



Holland America's New Style of Cruising on the Nieuw Statendam

by Janice and George Mucalov

It was music to our ears. Literally. The gifted classical quintet on the ship's Lincoln Center Stage played Schumann pieces to heart-tugging effect, stopping casual passers-by in their tracks. Later that evening – a few skips down the ship's Music Walk – a live band in the Rolling Stone Rock Room kicked out smash hits that got everyone rockin' and rollin' like it was the 70s again. The B.B. King's Blues Club also got us into the groove with soulful and funky tunes from Memphis.

If you think you know what cruising is like on Holland America, think again!

Holland America has jazzed up its approach to cruising, especially on its two newest 2,650-passenger ships, the Pinnacle-class Koningsdam and Nieuw Statendam.

This is not your granny's cruise – though she's very welcome. Our one-week Caribbean cruise on the Nieuw Statendam attracted a wide range of guests, from young families (most with well-behaved children) to globe-trotting silver-haired couples.

Club Orange

We signed up for Club Orange, the cruise line's new VIP pay-for-perks program (\$25 USD p.p. a day). This allowed us to skip the lines when embarking in Fort Lauderdale and board the ship almost immediately.

Best of all, we could have breakfast and dinner in the private Club Orange restaurant, also open to Neptune and Pinnacle Suite guests. Sporting décor color pops of pumpkin



orange and an open kitchen, it serves exclusive Club Orange dishes (which change daily), in addition to what's on the menu in the main dining room. It's particularly great for bypassing the breakfast crowds in the main buffet area and enjoying a sit-down breakfast of Eggs Benny.

Fresh Ship Design

Both contemporary and timeless, the Nieuw Statendam's design sings.

In the three-deck-high central atrium, a spiral staircase winds around a soaring sculpture resembling a harp. You feel as if you're walking right into the stainless steel strings. Look up at the ceiling skylight, and you see a changing kaleidoscope of high-def images – maybe wispy clouds or, at night, a star-studded sky.

The \$4 million art collection relates mostly to music. But other pieces are catnip for art lovers too. Many are new takes on classic masterpieces. There's a reproduction of the Mona Lisa. And beside it, another Mona Lisa made of jigsaw puzzle pieces. Triple take – is that a seriously blurred picture of the famous half-smiling lady? You can't help but stop and try to figure out the art on the walls.

Lots of high-tech wizardry abounds too. Fancy a glass of wine for lunch in the Lido Market? Just press a buzzer on your table to get almost-instant service. And gone are the days of checking a paper print-out of the daily activities – simply check the HAL Navigator app on your phone.

New Specialty Restaurants

We've cruised HAL in the past, but the dining had never really wowed us. Not so in the Nieuw Statendam's specialty restaurants.

We often judge a resto by something as simple as the bread. If it's not good, we don't expect much from the rest of the food. On the Statendam, each of the four main specialty dining spots boasts its own unique yummy bread.

At the 54-seat Rudi's Sel de Mer? Crusty baguettes garnished with sprigs of fresh rosemary. The place transports you to a cozy

French brasserie with plush curved red banquette seating and pop-art porcelain plates painted with colorful food faces adorning the back wall. We couldn't resist the classic escargot baked in Pernod butter for an appetizer. C'est bon! Popular entrées include duck à l'orange, coq au vin and whole Dover sole meunière with shaved pink Himalayan sea salt.

But the Pan-Asian Tamarind was our favourite restaurant. Sophisticated dim lighting. Black wood tables and plates. Rich purple glassware. Enhancing the exotic mood? Asian servers dressed in long Thai-style silk dresses. We sipped chilled sake while waiting for our orders. First up: A tempting array of fresh lobster and dragon rolls from sushi master Andy Matsuda's sushi bar. Next, we sampled wok-seared lobster, red Thai curry of cashew barramundi and Mongolian barbecued lamb chops with baby bok choy and plum sauce. It was all so tasty that if our cruise was longer, we'd have happily sprung for the extra \$25 USD p.p. cover charge to eat here again.

The Pinnacle Grill for steak and wild salmon and Canaletto for Italian food also won us over.

Staterooms

And then there are the staterooms. Of the 1,339 accommodations (including 174 suites), 851 are veranda staterooms. Varying from 228 to 420 square feet (including the balcony), they're well thought out.

Dressed in white duvets, the beds face a large flat-screen TV opposite. There's plenty of cupboard and drawer space (and we liked the wall hooks for hanging sunhats and purses). Bathrooms have decent-sized glass showers, so you can lather up with the ship's Elemis products without bumping into the sides. A swack of convenient USB bedside and other plugs also meant we could recharge our phones, iPad, laptop and cameras all at the same time. Outside on our balcony, two grey lounge chairs came with footstools so we could even recline and nap (sort of).

Pools and fitness room

Sea days are perfect for relaxing on deck by the pool, right? We had two such days on our cruise.

There are two pools on the Nieuw Statendam. One is mid-ship, with a retractable glass roof and lounge chairs topped with thick cushions. On the upper deck overlooking the pool, you can loll about like a Roman on cool cocoon-like couches and chairs, separated by breezy white curtains. You have to be savvy to snag a lounge here though (easier come mid-afternoon). Aft is another less busy pool.

For a pocket of tranquility, The Retreat is a separate sanctuary with pool- and ocean-view cabanas and dedicated staff to serve you drinks. It's popular, so book early (extra charge). We tried to reserve a cabana for our second sea day; sadly, they were all gone.

We decided to hit the fitness room with its forward view windows instead (better for us, we consoled ourselves). Problem: With so many state-of-the-art machines, it was hard to figure out which ones to try!

Itinerary

After summering in Europe, the Nieuw Statendam returns to her Fort Lauderdale homeport in November, 2020, for another winter season of Western and Eastern Caribbean cruises. The star attraction is Half Moon Cay, included on most itineraries. Picture the dreamiest of tropical islands with powder white sand and limpid waters. Chances are it looks a lot like this, HAL's private island in the Bahamas.

You can pet stingrays, ride horses and pedal a bicycle around the small island. But we were happiest just lazing about on the beach under the shade of waving palms. And when our stomachs started growling, we plonked ourselves down on wooden bar stools in the breezy new Lobster Shack to chow down on fresh grilled lobster.

Ahhh... Eat, swim, sleep, repeat. And evenings of first-rate entertainment to look forward to. A Caribbean cruise doesn't get much better than this. ■

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