

The Wind in Your Sails

Why tall-ship voyages belong on every cruise-goers' bucket list.

— by Sarah Riches

Kicking off my shoes, I pad across the deck to unwind in a net suspended above the waves. It's golden hour in Abu Dhabi, and I'm about to embark on a sunset cruise around Lulu Island with a handful of strangers. Rolling up their sleeves, all the men line up to hoist the sails just as the distinctive guitar riff from Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" blares over speakers. It's the perfect icebreaker, and as the beats mimic each pull of the rope, we burst out laughing.

When the wind catches the sails, nothing beats

TALL ORDER
Below The five-masted *Royal Clipper* is the flagship of the Star Clippers fleet, holding the record as the world's largest fully rigged sailing ship.

being aboard a tall ship. But what exactly is one? While there's no single definition, the term now embraces various types of classic sailing vessels, including schooners, which have at least two fore-and-aft-rigged masts. P&O Cruises' *Scaramouche*, which appeared in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, is a fine example. Then there are brigantines like Venture Sail's *Florette*, whose foremast carries square sails while the mainmast is rigged fore-and-aft. Barques have three or more masts, all square-rigged except for the mizzen, like Sea Cloud Cruises' steel-hulled *Sea Cloud*. And fully rigged ships (meaning every mast carries square sails) are the granddaddies of them all. Star Clippers' five-masted *Royal Clipper*, launched in 2000, is a modern version of the type — a romantic throwback to the golden age of sail.

SHIP AHOY

The Canary Islands, Adriatic, and Mediterranean are quintessential tall-ship destinations, as is the Caribbean. Once you've decided where to go, you must choose who to sail with.

Ultra-luxury line Ponant's original vessel, *Le Ponant*, is an elegant three-masted yacht carrying a maximum of 32 passengers and an equal number of crew. Built in 1991 and completely revamped in 2021, it's the world's first sailboat to achieve the Relais & Châteaux label, so you can expect refined gastronomy and top-notch service.

Another French brand, Club Med, operates the *Club Med 2*, with five towering masts and a suite of computer-controlled staysails that unfurl whenever the wind warrants it. Billed as channeling the old-school yachting spirit of the French Riviera, the ship has 184 cabins, 2,700 square meters of teak decking, two saltwater pools, and menus designed by the prestigious French culinary school Ferrandi Paris. Whenever the anchorage is suitable, the ship's stern opens to reveal an onboard water-sports center dubbed Nautical Hall.

American line Windstar Cruises has a trio of sailing ships in the Med and Caribbean. Four-masted windjammer *Wind Spirit* and sister ship *Wind Star* both carry 148 passengers, while five-masted *Wind Surf* — built in the same Le Havre shipyard as *Club Med 2*, with a similar design — can accommodate up to 342. All three will undergo stateroom redesigns across 2026 and 2027.

The three barques owned by Sea Cloud Cruises — founded in Hamburg in 1979 — are led by the *Sea Cloud*. With only 32 cabins spread over three decks and a quartet of masts made of wood rather than aluminum, this nearly century-old German-built beauty is a glorious relic of the past. No self-furling sails here: crew members climb the rigging to set *Sea Cloud's* great spread of canvas, while halyards are coiled meticulously on the deck below. It may



COURTESY OF STAR CLIPPERS

CRUISE

not have the niceties of newer vessels, but there's no lack of atmosphere.

Then there's the aforementioned *Royal Clipper*. The flagship of Star Clippers, this barquentine holds the record as the world's largest fully rigged sailing ship, carrying up to 227 guests. The passion project of Swedish entrepreneur Mikael Krafft, whose taste for old-school maritime style runs to mahogany paneling, nautical paintings, and clocks resembling captains' wheels. When all 42 sails are set and the rigging shivers rhythmically in the wind, it feels like a piece of living history.

ALL HANDS ON DECK

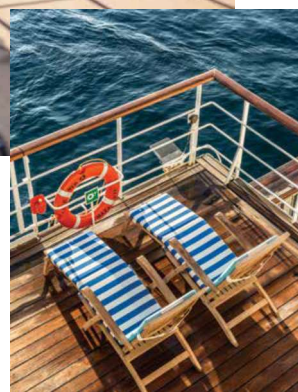
Many tall ships allow for a hands-on experience, explains Maddie Phillips, the shipkeeper of the historic *Cutty Sark* tea clipper that is now preserved as a museum ship in Greenwich, London. "Sailing on tall ships is more fun than cruising on big ships because they're participatory. The crew can sail them perfectly well, but you can join in if you want to."



This was a highlight for Sue Coupland on a recent Caribbean cruise aboard the *Royal Clipper*. "My husband climbed the rigging and took the wheel in the bridge," she says. "Watching the sails raise with Champagne in my hand gave me goosebumps."

Passengers can get involved with the sailing experience on Star Clippers' vessels, learning about sails, knots, and the basics of rigging. Similarly, on voyages with Sea Cloud Cruises, you can help set sails and haul lines during the bracing of the yards, and even make a supervised climb up a mast to 14 meters above the deck.

Tall ships come with other advantages as well. One is environmental: while most of these vessels



have engines, the time they spend under sail reduces their carbon footprint. Although not technically a tall ship, Hurtigruten's *Sea Zero* is aiming for zero emissions when it launches on the Norwegian coast in 2030, with much of its power generated by three solar-paneled sails.

They can also access secluded bays that larger ships can't, and feel more laidback than bigger vessels. While *Le Ponant* or *Club Med 2*'s dress code may be nautical chic, leave your heels and ties at home. "Tall ships offer a different pace to ocean ships," adds Phillips. "Crew must pay attention to forces of nature, which don't follow timetables. And unlike big ships, tall ships are often quiet; you hear the sound of wind and waves rather than engines."

More sociable than private yachts, tall ships engender a camaraderie that bigger cruise ships lack. With fewer guests, passengers have an easier time interacting, often dining at communal tables. Coupland loved this. "We came home having met lifelong friends."

Tall ships aren't for everyone, though, she warns. "They're small, so they don't have casinos like large ships. There are steep stairs and no lifts, so you must be fit and able-bodied to cope. They also rock more than bigger ships."

Concerned about seasickness? Phillips recommends ginger tea and not spending too much time below deck. "Look at the horizon, as that helps to focus you," she adds. Don a captain's cap and you'll fit right in. ☞

COME SAIL AWAY

Clockwise from above: Teak deck chairs on *Club Med 2*; the 32-passenger *Le Ponant* is the only vessel in the Relais & Châteaux collection; raising sails aboard the *Sea Cloud*.

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