



## Exploring the West Indies with Viking

by Johanna Read, TravelEater.net

**T**here's something irresistible about the Caribbean. The air smells of the sea and sunshine. Palm trees sway next to white sand beaches and candy-coloured buildings. But how to choose which island to visit?

For those who are indecisive, or just want to see it all, Viking Ocean Cruises' West Indies Explorer is an excellent choice. Their 11-day cruise visits nine different islands in the eastern Caribbean Sea, each with a different culture and microclimate.

Viking's 930-passenger ocean ships are more like luxury boutique hotels than crowded cruise ships. Initially known for its river cruises, Viking is growing to explore the world's oceans too.

Viking's oldest ocean ship, the Viking Star, was built in 2015. By 2027, the company will have 16 vessels exploring the world's oceans, in addition to their current count of 72 river vessels.

### Eleven days, nine islands

You can visit nine different islands on the West Indies Explorer, but up that count even higher if you book shore excursions to smaller islands like Nevis and Barbuda.

The 11-day cruise begins and ends in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Repaired after 2017's Hurricane Maria, San Juan's colourful streets welcome visitors to shop, eat mofongo (a garlic plantain dish), and drink rum cocktails. Viking includes a free excursion in every port. In San Juan, it's a walking tour to historic Fort San Cristobal and through Old San Juan's blue stone streets.

Another stop is the British Virgin Islands' Tortola, where an optional excursion goes to The Baths on Virgin Gorda. You can climb, walk and swim between piles of immense boulders that create mysterious grottoes and turquoise pools.

St. Kitts and Nevis is the western hemisphere's smallest state and its two islands are ideal for sailing and snorkelling. Ride the only double-decker rail cars in the world and see the rainforest or, on Viking's included tour, explore Basseterre's botanical garden and Victorian architecture.

The cruise also visits the Commonwealth countries of St. Lucia, Barbados, and Antigua. Excursions include a Caribbean cooking class, painting class, cave tour, cricket museum, sailing, snorkelling, and beach time.

A lesser-visited island, Dominica, is also on the itinerary. This lush country is known as the Caribbean's Nature Isle. Its nine volcanoes bring natural hot springs and even the



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opportunity to snorkel through what seems like Champagne. Dominica also has whale watching, river tubing, waterfalls, and a rich indigenous culture to learn about.

Viking docks on the Dutch side, in Philipsburg, of the two-country island of Sint Maarten and St. Martin. Popular with shoppers, you can also race on America's Cup yachts, take a perfume class, or snorkel above a purposefully-sunk submarine and helicopter.

Before returning to Puerto Rico, Viking's last stop is St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. Explore Charlotte Amalie's colourful buildings, duty-free shopping, and Blackbeard's Castle, or go sailing, snorkelling, or kayaking.

On board: Is a Viking Ocean Cruise right for you?

Viking recently designated its sailings for adults only. The cruise line caters to people who are knowledgeable about the world and often well-travelled. They're friendly and it's easy to have a conversation, if you choose, with the people sitting next to you at dinner. With 930 passengers, you'll keep meeting new people but also run into familiar faces.

The mood aboard Viking is the perfect combination of relaxed sophistication with attention to detail. There are no casinos, lineups, formal nights, pre-arranged dining companions or times, sales pressure, nickel and diming, or any of the other things you might associate with large mass-market cruise ships. Crew members are quick to smile and very good at anticipating your needs.

The dress code aboard is casual -- there's no need to pack an evening gown or suit jacket, though men should wear trousers and collared shirts in the evenings.

#### Staterooms

Each stateroom has a veranda (an ideal spot for breakfast, in your provided robe and slippers). Standard rooms have a king or two double beds, as you specify, with luxe linens. There's also easy chairs, a desk, a stocked



mini-fridge, plus a full closet. An interactive 42-inch LCD television has on-demand movies, live TV, and cruise information. Bathrooms are surprisingly large with heated floors, a glassed-in shower, and lots of storage. Housekeeping comes twice daily. There's free wifi throughout the ship.

#### Dining

Viking Ocean ships have several dining venues, including 24-hour room service. All are without additional charge. The Restaurant, open for breakfast and dinner, is à la carte. The dinner menu changes nightly, often with themes linked to the current port, with a handful of favourites always available. The World Café is a buffet restaurant with indoor-outdoor seating. Don't miss the seafood feasts, with giant crab legs, ahi sashimi, and much more. The nearby Pool Grill has a small buffet and grilled-to-order meats and fish all afternoon.

For snacks and smaller meals, passengers can visit the Viking Living Room, Mamsen's (made-to-order waffles with fresh berries are a top breakfast draw), and, for afternoon tea, the elegant Wintergarden. Restaurants requiring dinner reservations are Manfredi's for excellent Italian, and The Chef's Table, which has a rotating tasting menu of international dishes.

Viking takes food allergies seriously, but crew members go out of their way so passengers don't have to worry about it. No request is too much trouble. Servers are very knowledgeable about ingredients and consult chefs to be absolutely sure dishes are safe for each individual's needs. Those with allergies receive a detailed dinner menu the night before from which they can make their next-day selections, with chefs adapting dishes as needed. The galley has special equipment, including a pasta maker, that is protected from gluten.

#### Drinks

Unlike many cruise ships, Viking includes many beverages in their regular fares. At lunch and dinner, beer, house wine, and soft drinks are all free, as are specialty coffees and teas throughout the day.

For those who want to sample all of Viking's great cocktails and wines, the Silver Spirits package is a great deal (the cost varies by cruise length). With the package, almost all drinks on board are free, including premium wines and alcohols, as well as the premium wine pairings for the Chef's Table. Drinks are also available à la carte, with most beers at \$5 and cocktails around \$7.50 US. Don't forget to pop into Torshavn after dinner for aquavit.

#### Onboard activities

Vacations are about relaxing and recharging, and Viking gives you plenty of opportunity in their large spa. Unlike with many other cruise lines, access to Viking's Nordic spa is free (there is a charge for massages and other treatments).

In each dressing room, you'll find a Finnish sauna, plunge pool, plus areas to relax. In a central area, with access for both sexes, are heated lounges, a warm mineral pool framed by a fireplace, jetted hot tub, and a steam room. A bucket shower and even a Snow Grotto complete the Nordic hot-cold cycle. Next door is a large gym with sea views plus a beauty salon.

There's more exercise equipment on the top deck and even a putting green. Deck 2 has a jogging circuit. Though more for dipping than for exercise, there are two swimming pools, each with a hot tub. The main pool is under a glass retractable roof, so you can swim if it's raining (or cruising the North Sea in winter).

For those who want to sit back and relax, Viking shows movies (listen with headphones) under the stars at the main pool. Don't want to miss an important sports game? It'll likely be on the big screen too.

Viking's Chairman Torstein Hagen called Viking "the thinking person's cruise" and the ships have regular enrichment discussions by Viking Resident Historians and guest lecturers. Topics range from turtle conservation to astronomy to pirates. Ted Talks are rebroadcast throughout most days in the cinema.

Evenings often have a live performance in the main theatre; the ABBA and show tunes singalongs are especially popular. Some evenings have dancing. Live music -- piano, violin, cello, guitar -- is found in several locations afternoons and evenings. ■

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# Welcome to World Traveler



**I**n this issue, we focus on cruising many of the countless oceans and rivers of the world, starting this worldwide voyage in China's Lijiang River from Guilin and finding out why it is called the 'Pearl of Southern China'. We then hop onto another cruise, this time on the wonderful Cunard ocean liner the "Queen Elizabeth" sailing some of China's busiest and most popular ports.

While still in Asia, we visit the many splendours of beautiful and historic Kyoto, Japan. After being in the Far East, we head way, way down to 'Tasmania's Wild & Untamed Freycinet Peninsula'. Then, travelling west, we find ourselves in Dubai - 'Where the Middle East comes to life'.

Close by, we jump on an amazing 'Three Continents Cruise' Adventure with Trafalgar, visiting points in Europe, Africa and Asia. At our next port of call, we climb on-board the AmaLya in Paris and head through the beautiful countryside of Normandy. While still in Europe, we visit the amazing and 'Captivating Cascais' in Portugal.

Next, we jet off to the new world. First, 'From Sea to Shining Sea', we are 'Rediscovering America's Beauty' and also sail up the Great Lakes as we take 'The Smooth Cruise on Victory 1' before heading west to take in the best of Vernon, BC. We then cruise from Vancouver to L.A. on the magnificent Norwegian Joy and take full advantage the many dining and entertainment options this beautiful ship has to offer.

Back in the southeast, we take in some of the best dinner shows in Orlando. While still in Florida we celebrate a New Year's on a Carnival Cruise to the Bahamas before we head off to explore the warm waters of the West Indies with Viking on a wonderful ocean cruise.

In Mexico, we find that 'Puerto Vallarta's Got it All!', and next, we visit the charming small town of El Tuito and then on to Curacao and 'Beyond the Handelskade'. Finally, we again find ourselves way down under, but this time to check out the loveable penguins in the remote Falkland Islands.

Happy travels!

