

## **The *Sea Cloud* Provides Classic Luxury Sailing**

**By Joe Pollack**

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The ship built in 1931 for E.F. Hutton and Marjorie Merriweather Post, cruises the Mediterranean out of Barcelona, emphasizing art and architecture.

There's just something about sailing ships. . .

Midshipman Horatio Hornblower traveled on them, and so did the pirate Scaramouche, about whom Rafael Sabatini wrote, "He was born with the gift of laughter, and a sense of the world gone mad." Poet John Masefield produced the memorable lines, "I must go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky. And all I ask is a tall ship, and a star to steer her by."

So when the mail arrived one day last spring, and a flier from the National Trust for Historic Preservation described a cruise, with emphasis on art and architecture, on a magnificent, four-masted sailing ship built the year I was born, I was dipping into savings and writing a check the same afternoon.

I've traveled on cruise ships before; I wrote a Post-Dispatch article about a decade ago on a trip along the Norwegian coast, and one some years before that about a Baltic cruise to Oslo, Stockholm and St.Petersburg. I like being on the ocean, but I'm not enamored of gigantic cruise ships that need several hours to unload passengers into souvenir-driven ports and whose onboard activities feature second-rate entertainers and groaning, never-ending buffet tables.

I was hooked before I had finished the first page of the brochure. It was a two-week program involving a visit to Barcelona, where I once spent a single night but saw little, and would feature the architecture of Antonio Gaudi, some of the world's most memorable. There was a side trip to Bilbao for a visit to the new Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry, and then there was a cruise through the Mediterranean, beginning in Barcelona, stopping at a number of French Riviera towns and ending in Nice, where we would spend a couple of days before the return flight.

I had visited the Riviera before and loved every bit of it, and was eager to return, to breathe the sea air and to look at the blue of the Provencal skies, inspiration for so many great painters. And then there was the ship, the *Sea Cloud*.

A four-masted, full-rigged bark, it was built in Germany in 1931 as *Hussar*, a wedding present in the days when loving bridegrooms presented their brides with wedding gifts that would last. Financier E.F. Hutton had it built for his bride, breakfast cereal heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post. As it happened, the ship lasted far longer than the marriage; she got it in the divorce, renamed it *Sea Cloud*, and kept it when she married Joseph Davies, U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union in the days before World War II. *Sea Cloud* went along, docking in the St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) harbor. During the war, Post leased it to the U.S. government for a dollar a year, and the Coast Guard, after giving it the glamorous name of *IX-99*, used it for weather patrol duty.

*Sea Cloud* was returned to Post after the war, and she again used it as a private yacht, with 12 passengers cared for by a staff and crew of 66. She sold it in 1955, and for the next 20 years, there was a succession of names -- Angelina, Antama, Patria -- and owners, including President Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, and international playboy Porfirio Rubirosa, who docked it in Los Angeles and used it for parties and entertainment of all types. Finally, it was bought by a German consortium in 1974, renamed *Sea Cloud of Grand Cayman* and then just *Sea Cloud*. It still roams the world, leased to various organizations and tour operators, based in Hamburg and staffed by a crew that is mostly German, but under a Russian captain, Evgeny Nemerzhitsky.

It is 360 feet long, 48 feet wide at midships and provides luxury cruising for a maximum of 68 passengers, but oddly, it cannot dock in the United States. Ship personnel reported that because of its wooden construction, it did not meet fire-safety standards at American facilities, and also pointed out that because of more stringent regulations to come, its career will end in 2010. It is hoped that the ship will become a museum and an adjunct of the Hillwood Museum and Gardens, the Post estate along the Potomac.

Sailing on it was an amazing experience, aided by the fact that the Mediterranean, at least in the summer, is as gentle as Post-Dispatch Lake in Forest Park. We had a gentle roll on a couple of days; mostly, we pattered along at just

enough speed to provide a breeze. We did hoist sail on several occasions, for a couple of hours at a time, with the crew showing off its climbing and rigging skills and the ship looking especially beautiful under its full complement of 34 sails, from the flying jib forward to the spanker, bringing up the rear, or aft.

Alas, romantic dreams were shattered -- never did waves break over the bow, never were passengers or crew lashed to the masts or keelhaunched, never were we forced to repel boarders, never did we proceed at a speed high enough or in seas rough enough to create the romantic image of a ship sailing with a bone in her teeth as foamy white spray rose in clouds while the ship knifed through the blue water. But the ocean shone as brightly as the glitter-strewn hair and eyelids of Olympic gymnastic nymphets.

And blue it was. Sky and sea were a gorgeous azure hue, and once again, it was easy to see why artists such as Picasso, Renoir, Chagall, Matisse, Van Gogh, Braque, Leger, Gauguin and so many others lived and worked along the Riviera or in Provence, or paid extended visits to the area.

Cabins were roomy, with shower facilities and air conditioning, and everything was spotless. The mahogany and brass gleamed under daily polishing, and there was a roomy lounge/dining room that doubled as a lecture area. The crew was obliging and available, relaxed in the knowledge that we were sailing in perfect weather. Two cabins below, originally for Hutton and Post, have been restored and are used by special passengers. They are spacious suites, with full bathrooms. Hers is white, in French provincial decor, and his is more masculine, with dark wood.

We were fortunate, on this trip, because Ellen Charles, Post's granddaughter, was on board and able to tell stories of her own childhood traveling with the rich and famous in romantic waters, to once-in-a-lifetime ports of call. If there was a cloud in this luxurious world, it was that I did not consider the food and wine to provide sufficient value. Too much food had been stocked in the freezers in advance, and as a traveler who always tries to eat and drink the victuals of the immediate area, I thought, for example, that French or Spanish sausage would have been preferable to German sausage, excellent as it was, and that local vegetables and cheese should have been served more often. Wine was a real sore point. There is no need to serve second-line Chilean and Argentine wine when the French and the Spanish make far better second-line wine. And to ignore the marvelous rose wines of Provence is a major shortcoming. A luxury cruise, at premium prices, should not skimp.

Eva Eppert, the chef, was charming and eager, offering some lovely presentations, but not quite as imaginative as I would have hoped. Or perhaps she was limited by her budget.

We sailed only 411 miles (357 knots, 662 kilometers) and there was plenty of time for shore excursions, run in tip-top fashion. A couple of experienced, talented cruise directors kept everything, and everyone, on course. Large, comfortable buses always were on time, water was always available, and road travel time was short. Eugenio Suarez-Galban and his wife, Carmen Ana Sierra, were excellent lecturers on history, art and architecture, and we had additional guides on a number of the bus rides and town and museum visits. High marks for that part of the journey.

Barcelona is a throbbing, vibrant, modern city with a great history and a superb view of the world, much of it ignited by the 1992 Olympic Games. It's a great seaport, with outstanding restaurants, featuring dishes such as razor clams and glorious lamb, great food markets, fine shops, a fashionable air to shopping streets and public spaces, a strong nationalism based on a major use of Catalan as its language and the amazing, unusual architecture of Antonio Gaudi (1852-1926).

Gaudi's native Catalan spells the first name as Antoni. Gaudi claimed he took nature as his inspiration, and he must have, because there doesn't seem to be a single straight line anywhere in all of his buildings, nor are motifs repeated, even in the same building. One of them, Casa Mila (for Pere Mila, the industrialist who hired him) now is part museum, part apartment house. Two of the apartments are open to tourists, preserved as they were in the '20s, and they offer fabulous memories. The building, nicknamed "La Pedrera," which means quarry, because of the raw, almost tortured look of the stone, also provides splendid views of Barcelona from its windows and its roof.

Gaudi's most famous structure remains unfinished, maybe the longest-lasting construction job since the Pyramids of Egypt. The Temple of the Sacred Family, its construction site open as a museum and as something to marvel at, was begun in 1882, and Gaudi was hired as project manager the following year. His presence changed it immediately and immensely. Work was halted after Gaudi was hit by a streetcar and died, in 1926, but it resumed in 1952 and has continued since.

A third monument to Gaudi is Casa Battlo, designed and built as a private home. Casa Battlo is a museum of modern art all created by one man, and it, too, is an amazing, often breathtaking place to visit. Only the ground floor is open, but it's enough. Parquet floors are gorgeous, and they lead to a curving staircase whose hand rails are sensuous in their beauty and need to be touched. The living room looks out on what was the most fashionable street in the city, and the entire structure is remarkable and memorable.

Barcelona, a classic city. The Riviera, classic art and scenery. Nice, a remarkable town with a classic air. The *Sea Cloud*, its sails billowing in the breeze, offering a classic fortnight.

If you go..

Traveling on a ship such as the *Sea Cloud*, with all amenities (except tips) provided, and transportation to and from New York, is expensive, and can be very expensive, depending on the cabin and the particular itinerary. Our trip began in Barcelona a many (though not all) meals, good guides and lecturers and first-class ground transport, with per person prices from \$5,000 to \$12,000, plus St. Louis-New York transportation.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has many travel-and-learning programs, at sites all over the world, at a considerable range of prices. For more information, check the organization's Web site, [www.nationaltrust.org](http://www.nationaltrust.org), or call 1-202-588-6000.

Academic Arrangements Abroad is a large arranger of pleasure-study trips, packaging them for a variety of clubs, alumni organizations and the like. The group can be contacted at [www.info@arrangementsabroad.com](http://www.info@arrangementsabroad.com) or 1-800-221-1944.

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