



The French touch

Arriving in Valletta, capital of Malta at sunrise.

Joie de vivre on a Mediterranean cruise

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PONANT's Le Champlain at port in Mahon, Menorca.

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hen our cruise ship comes to a sudden stop in the middle of the Mediterranean, we think something's wrong. Rising from our loungers, where we've been basking in the late October sunshine, we lean over the side to investigate.

Below us, the stern deck opens like a drawbridge. A perforated platform rises up like the mythical phoenix. And what looks like a giant mechanical arm pushes the platform out and over the rippling blue waves. Presto—it's a dock!

Next, we watch as a couple of crew zip around in zodiacs and rope in a large rectangle of ocean to create an Olympic-sized pool. More crew on deck bring out masks, snorkels and those colourful "noodles" that help you stay afloat.

Then, a flurry of excitement as we realize... we're going swimming!

Given that most guests on board are retirees, I'm surprised how quickly everyone reacts to this unscheduled fun. Soon, people are gleefully jumping off the dock and bobbing about in the 25-degree Celsius water.

After a delightful swim and snorkel myself, I notice the captain standing on the dock. Wearing shorts and chatting with guests, his hair is slick from a swim as well.

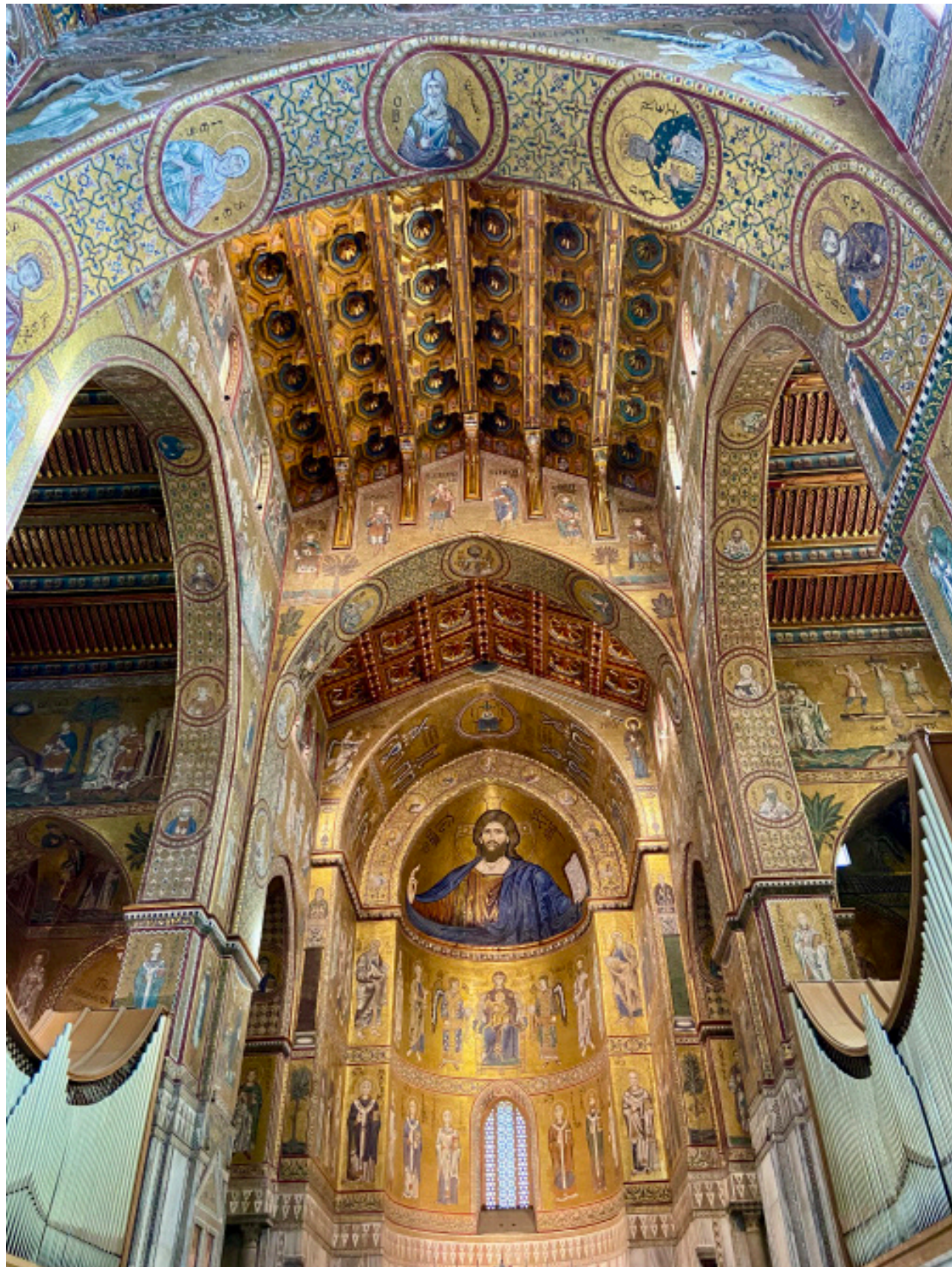
Up on the deck, a pool party has broken out with music, punch, and—because this cruise line is proudly French—crepes bathed in butter and served with chocolate sauce and half a dozen toppings.

Over dinner that night, Richard Henderson, an American we've met from New Jersey, who—like us—is on his first PONANT cruise, jokes that if we were in North America, we would have been obligated to sign multiple waivers before ever being allowed to swim so casually off the back of the ship.

Happily, PONANT sees things differently.

And that's because, as I discover on this week-long cruise, PONANT is different from other cruise companies. Founded by a group of professional sailors in 1988, it's still the only French-flagged cruise line in the world, and genuinely sees itself as a proponent of the French way of life.

What does that mean exactly? It's the sharing of French culture and know-how, and imbuing each of PONANT's 13 ships with "the French



Monreale Cathedral, Palermo, Sicily.

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touch.” There are fabrics by Pierre Frey, for instance, subtle room fragrance by Fragonard and toiletries by Hermès, among other things.

And it's true that from the moment I'm greeted with “Bonjour, madame,” and handed a flute of champagne upon boarding our ship in Barcelona, to the final “Au revoir, madame,” in Valletta, Malta, this cruise feels distinctly French.

And that's without even stopping at any French ports. Instead, we explore the Albufera wetlands near Valencia in Spain, where short grain rice is cultivated for paella, the country's national dish. On the Balearic Islands of Mallorca and Menorca, we stroll narrow cobblestone streets, taste local pastries, shop for shoes (PONS makes its Avarca shoes in Menorca) and learn the history of these sun-bleached islands.

In the old city of Palermo, Sicily, we are gobsmacked by all the gold in the Monreale Cathedral and the exquisite mosaics in the 12th-century Palatine Chapel. We sip fresh-squeezed orange juice from a street seller to quench our thirst in this never-ending summer of 2022.

While our on-shore excursions provide almost-daily highlights, it's our sleek, luxurious ship that offers rest and relaxation.

Le Champlain is named for French explorer Samuel de Champlain and is one of six Explorer ships in PONANT's fleet. Just 131 metres long, it's cosily intimate with 92 rooms and suites. And while there's nothing particularly French about that, the fact is, size matters.

I can walk from our room on Deck 5 to the outdoor pool on Deck 3 in about two minutes. Same thing when I go to the panoramic lounge on Deck 6 to read in the light-filled library.

This ship is designed to human scale, rather than for economies of scale. So, I'm not surprised to learn that PONANT was voted the Best Expedition Ship Line and the Best Small Ship Line in the world in the 2022 Reader's Choice awards by *Condé Nast Traveler*.

Many of the crew are French, of course, and also a third of the guests, but those of us with only high school French or less (there are lots of Americans, Aussies and Brits on board) don't



Traditional sandals of Menorca.

feel left out as announcements are made in both French and English, and crew members switch effortlessly between the two languages.

I was more concerned that enjoying haute cuisine each evening might require a variety of elegant outfits and multiple pairs of shoes. Since I'm traveling with only a carry-on, I'm happy to learn that we can enjoy casual dinners outdoors at Le Grill or dress up for a multi-course gastronomic experience indoors with wine pairings at Le Nautilus.

But inside or out, the food on board *Le Champlain* is indisputably French and fabulous. In 2016 PONANT partnered with Ducasse Conseil, the consulting firm founded by three-Michelin-star French chef Alain Ducasse, to raise its culinary bar. Ducasse's team now trains all PONANT chefs and creates recipes for them.

One afternoon, I'm reviewing the program and notice that at 5 pm guest lecturer Malene Rydahl is speaking on “How to live happier.” Malene is an executive coach and the author of the best-selling book *Happy as a Dane*.

I figure I'll go to her lecture, then head to the lounge at the opposite end of the ship for the 6 pm “Tasting of Pata Negra.” That's the Iberian ham that comes from a dark-coloured breed of pig that's raised free-range and fed acorns.

When I arrive in the theatre, Malene is on stage speaking, but to an empty room. I look around. Out of 138 guests on board, fewer than a dozen are here.

I think I know why. It's not because something else is going on, but because PONANT guests have already figured out how to be happy. Enjoying cruises like this one is surely one of the ways. **B**