, conversions are easy. Wherever I went, I tried to pay with my credit card (American Express and Visa are accepted in most places), and if they didn't accept plastic, I would pay with Euros. Keep in mind that whenever you change from dollars to Euros or even Euro travelers checks to Euros, you will be charged a transaction fee. I exchanged \$300 worth of Euro Travelers checks in Nice, and was charged a \$5 Euro fee at a local bank.

The ship can convert your dollars as well. Always carry some of the local currency for a cab or a local cafe. I found that cab rides in almost every port were between \$10 and \$20 Euro. Tipping in Europe is not the norm, but spare change is sometimes left on the table. There is not a 10-15% rule as is in the states. As far as service goes, you'll be spoiled on the ship, and the opposite will be true ashore. I had pizza at a local restaurant in Sorrento which took forever to get served. This is normal. Life in Europe is for socially paced, so don't expect quick, or efficient service.

Entertainment. Since there were no days at sea, most passengers spent most of the days on shore doing tours or viewing the local culture. In the evening, there was a wide variety of wonderful entertainment, from Karaoke to theater performances. Radisson has always done a remarkable job in getting quality entertainers. My favorite is always the piano bar. On Voyager, they had a piano player, guitar player, a keyboard/singer team, theater troupe, and a small band. All were excellent performers.

Venice Glass. One of the highlights of the cruise was the artisan glass found in Venice. The Murano Glass Factory is a tour which you should put at the top of your list, next to the gondola rides through the canals. I got to one of the Murano Glass stores and bought several beautiful pieces of glass art. This art is timeless, and a great way to remember Venice.

Sampling the Culture. The most fun you'll have voyaging is sampling the local culture. Whether this means a cup of cappuccino, a beer, or meal in a local restaurant, it's the best way to get a taste of the port you're visiting. Even an internet cafe can provide some insight into the area you're traveling. Part of the adventure in traveling is taking in the sights, sounds and foods to where you're going. Italy is full of culture, and fantastic food. You'll find a new cafe to explore in every port. In Sorrento, try the lemonchillo (a liquor that is made from local lemons).

Cabin Selection. Since Voyager is new, the cabins are excellent. However, the back end of ship vibrates from azipod drive system, which is most severe around 19 knots (cruising speed), and mostly at night. I was told that the ship was going into dry-dock to try and cure the problem, but I recommend getting a cabin forward or amidships. My cabin, which was aft of amidships, did not have any vibration, but in Horizon Lounge, the vibration was quite noticeable. So much so, that it becomes annoying after a while. I spent very little time in Horizon. Of course, in port, or during slow speed cruise, there was little or no vibration. Nor did the vibration extend to other parts of the ship. It was very localized to the stern area.

The Mediterranean is one of the most beautiful seas to voyage. The picturesque Italian cliffside villages made this cruise very memorable. The stunning sunsets and the cruise down the Grand Canal in Venice are memories which will last a lifetime. Radisson, and the staff on the Voyager provides a cruise which will be a hallmark in your traveling life, it is not to be missed. Choose your itinerary which will allow both shipboard and adventures in port, and you'll have a vacation which will make you yearn for another voyage.

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