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MEET THE NEW STARS OF CRUISING: VIKING STAR AND WINDSTAR'S STAR PRIDE

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Star power



Windstar Cruises raises the bar on affordable luxury with three new “star class” power yachts.

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV

CAN AFFORDABLE LUXURY CRUISING get any better? We’re splashing out in a suite – all 106 staterooms are outside suites that come with huge picture windows or balconies plus living areas (where we can order multi-course dinners if we wish). There’s even a walk-in closet. We have deluxe L’Occitane bath products, his-and-hers sinks and a full-size bathtub too in the marble bathroom. And, oh, the food! How are we going to zip up our pants with the food being this scrumptious?

Welcome to the *Star Pride* – the first in a trio of Windstar Cruises’ new ‘star class’ yachts. Windstar prides itself on their ports-of-call being the chief attraction. We fondly recall our Tahiti and Amalfi Coast cruises on Windstar’s tall ships – intimate enough to nose into hidden bays and secluded villages the big ship contenders can only dream about. But if the new *Star Pride* is any indication, the ‘star class’ yachts can boast star power themselves.

Until recently, Windstar was known for its three motorized, tall-ship yachts (*Wind Surf*, *Wind Spirit* and *Wind Star*). The line then acquired the 440-ft. *Pride* from the luxury Seabourn fleet, which set sail as the *Star Pride* under the Windstar flag in 2014. Two sister ships were also

plucked from Seabourn, and after a multi-million dollar transformation (double the upgrades of the *Star Pride*), the *Star Legend* and *Star Breeze* were launched by Windstar in May, 2015. The three ‘star class’ yachts offer a new level of luxury for port-hopping Windstar guests.

You’ll especially love the extra-roomy suites. At 277 sq. ft. in size, they have lots of elbow room. And they’re all about serenity. *Star Pride*’s suites feature new dove grey carpeting and blonde wood cabinetry topped with creamy marble. Color accents come in blue satin borders on the bed linens and a navy blue leather desk chair. Curtains, tied back with tassels, separate the bedroom from the living area, which has a love-seat and two armchairs around a marble coffee table – we enjoyed sipping quiet cups of afternoon tea in the privacy of our living room while gazing out our open balcony window.

Other standard in-suite amenities include a stocked minibar with complimentary water and soft drinks, LCD flatscreen TV and DVD player (lots of movies we could check out from the library), Euro-top bed mattress, Egyptian cotton towels in the bathroom, waffle-weave robes, slippers, fresh fruit bowl and vase of flowers.

STAR CLASS

Windstar Cruises' new *Star Pride*, *Star Breeze* and *Star Legend* are luxurious, all-suite power yachts.

Expect the same trademark offerings as on Windstar's tall-ship yachts – open bridge, relaxed but elegant dining, etc. – but on more spacious vessels.

From spring to fall, the new 'star class' ships sail in Europe (including Iceland), the Mediterranean and Morocco; in winter, they cruise the Caribbean, Panama and Costa Rica.



A third of the suites also have Juliet balconies with glass railings. We couldn't sit outside, but throwing open the sliding glass doors to let the sunshine and breeze in from our balcony gave us that same outdoor feeling. The walk-in closet was a lovely surprise too. We had oodles of hangers and hanging space – more than enough room to hang every item of clothing we packed. Add to that all the shelves, cupboard drawers and hooks. No living out of suitcases here! We really felt like we had settled in – and that's a nice feeling, especially on longer cruises.

As for dining onboard, the welcome Windstar philosophy of "casual elegance" is the same on the new vessels. Eat with whomever you wish (or just the two of you). Eat when you want. And, gents, don't worry – there's no need to wear a jacket or tie. AmphorA, the main restaurant, attractively decorated with Murano glass panels, serves international and ethnic specialties. On our cruise, the Indian lamb biryani and chicken curry were so delicately spiced they were as popular as the beef tenderloin.

Veranda, the breakfast and lunch buffet venue, has indoor and outdoor seating at the stern (white tablecloth setting). At night, it becomes the reservations-only Candles Grill, offering expertly prepared steak, lamb chops and seafood. We liked eating alfresco, watching dusk work its magic on the scenery ashore, as the *Star Pride* pulled out of port. One evening on each cruise, Windstar pulls out all the stops with its gala deck barbecue under the stars – suckling pig, grilled lobster and paella, cooked à la carte. There's no extra cost for specialty dining or cappuccino and sparkling water (but you pay for wine and alcohol).

Good thing there's a unique swim-and-sports platform at the back of each yacht, open when conditions are right. You can burn off some of those calories with complimentary water toys like wakeboards, kayaks, standup paddleboards, sailboats and waterskis. It makes you feel like this is your own private yacht! There's also a delicious sense of freedom that comes from swimming right from the yacht to floating rubber mats tied to the platform. Prefer your activity on land? Windstar carries state-of-the-art folding bicycles for rent – perfect for exploring some of Europe's coastal villages.

Europe, in fact, is where the yachts will spend their time from spring to fall. A new itinerary between Venice and Athens entices with scenic cruising along the coasts of Croatia and Montenegro and through the Corinth Canal (which the height of Windstar's sailing-style yachts prevented). Do you fancy exploring Iceland? Come 2016, *Star Legend* will circumnavigate Iceland on several summer voyages. Soak in the famous Blue Lagoon, ride an Icelandic horse, fly over raging waterfalls, see huge puffin colonies and kayak through the West Fjords.

For winter, new Costa Rica voyages on *Star Breeze* will immerse you in all that's special about the country – volcano tours, spider monkey spotting in national parks, swimming at white sand beaches and rainforest exploration. Sign us up!

On each cruise, you're treated to a complimentary private signature event, like an outdoor concert and cocktails among beautiful Roman ruins in Butrint, Albania (Athens-Venice itinerary), or an afternoon performance by the acclaimed Odessa National Opera and Ballet Theatre (Black Sea cruises).

The cruising experience is quite relaxed. No annoying public announcements – just a light schedule of cooking classes and other shipboard activities, with informative and entertaining guest lectures by an anthropologist with three masters degrees to keep our brains in gear.

A standout feature is the truly excellent, friendly service onboard. Perhaps it has to do with the 1-to-2 crew/guest ratio – but how the dining room staff knew so quickly our personal preferences – sparkling vs. still water, skim – not whole-milk lattes – is a marvel. The sports-and-swim team, doubling as dining stewards at dinner were fun and ever-helpful. Every time we reboarded the ship after going ashore, there were cold facecloths waiting for us. And the crew performance as one evening's entertainment had us all in stitches.

Surprisingly, you don't have to pay a pretty penny for all that these new 'star class' yachts offer. This is affordable luxury at its best – something competitors will find hard to beat. ■

IF YOU GO: For more information on Windstar Cruises new 'Star Class' yachts and itineraries visit: www.windstarcruises.com.



Sun deck



Candles Grill



Yacht Club



Amphora



Balcony Suite