

# Ahoy! The plucky pirate of the Med

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

**L**ooking up at the tangle of ropes and rigging slapping and swaying about 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 134m (439 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 under a warm sun and a light breeze.

The giant sails unfurl slowly and the crew unwrap the top gallant staysails, and with a little help from the engine we 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 hanging out in the bridge or handling sails, to taking out a small dinghy. As well as climbing the mast, you can clamber out at the bowsprit (the pole stretching forward beyond the prow) onto the massive net overhanging the bow, although it's not for the faint-hearted.

Looking up from the seemingly endless decks, the masts reach heavenward like a forest of trees. Along the deck, thick white ropes are neatly coiled on their posts, ready for action. We are powering



**REGAL:** The Royal Clipper and, right, its dining room; Yvonne takes the helm, below right



## 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**, Central America and the Caribbean. A three-night Mediterranean sailing costs from €720pp, including all meals and snacks, entertainment and all port calls. Excludes port taxes. A seven-night sailing costs from €1,530pp. Prices are based on two people sharing and exclude flights. To book, contact Trailfinders on (01) 881 4948, see [www.trailfinders.com](http://www.trailfinders.com) or visit [www.starclippers.co.uk](http://www.starclippers.co.uk).



easy to forget about the downpour. Every muscle in my body seems to melt as I glide around, seeking out warm patches in which to wallow. A small fumarole – a volcanic vent from which steam and hot gases escape – bubbles just offshore and as I swim out to it, the mud washes off. Although the sea is cold, I feel it warm up as I draw closer to the bubble. The rain is coming down as steam spirals up from the surface – it 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 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 sturdy 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-holes and volcanoes for weeks.

● *The Clipper Round The World Yacht Race* sails into Kinsale and Cork City for an eight-day festival from July 1-9. See [www.clipper-roundtheworld.com](http://www.clipper-roundtheworld.com) for more.

**FIRST MATE:** Net overhanging the bow, left



along at 10 knots, in about 15 knots of breeze, heading for the Strait of Messina, the narrow stretch 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; Mariano, 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.

**B**ack in my cabin, the moon glitters on the water outside the port-hole and I am lulled 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 taste-

ful 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 has three volcanoes. Disappointed, I enquire about renting a boat from the pier and meet a like-minded passenger. We soon discover we can get a hydrofoil to the island.

Halfway through the 10-minute journey, peals of thunder and lightening flashes make us wonder what would happen if we got hit. After landing safely in the little port, we follow the smell of sulphur to the thermal wells.

It is still lashing rain but walking into the warm mud baths it's