



Crystal Cruises

# Romantic Europe on the Reimagined “Crystal Serenity”

by Janice and George Mucalov

**W**e'd been warned. Climbing up the 1,350 stone steps to St. John's Fortress in Kotor, Montenegro, is a high-burner. But we stopped so many times to gape at the gorgeous views of Kotor's red-tiled medieval roofs and the turquoise inlet on which the UNESCO city sits that we didn't huff and puff too much.

We were visiting Kotor while on a 7-night cruise on the deluxe Crystal Serenity, calling in at some of Europe's most romantic ports. And

Kotor must take the prize for being the most beautiful cruise port anywhere!

## Kotor

Steep mountains rise up dramatically on either side of the Bay of Kotor, nicknamed the “southernmost fjord of Europe.” The car-free Old Town itself is a maze of cobbled alleys, with medieval stone buildings sporting characteristic green shutters.

In Kotor, we could have taken a shore excursion to Perast, an old Venetian town packed with Baroque palaces. A short boat trip away is a tiny islet with the remarkable Church of Our Lady of the Rocks. Or we could have visited the ancient seaside resort of Budva, dotted with beaches.

We're glad, though, that we chose the 2.5-hour roundtrip hike to the fortress. The food on Crystal Serenity is so darn good we needed the exercise.



Photo: Mucalov



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## Reimagined Restaurants

During a one-month dry dock in November, 2018, Crystal Cruises extensively refurbished the ship. The restaurants were totally spiffed up – and Serenity now offers several new and enhanced open-seating dining options.

Silk, a Chinese-inspired venue featuring Chinois soup, a noodle bar and dim-sum, occupies what used to be Tastes. At night, the casual café is now the Brazilian-style Churrascaria (gauchos carve grilled meats tableside from sword-like skewers). And Waterside, which replaces the former main dining room, now offers more intimate seating with tables for two and four.

Umi Uma was perhaps our favourite restaurant. Serving Japanese-Peruvian specialties from Master Chef Nobu Matsuhisa – prepared by his personally-trained chefs – the exclusive Umi Uma eateries on both Crystal Serenity and Symphony are the only Nobu restaurants at sea. Each guest gets one complimentary reservation per cruise. But we managed to slide into the sushi bar section of the specialty restaurant a second night for another crack at the rock shrimp tempura, sautéed mushroom salad and lobster with truffle-yuzu sauce. The celebrated chef's privately branded Chardonnay went down very smoothly too.

Prego, Crystal's Italian restaurant, was also a hit. Indeed, after boarding in Civitavecchia (Rome's cruise port), we joked with our waiter that the ship's kitchen could teach the Romans something about Italian food. Prego's signature mushroom soup is no ordinary soup, but a divinely creamy concoction served in a scooped-out sourdough bread bowl. And the beef carpaccio is masterfully presented – at the table, fresh lemon juice is squeezed onto the thinnest slices of beef, then Spanish olive oil and aged Balsamic are drizzled on top. A sprinkling of finely grated Parmesan caps off the dish. And don't get us started on the home-made pastas!

## Dubrovnik and Other Ports

Sadly, we knew that one hike in Kotor wouldn't be enough to prevent those calories from sticking. More exercise would be needed.

So in Dubrovnik, we forsook lazing about on the beach in favour of walking around the

medieval stone walls encircling most of the UNESCO-listed Old Town. From up top, we gazed at a maze of red clay roofs, jumbled together with Baroque palaces and churches. At the seaside section of the wall, we peered down at a little café carved into the rocks, where people dove into the deep blue Adriatic before climbing back up for another slug of their coffee.

Our ship also called in at Sorrento on Italy's Amalfi Coast and Corfu on its way to Venice. We'd previously visited these places; the Amalfi Coast, in particular, is drop-dead stunning. But the truth is, after going ashore for a while, we actually preferred just enjoying the ship.

## Stylish New Suites

How could we not? We were splashing out in one of the 36 new Seabreeze Penthouses, totally gussied up in the late 2018 refit. Crystal essentially took a number of Deluxe Staterooms with Veranda and converted them, almost two for one, into these new 339 sq. ft. Seabreeze Penthouses (reducing the passenger numbers from 1,070 to 980).

Large queen-size bed? Check. Walk-in closet (with Frette bathrobes, kimonos and slippers)? Of course. Butler service? You bet. We especially liked the spa-like bathroom with double sinks, lots of drawers for toiletry kits and a large glass rain-shower (bigger than ours at home) with easy push-knobs and great water pressure – the best bathroom of the 50+ ships we've cruised on (no tub though). Minor niggle: There's little room between the end of the bed and the long coffee table in front of the couch opposite (so we squished the coffee table into the corner).

Most staterooms and suites on the ship (85%) have verandas. Out on ours, we'd read, nap and dip into our fridge, stocked with our chosen drinks. As a top-tier cruise line, Crystal includes all champagne, premium spirits and fine wines, anywhere on the ship, in the rates.

## Pool and Palm Court

Or we'd lounge on a comfy cushioned recliner under an umbrella by the pool.

Around the pool, in fact, was a popular place to hang out. Because this cruise was a shorter



one-week cruise, guests tended to be part of the well-traveled "working wealthy" class, many in their 40s and 50s. They were making the most of their warm-weather holiday, and the champagne flowed freely. In fact, while Crystal offers longer voyages around the world, it's upped the number of one-week cruises for 2020, which appeal to younger guests, and added 100 new itineraries.

Indoors, the Palm Court at the bow has also been dolled up and is now very pretty in purple. Craving a civilized afternoon tea or quiet spot to look out floor-to-ceiling windows? This is the place – settle yourself in a wingback chair, rest your feet on a footstool and let the world pass you by.

## Romantic Venice

One of the most enchanting times on our trip was the two-hour cruise into Venice late in the morning. Bellinis were the order of the day as we entered the lagoon, rippled with different hues of aqua and blue. We passed several islands – and then Venice itself came into view. There was St. Mark's Square, with gondolas bobbing in front, and the Doge's Palace, which looks like a giant wedding cake. Along the Giudecca Canal, trattorias were lined with flower-decked terraces. It was all so gorgeous, most guests were out on deck, jostling for prime photo spots.

Who needed to take a vaporetto or gondola to see Venice's sights from the water! Nothing could beat our scenic sail-in under a warm September sun. Still, it was a bitter-sweet arrival. Because while we'd be docking at one of the world's most romantic cities, we would soon be leaving the Crystal Serenity. ■

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