

# Viking Star redefines the oceanic experience

Cruise line specializes in destination-focused trips

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We were boarding the “World’s Best New Cruise Ship,” according to CNN, also hailed by Cruise Critic as the “Best New Ocean Ship.” Naturally, we were curious – what’s so special about the Viking Star to merit such high praise? The all-veranda staterooms? The TED talks? The spa’s snow grotto?

As we discovered over the course of our “Viking Homelands” Baltic cruise, it’s not just one thing, but a whole lot of things that, bundled together, make the ship stand out and a true delight to sail on.

Viking’s chairman, Torstein Hagen, wanted to redefine ocean cruising with the 930-passenger Viking Star. Unveiled in 2015, it’s the first ship for Viking Ocean Cruises, the new ocean-based brand which Hagen introduced to complement Viking River Cruises and its river ships. Purpose-built for destination-focused itineraries, it offers a long list of freebies unheard of on many similarly-priced, ocean-going cruises – like complimentary shore excursions, unlimited Wi-Fi and wines (or beer) with lunch and dinner.

Naturally, Hagen’s Norwegian heritage is evident throughout the ship. Take the Scandinavian design. The inside is so bathed in natural light, you almost need to put your Ray-Bans on. Huge windows bring in the sunshine, which bounces off white walls and pale timber floors. In the beautiful two-storey Explorer’s Lounge at the bow of the ship, reindeer pelts are draped over comfy couches; leather footstools invite you to put your feet up. Cupboard and drawer handles in the staterooms and stair railings are covered in leather. And in the Winter Garden, where afternoon tea is served, sculpted blond wood “trees” reach up to a glass ceiling. Everything is serene and uncluttered. There’s even a display of museum-quality helmets and other Viking exhibits to add to the sense of place.

Hailing from a cold country, Hagen is probably also the man to thank for



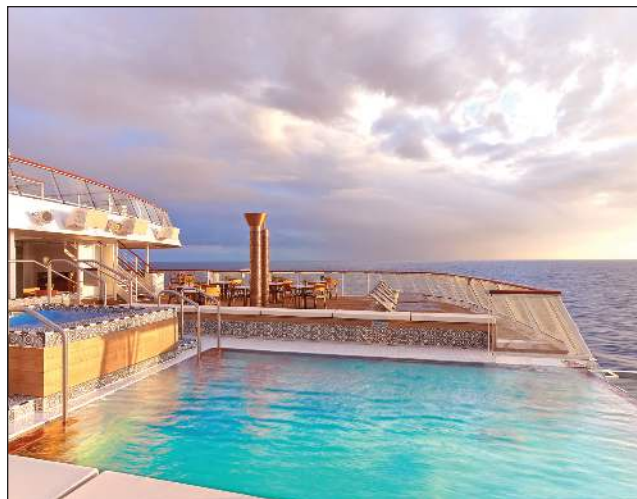
The Viking Star visits Venice, Italy on its Mediterranean Odyssey cruise in the summer. PHOTOS SUPPLIED VIKING OCEAN CRUISES

the heated bathroom floors in the staterooms. It was a treat to have warm toes after stepping out of our glass shower.

All staterooms also have private balconies with glass railings – no more balcony envy! Everyone can relish the pleasure of sipping early morning coffee (from their in-room Nespresso machine) on their own balcony as the ship sails into port. The king-size beds were a nice surprise too. Our only suggestion (if anyone was to ask) would be to swap out the free soft drink mini-bars for an extra chest of drawers – you can never have too much storage space on a ship, right?

Other Nordic influences, like the tradition of alternating hot and cold water therapies, can be found in the co-ed thermal spa. We’re so used to ships where you have to pay to use the spa pools and sauna (the Aqua Therapy Centre on the Queen Mary 2 costs \$40 day) that it took us a while to figure out this spa is free (except for treatments, of course).

“Where are your rubber slippers?” asked a fellow guest when we gingerly padded barefoot into the spa the first time. Oh, the spa robes, slippers and lockers are also free? By this time, we were starting to appreciate the “no nickel-and-diming” philosophy onboard. After trying out the warm, swim-against-the-current pool (with underwater massage roller beds), heated stone loungers, sauna, steam room, hot whirlpools,



The infinity pool suspended at the stern's edge feels like you could swim right off into the sea.

cold-dunk shower and “snow grotto” (an ice-cold, blue-lit glass room with real snow), hitting the spa became our much-anticipated ritual before dinner. (But, alas, we never did see the real snowflakes falling in the snow grotto that we’d read about.)

The inviting pool areas also lured us in. Facing the windows, cushioned seating areas and teak loungers with soft blankets are popular spots to curl up with a book or nap. With a retractable roof, the large mid-ship pool deck was built for comfort whether sailing in cooler climes or hotter destinations. We lucked out with unexpectedly warm weather on our September cruise, and the pool roof was open much of the time. We even got to splash around in the second glass infinity pool suspended at the stern’s edge – it felt like we could swim right off into the sea.

No matter how attractive

a ship is, though, it’s the destinations that matter most to us. The Viking Star scores high marks in this department. We were in port every day except one on our two-week cruise. And in each port, passengers, divided into smaller groups, were treated to a free shore excursion. In Tallinn, Estonia, that was a guided walking tour of the well-preserved medieval Old Town, listening to our guide on Quiet VOX earphones. In Warnemünde, it was a chartered train ride into Berlin and a panoramic bus tour of the Brandenburg Gate, Reichstag, Checkpoint Charlie and the city’s other main sights, followed by several hours of on-your-own exploration before the train ride (with free German wines) back to the ship.

Our days in port were often long ones (sometimes until 10 p.m.) and included overnights too. If you wanted to shop after your

shore excursion or eat dinner ashore, you had time.

We never felt the urge to try local restaurants, however – the ship’s food was that good. For breakfast and lunch, we’d pick and choose from the buffet restaurant, sitting alfresco on the open deck at back. Local dishes were often featured. The splendid Scandinavian seafood lunch with made-to-order waffles, berries and cream for dessert is one example.

For dinner, we loved Manfredi’s, one of two specialty restaurants onboard. With a black-and-white tile floor and vintage photos on the walls, it had a real Italian atmosphere. And everything – from the hand-cut beef tartare to the veal scaloppini to the angel hair pasta with scampi – was excellent. We learned the kitchen makes all its pasta noodles fresh each day. Added bonus: no cover charge (not often the case with specialty restaurants at sea).

At the other specialty restaurant, the Chef’s Table, the five-course set menu revolving around a different theme each night might not appeal to everyone. But we enjoyed being introduced to new tastes and flavours – like the Scandinavian-themed menu of reindeer consommé, lingonberry-infused salmon tartare and a delicious lamb-and-cabbage casserole.

In keeping with Hagen’s desire to make the Viking Star a “thinking man’s cruise,” oodles of interesting travel-related books are scattered about in lounges

throughout the ship. And two to three enrichment lectures are given in the theatre each day. We had five guest lecturers on our cruise, including a polar oceanographer, Fulbright scholar/law professor and BBC television journalist – talks on NATO and Russia in the Baltic, as well as the EU’s refugee migration policy, were thought-provoking. And recorded TED talks covered a variety of stimulating topics.

So what does the Viking Star not have? There’s no casino. (Hagen once said Viking passengers would “rather have a free laundry,” which indeed there is on every deck.) There’s no hard (or soft) selling of spa products or even liquor – paying for “premium wines” seemed extravagant as our waiters kept pouring the complimentary Italian, French and German selections, all very good. And no children under 16 may sail.

Cruises on the Viking Star are selling quickly. Clearly the word is getting out and others are as curious as we were to see what all the hype is about.

#### If you go:

– In 2016, the identical Viking Sea joined the Viking Star as the second ship in the Viking Ocean Cruises line. Two more ships are slated to debut in 2017.  
– This winter, you can catch Viking Star and Viking Sea in the Caribbean, before they return to Europe in the spring.  
– [vikingcruisescanada.com/oceans](http://vikingcruisescanada.com/oceans).