



Life in the luxe lane

With the arrival of Ritz-Carlton and Virgin Voyages on the horizon, **Jillian Bolger** explores the new luxe trend in cruising

Cruise ships have come a long way since P&O first introduced its passenger services in 1844. The forerunner of modern cruise holidays, the shipping company advertised its first cruise in 1904 on the 6,000-ton Vectis, a ship fitted to carry 150 first-class passengers. Fast forward to 2018, and the capacity of the world's largest modern cruise ship, Royal Caribbean's new 228,018-ton Symphony of the Seas, is 5,518 passengers.

Aside from the staggering scale of these super liners, it's estimated that more than 27 million passengers will cruise in 2018, across 314 ocean and river-going ships.

All-day dining buffets, ever-changing scenery, aqua aerobics and day trips are no longer enough to entice discerning travellers on board, with older travellers demanding added value elements from their itineraries. The 50+ market has always been critical for the cruise industry, and while we frequently read

about the headline-grabbing new attractions drawing more millennials on board (climbing wall or surf lessons, anyone?) most of the top cruise lines have also been investing in their core customers, broadening their itineraries, sharpening their luxury offering and putting health and wellbeing to the fore.

Richard Branson's Virgin brand has always been a disruptor, and the imminent launch of Virgin Voyages will see a new generation of cruise ships hit the high seas in 2020. Working with some of the world's leading design firms, including Tom Dixon from Design Research Studio, Virgin has set out to completely reimagine how sea travel looks and feels, deliberately choosing designers that have never designed ships before. "If you're going to be disruptive," says Dixon, "then maybe you shouldn't know that much about how a cruise line is currently operated."

Wellbeing will be central to Virgin Cruises' DNA, with Scarlet Lady, the first of their ships, incorporating dozens of integrated fitness spaces.



A pool deck on board a Ritz-Carlton cruise ship



The Athletic Club Training Centre on Virgin Voyages's Scarlet Lady



The main pool deck on the vast Sky Princess



The Sky Princess has an incredible 19 decks

Guests can indulge in sunrise yoga, a halo-like floating running track and the Athletic Club, an integrated space featuring an outdoor training zone, including boxing ring, strength and gymnastics equipment, oversized games, cabanas for relaxation and a sports bar for a post-workout drink. The B-Complex features dedicated fitness studios with ocean views, and there's a dazzling spa on deck 5.

Virgin may be raising the fitness stakes at sea, but premium outfit Celebrity Cruises has no intention of being left in its wake. Their latest flagship, Celebrity Edge, will welcome guests on board this December to what they're calling a "revolution in modern luxury cruising". Like Virgin, there's lots of outward facing design breaking from traditional ship design, allowing guests feel more connected with the sea and destinations they're visiting. The Edge Spa, a new luxury offering, will include treatments infused with natural elements and guests staying in Aqua Class will have complimentary access to the SEA Thermal Suite as well as aromatherapy diffusers and pillow menus.

Celebrity Edge's pièce de résistance is Eden, three levels of



The Lotus Spa on board the Sky Princess



Virgin Voyages' maiden ship Scarlet Lady



On the deck of the Scarlet Lady



The solstice-class Celebrity Reflection

sensory experiences completely wrapped in glass with views out to the ocean. Encompassing two al fresco dining areas, and chill out space, you can come for morning yoga, pop by in the afternoon for a seminar or artistic performance and rock up after sunset for Eve at Eden, with food served by "Edenists", which it pitches as quite a theatrical sounding dining affair.

For travellers looking for well-being without the imposition of Lycra, Ramblers Cruise & Walk Holidays combine walking holidays with smaller scale cruising. Teaming up with Fred. Olsen's scheduled sailings, Ramblers offers walking excursions as shore trips with special group leaders on board.

With carefully planned walking programmes that make the most of each destination, you have the opportunity to enjoy all the benefits of a cruise with the added adventure of stepping ashore, in a small group. The latest portfolio offers 26 walking holidays across 64 departure dates, with itineraries graded to help you choose your preferred pace.

One of the fastest growing seafaring cruise lines, Viking Ocean Ships, has also prioritised health across its relatively new fleet. Its LivNordic Spa and Wellness Centres draw upon the holistic wellness philosophy of Nordic culture. Designed for intense relaxation and mental healing, guests can indulge in a Nordic bathing ritual in the thermal suite, which detoxes and relaxes tired muscles, or maybe sign up for de-stressing Swedish massage.

A boutique experience

The yacht-meets-cruise world delivers a more boutique experience, with intimate vessels and access to smaller and more shallow ports and harbours than larger ships can navigate.

Exclusive access means fewer crowds on shore and a gentler pace all round. Hoping to shake up the lucrative sector is luxury hotel group Ritz-Carlton, which takes to the oceans in 2020 with the launch of its Yacht Collection.

Guests can expect the exacting standards of the Ritz-Carlton combined with the glamour of a yachting experience on board the first of three custom-built yachts, each accommodating up to 298 guests across 149 suites. Reservations are now open for the inaugural season with a promise of access to "coveted city harbours" around the world, including Cartagena, Bordeaux and the Caribbean.

Ritz-Carlton joins established luxury player Seabourn, whose specialist itineraries are widely regarded. Seabourn's cruises include impressive guest speakers from the world of arts, science, culture, politics and the humanities, allowing you choose a cruise that matches your interests. Speakers don't just do on board presentations, but participate in the daily social scene, sharing meals and shore adventures. In 2017, Seabourn also introduced its fleet-wide mindful living programme, Spa and Wellness with Dr Andrew Weil, a holistic wellbeing programme led by on-board guides certified in yoga



A solarium aboard the Celebrity Edge



Ventis Australis guests see a whale up close

and meditation practitioners.

With a maximum of 112 guests and a 95-person award-winning crew, SeaDream Yacht Club operates two casually elegant mega yachts, SeaDream I and SeaDream II. "It's yachting, not cruising," they declare, providing a yachting experience that visits small harbours and ports around the world. On board you'll find everything from a luxury spa, wellness activities and a raw food menu option to sunrise yoga and tai chi sessions and mountain bikes for shore day exploring.

For an even smaller ship, Great

Cruise Journeys' luxurious new MS Arca carries just 38 passengers and offers original new voyages like 2019's Adriatic by Yacht & Plitvice Lakes. Of course, keeping active doesn't have to mean breaking a sweat, and many other cruise lines host specialist cruises tailored to specific hobbies and interests.

Alongside transporting you to an inspiring location, they offer the chance to meet like-minded travel companions while enjoying talks and presentations from experts and guest speakers. Award-winning photographer

Nori Jemil, known for her extreme landscapes, will be on board the Ventus Australis on two specialist departures in February 2019. Australis, an expedition cruise ship company, runs unique itineraries around the Patagonian fjords and out to Cape Horn and Jemil will deliver on board workshops and seminars, as well as practical advice on excursions.

Wildfoot Travel also specialises in small vessel expedition cruises in the Antarctic and Polar regions, while National Geographic has just teamed up with luxury French

cruise company, PONANT, to run a series of 18 luxury expedition cruises to all seven continents.

On board their small vessels you'll be joined by experts and renowned photographers from the National Geographic. We like the sound of the 21-day Antarctic Odyssey visiting the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, the South Orkney Islands and the Antarctic Peninsula. Of course, there's a spa on board, with a balneotherapy area, which sounds just the job after a spot of icy penguin spotting outdoors. ■

Four of the best cruises departing Dublin in 2019

Summer Gardens & Rivers with Magellan

Cruise & Maritime Voyages
7 nights, departing July 21, 2019
Set sail on the CMV Magellan, visiting the world-renowned gardens of the Treco Abbey Gardens in the Isles of Scilly, Monet's garden at Giverny in Normandy and the beautiful coast and countryside of Guernsey. Cruise the river Seine. Then head to Rouen for an overnight stay where you can explore the Old



Town and city's beautiful botanical garden before setting sail for vibrant Liverpool. **From €1,299 at jmg-cruise.com**

British Isles Grand Adventure Princess Cruises

25 nights, departing September 13, 2019
Board the luxurious Crown Princess for a 25-day 13-port voyage. This transatlantic sailing leaves Dublin for Liverpool, Belfast, Glasgow, Invergoron and Edinburgh before sailing to Le Havre, Southampton, Zeebrugge in Belgium, Portland in England, Le Verdon in France in Spain, Lisbon and the Azores, before six nights at sea, arriving in Fort Lauderdale, Florida on the last morning. **From €2,829 at princess.com**

Northern Glow

Oceania Cruises
19 nights, departing July 5, 2019
Sail with Oceania's Nautica to Copenhagen on a diverse

itinerary that heads north from Dublin to the Shetland Islands, seven Norwegian ports, three Russian ports including the mesmerising Solovetsky Islands, before arriving at colourful Copenhagen. Eight shore excursions and a beverage package are included in the price. **From €5,539 at oceaniacruises.com**

Iceland Summer Sojourn

Regent Seven Seas Cruises
12 nights, departing June 29, 2019
Embark in Dublin on the luxurious Seven Seas Navigator and stop off at the Isle of Man, Fishguard, Cobh and Galway before cruising the Atlantic to the Isle of Skye. Next stop is the Faroe Islands before travelling towards Iceland where you'll visit the whale watching spot of Akureyri, mountainous Isafjordur and finish with two nights in Reykjavik. All-inclusive covers all shore excursions, beverages, speciality restaurants, transfers and pre-paid gratuities.

From €6,099 at rssc.com