Arroy! The plucky sailor of the Messina Strait

Yvonne Gordon is buoyed up by a voyage on the largest sailing ship in the world

Looking up at the tangle of ropes and rigging snaking and snaking along like thread in the wind, I feel my knees go weak. Even as I clip on my harness, I torture myself with what-ifs. The crow’s nest, about one-third of the way up the 80m mast, suddenly looks very far away. Tentatively, I start climbing the wide rope ladder, holding on so tight that my knuckles go white. Although I am attached to a safety line, I am terrified. As a regular sailor, I have been up lots of masts but this is different — usually you are winched up in a bosun’s chair which has a rigid seat, but here you have to climb up the rigging yourself. My shame is complete when a man who looks like he’s in his 80s races by me up the rigging with his eyes closed.

This is the deck of the Royal Clipper, the largest fully rigged sailing ship in the world. At 328 feet long, it’s a stunning tall ship with five masts, 42 sails and a sail area of 5,000sq.m. Modelled on legendary clipper the Preussen, which was the largest and fastest sailing ship in the world when it was launched in 1902, it has the feel of a true classic. With its long teak decks and abundant brass and wood fittings, it’s not hard to imagine what it was like all those years ago.

The Clipper is three days into a week-long voyage from Civitavecchia (Rome) around Sicily and the Aeolian Islands. We leave Amalfi harbour in the early evening and set sail for Sicily with the feel of a light breeze.

The sails unfurl slowly and the crew unwrap the top gal- lant staysails, and with a little help from the engine, we seem to set off along the coast.

For a regular sailor, a voyage on the world’s largest sailing ship is the ultimate adventure. I’ve come for the sailing with the added benefits of a cruise, but many passengers are here for the luxury cruise aspect with some sailing thrown in.

The air-conditioned cabins have DVD players and ensuite marble bathrooms, and there’s a gym, three deck swimming pools and a boutique, so it’s not quite roughing it.

You can get as involved in the sailing as you want — from handling the mast to climbing the main rigging yourself. The crow’s nest tells us about the ship’s previous owners and the narrow streets are lined with shops and cafés. Its Greek and Roman amphitheatre offers spectacular views over the bay and the ship anchored far below as Mount Etna looms in the background.

The next morning we reach the Aeolian Islands, an archipelago of seven small volcanic islands, and I take the first tender off the ship. Halfway across to Lipari harbour we are soaked in a huge rain squall that develops into a tropical downpour. The rain is coming down as steam spirals up from the surface — all feels rather surreal.

At sunset, we sail past Stromboli, which is still active and puffing a cloud of smoke from its top. At dinner, I realise I stink of sulphur and the sails are never all up.

As dawn breaks, we approach Messina, the narrow strait of water between Italy and Sicily. On the bridge, where an ‘open bridge’ policy applies, the chief engineer is on hand to answer questions and explain the route charts.

At the centre of the ship, a light- filled atrium with a gold-edged spiral stairway leads to the dining room where meals are informal and the maitre d’ seats you with other guests as you arrive. The food is delicious and not too heavy.

At the table is the ship’s captain, Captain Vlad, a marine biologist who is travelling on the ship for a month, two eco-travel writers and an Australian couple. People swap stories and the captain tells us about the ship’s previous adventures. After dinner, there is a crab race in the bar. Some passengers go up on deck to see the stars. The crew switch off the deck lights and the full magnificence of the night sky is revealed.

Back in my cabin, the moon glitters on the water outside the port- hole and I am filled to sleep by the gentle swaying of the boat. As dawn breaks, we approach Sicily. Mount Etna’s vast snowy tip is visible over a bank of clouds. On deck, Captain Vlad regales an attentive audience with tales of the Preussen, on which the Royal Clipper was modelled.

It was built to be able to round Cape Horn in heavy weather and could reach speeds of 17 knots.

When the anchor is dropped, the ship’s tender takes us to Giardini Naxos, Sicily’s oldest Greek city. From there, it’s a taxi to Taormina, a pretty town up in the hills where the narrow streets are lined with old stone buildings, art and tasteful shops and cafés. Its Greek and Roman amphitheatre offers spectacular views over the bay and the ship anchored far below as Mount Etna looms in the background.

The next morning we reach the Aeolian Islands, an archipelago of seven small volcanic islands, and I take the first tender off the ship. Halfway across to Lipari harbour we are soaked in a huge rain squall that develops into a tropical downpour. The rain puts paid to a planned boat tour to the neighbouring island of Vulcano, which is still active and puffing a cloud of smoke from its top. At dinner, I realise I stink of sulphur but thankfully nobody comments.

We spend the final day at sea sailing back to Rome and watch whales and dolphins off the starboard bow. There is lots to do: mast climbing, knot-tying on the bridge and a visit to the engine room. As a sailor, I love to feel the wind in my hair and a boat tipping to the side under the force of full sails. I never quite get that feeling on the sturdier Clipper but the winds are light and the sails are never all up.

It takes three whole days after returning to land to stop feeling the boat’s rocking motion, and my dreams are filled with ships, port calls and vagaries for J-cut kerbs.

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**Getting There**

**Aer Lingus** and **Ryanair** fly to Rome daily. Star Clippers offer fully crewed cruises on board the world’s largest tall ships sailing around the Mediterranean and Caribbean. A three-night Mediterranean cruise costs €720pp, including all meals and snacks, entertainment and all port calls. Excludes port taxes. A seven-night sailing costs from €1,309pp. Prices are based on two people sharing and exclude flights. To book, contact **Trailfinders** on (01) 881 4948, or visit **www.trailfinders.com** or visit **www.starcruises.com**.

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**The Clipper Round The World Yacht Race sails into Kinsale and Cork City for an eight-day festival from July 1-9. See www.clipperroundtheworld.com for more.**