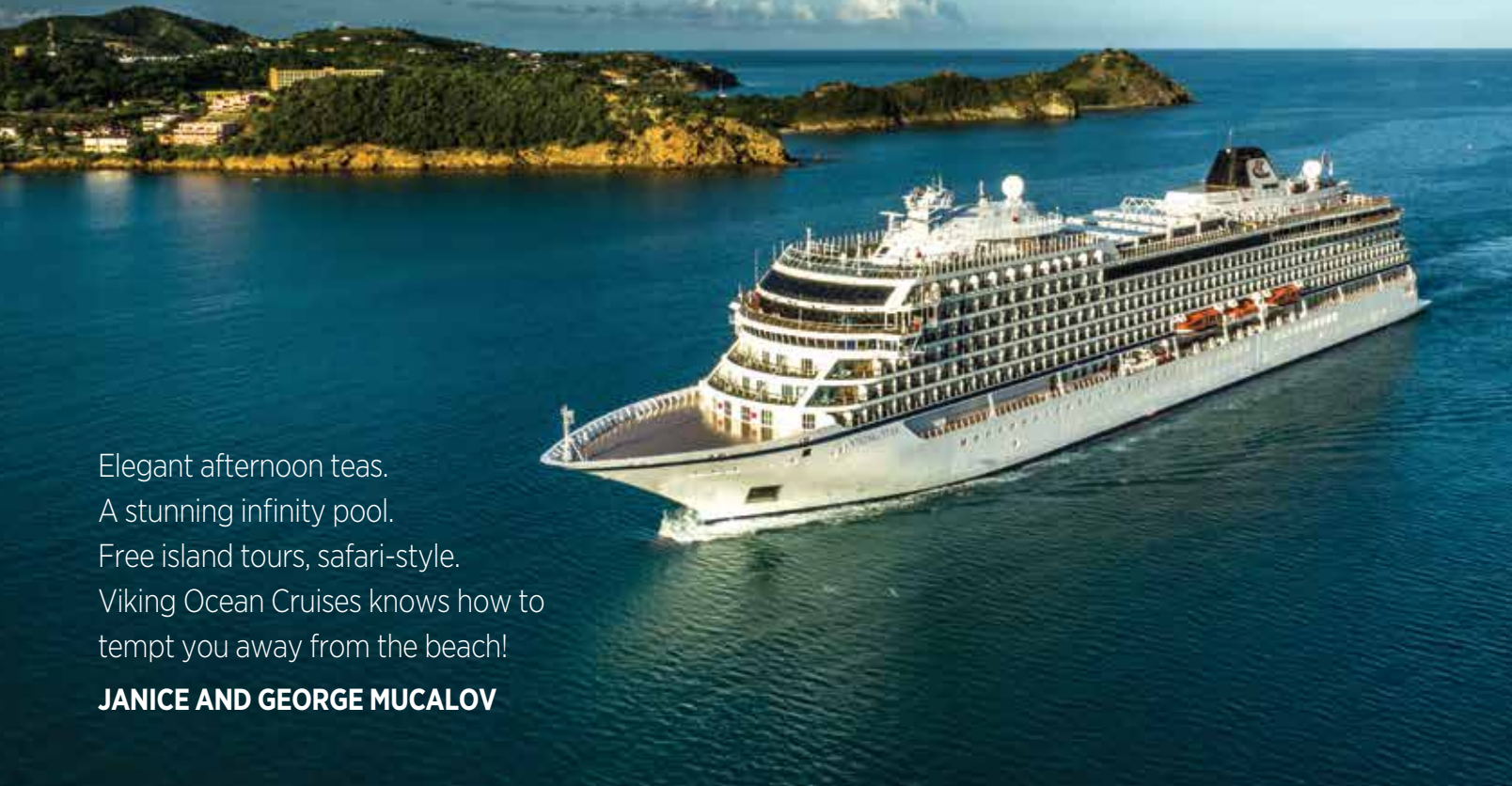


VIKING SEA

in the Caribbean



Elegant afternoon teas.
A stunning infinity pool.
Free island tours, safari-style.
Viking Ocean Cruises knows how to tempt you away from the beach!

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV

THE OPEN-SIDED MINIBUS grinds its way up a twisty road on our scenic tour of St. Thomas but a sudden downpour blankets what should be panoramic views at the mountain top 2,100 feet above sea level. “Well, there goes that idea,” moans our fellow guest dressed for safari weather, camera at the ready. Later, the sun takes pity on us at the Magens Bay viewpoint on the way down. Peeking out, it reveals the come-hither curve of white sand below that’s consistently voted one of the world’s 10 most beautiful beaches.

And what’s this? Waiters from our cruise ship serve rum punch from a pop-up stand set up by a roadside stop. Great way to cheer us up on this grey day!

We’re cruising the Caribbean on the Viking Sea, the second in Viking Ocean Cruises’ fleet of 930-guest vessels. Viking built its reputation on river cruising – it has more than 60 river vessels in Europe, Egypt, China and Vietnam – but now, since branching out into ocean cruising in 2015, it’s also making a name for itself with its affordable-luxury, ocean-going cruises. Part of the appeal is the one free shore excursion offered in every port (like our

St. Thomas tour) – rare on ocean cruises, unless they’re expedition-oriented. On our voyage, these also include bus and ferry tickets to explore Bermuda on our own; a visit to a centuries-old plantation manor in St. Kitts; and a guided walking tour of Old San Juan in Puerto Rico. We’re given bottles of water when leaving the ship and iced facecloths when we return. Some 50 crew members even line up on the dock as we reboard one drizzly afternoon, to shield us with red Viking umbrellas and hand us glasses of bubbly.

Guests, many repeaters, also like the design of the ships. Almost identical (except for the new Viking Orion, which boasts a planetarium), they reflect the clean Scandinavian aesthetic favored by Viking’s Norwegian founder, Torstein Hagen. Light streams in through big glass windows, bouncing off blonde wood floors. Staircase railings are wrapped in ivory leather and modernist paintings by Edvard Munch and other Norwegian artists adorn the walls; the Viking Sea showcases more than \$3.3 million USD of art. You can even download a Viking Art Guide app for a narrated tour.



Explorers' Lounge



Infinity pool



Gravlax at Mamsen's Café

GEORGE NUCALOV

Staterooms (standard size 270 square feet) are particularly well thought out. Fancy gazing at a kaleidoscope of colourful island scenes from your balcony – cold gin-and-tonic in hand (the complimentary sodas are restocked in your mini-fridge daily) – as you sail away each afternoon? Well, all staterooms have balconies with rattan chairs and glass railings. Beds are king-size too, dressed with soft white duvets. We also have a Nespresso-style coffee maker. And a collection of convenient USB bedside and other plugs means we can recharge our phones, iPad, laptop and cameras all at the same time, without the nuisance of charging first one, then the other.

Wait till you see the bathrooms! They come with heated floors – great for warming tootsies if you're cruising northern Europe (but we ask our steward to turn off the heat on our tropical cruise) and you can easily lather up in the glass walk-in shower without bumping into the sides.

Early in our cruise, we spend time in the two-storey Explorers' Lounge at the bow with its floor-to-ceiling windows. Sinking into buttery leather sofas draped with reindeer pelts, we thumb through books about Amundsen, Cook and other explorers, then check out the telescopes.

You can browse scads of intriguing books all over the ship. "We offer our guests the thinking man's cruise, not the drinking man's cruise," Torstein has said. But only in the Explorers' Lounge will you find Mamsen's. The traditional Norwegian café serves delicacies like gravlax on toast and steak tartare, and best of all, made-to-order waffles with sour cream and berries.

When the weather heats up, we gravitate to the deck. Some guests laze by the central pool, which has a retractable glass roof. Cushioned loungers and plush seating areas, with overhead shade, invite dozing and reading. We prefer hanging out by the striking glass infinity pool at the stern though. Looking out from the pool's warm water, you feel as if you're swimming in the sea – why get off the ship?



Classical entertainment in the Atrium



Penthouse junior suite



VIKING'S RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Viking Ocean Cruises has struck a sweet spot with its stylish, adults-only (guests must be 18 or over) mid-size vessels. Its “no nickel-and-diming” philosophy is a hit too. Along with complimentary shore excursions, you get free unlimited WiFi, self-serve laundry, and wine and beer at lunch and dinner. There’s no charge either for the specialty restaurants or to use the Nordic Spa (complete with hydrotherapy mineral pools, steam room and “snow grotto”). All this has helped the cruise line garner a slew of awards – from “#1 Ocean Cruise Line” (by *Travel + Leisure* readers) to “Best Overall Ship” (Cruise Critic annual cruisers’ choice awards).

While Viking specializes in two-week Baltic and Scandinavian cruises, itineraries run the gamut from “quiet season Mediterranean” to the Caribbean, Australia and Asia. Come August, the Viking Sun will embark on the longest cruise in history – an eight-month journey to 59 countries around the world. Want the best of both river and ocean cruising? Combination cruises allow you to seamlessly tack on a northern Europe ocean cruise to a Viking river cruise on the Danube or Rhine.



PHOTOS COURTESY VIKING



Fortaleza Street, San Juan, Puerto Rico



Manfredi's Italian Restaurant



Viking Sea dining room

Indeed, in Sint Maarten, where a behemoth ship also docks, we stick close to “home” – which means we don’t miss afternoon tea. At 4:00 pm in the Wintergarden solarium, we order from a menu of 25 loose-leaf teas – Earl Grey, served in a white teapot. A waiter delivers a three-tiered cake tower with almond tarts and crustless cucumber sandwiches, along with plates of warm scones, clotted cream and jam. A trio of musicians plays classical melodies in the background.

Admittedly, it’s not as if we need tea, what with dinner to look forward to later. Along with the main dining room, two specialty restaurants vie for our tastebuds.

Our favourite, Manfredi’s, is probably the best Italian restaurant at sea. Black-and-white marble floors and vintage photos of Italian actors on the walls lend it an authentic Italian feel, and it has a lively buzz. Must try: the Bistecca Fiorentina rib eye steak – rubbed with chili, brown sugar and mushroom powder – perfectly broiled to your liking. The hand-rolled gnocchi in black truffle cream is a worthy appetizer.

The Chef’s Table truly pushes the culinary boundaries. Set five-course menus rotate every three days. The amusing “Sweet and Salty” pairings are especially fun. Passion fruit with grilled scallops and beets? Grand Marnier Bavarian cream and strawberry sauce with basil jelly and black Hawaiian lava salt? It works.

After dinner, we check out the entertainment. More classy than glitzy, it caters to the mature tastes of the well-traveled audience from Australia, Britain and North America. A talented ventriloquist one evening, a classical crossover pianist another. Lectures by a ship historian, BBC producer and marine biologist are enriching too.

In Old San Juan our last day, we’re surprised the colonial buildings, shops and restaurants look in such good shape – here, you’d hardly know Puerto Rico was badly hit by Hurricane Irma in 2017. We linger on the cobblestone streets, reluctant to start packing. Pink and lemon parasols strung along high above Fortaleza Street – a new art installation – catch our eye. They make us smile as we walk back to the ship. ■

IF YOU GO: With Viking Jupiter’s debut in February, 2019, the line now has six ships, with ten more to sail by 2027. Visit vikingcruisescanada.com and see your local travel professional who can help book your cruise.