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COASTING DOWN TUSCAN SHORES ON A WINDSTAR BREEZE

Story by Anne Z. Cooke; photos by Steve Haggerty

And so it was last spring, as we sailed down Italy's west coast on the Star Breeze, one of Windstar Cruises' three newly-acquired and refitted all-suite yachts, a move that Windstar CEO Hans Birkholz describes as the company's "first venture into ships without sails."



The Star Breeze at anchor in the ocean off Portofino, Italy

Like Odysseus sailing home from Troy, we – my husband Steve and I – couldn't resist the lure of Tuscany's distant shores, a siren song of rugged cliffs, green hills and secluded coastal villages. After a busy first day in Monaco and a glittering send-off at the Monte Carlo Casino, we sailed on to the tiny village and harbor of Portofino, the oft-photographed celebrity hideaway.

Going ashore for a wake-up coffee, our usual vacation ritual, we set out to explore Portofino's steep streets, poking through cheese shops, bakeries, art galleries and souvenir stands. At noon we joined our fellow passengers for a climb up the ridge (or for those couldn't walk, a shuttle bus) to the award-winning Hotel Spendido for a gourmet lunch.



The harbor at Nice, France, the Star Breeze's port of embarkation.

But that evening, as I read about Portoferraio, our next port-of-call, I realized we were heading to the island of Elba, 87 square miles small, a place I'd always imagined to be a barren, storm-tossed rock, an Italian Alcatraz. After all, this was where Napoleon, self-proclaimed emperor of France and the scourge of Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was eventually exiled.

But the next morning, as we sailed closer, a gentle hill appeared on the horizon with an ancient tower and walled harbor along the shore. Red-tiled mansions lined the water's edge where private yachts and fishing boats rode at anchor. Miniature cottages half-hidden among groves of trees, climbed terraced hills.

And the shore excursions I'd expected to blow off? Two choices promised rich dividends. The first, a visit to Napoleon's country residence and his in-town quarters, the gardens and a museum meant I might get some answers.



Sunset over the coast marks the cocktail hour on the Star Breeze's top deck. Cruising off Italy.

But the truth is, Napoleon wasn't on Elba long enough to be worth a museum. In less than a year, he escaped. (More fool he, considering his more permanent defeat at Waterloo.) But the second excursion, a circle-island tour, offered a chance to see the real island, rocks, shoreline, warts and all. I couldn't pass it up.

Piling into the tour bus we were off, following a winding two-lane road across the island, up and down pine-forested hillsides and past olive orchards, grassy pastures, milk cows and vegetable gardens. Along the shore, a string of coves, dotted with seaside cottages – many for rent -- looked out on transparent blue-green water.

At the halfway point, we turned off the road for a visit to La Chiusa vineyards, where the owners laid out a wine tasting and tapas: fresh bread, local olive oil, cheeses and fruit. The tour ended with a free hour in Porto Azzurro, a sunny seaside hamlet village where the only action was fishermen unloading the day's catch.

There were no other tourists, no rush in the souvenir shop, no lines in the bakery and plenty of unclaimed tables at the outdoor café on the main square. Too small for the big cruise ships to visit, Elba was the kind of offbeat port-of-call that Windstar includes on its yacht cruises.



The Hotel Splendido pool overlooks the harbor, Portofino, Italy.

As on the company's better-known sailing ships, quality service and deluxe surroundings set the mood. With fewer than 200 passengers, meeting people at dinner, in the lounge and on deck was not just easy but inevitable. The crew members remembered not just our names but our preferences. Even former Seabourn Cruise Line passengers onboard soon felt at home.

"We've celebrated some very special birthdays on this ship," said Sarah Miller, as we stood in line to pick up our passenger identification cards. "It's been a tradition since 1994. It meant a lot to us."

Miller's family knew their favorite stateroom so well that they felt like owners, she told me. When Windstar announced the Star Breeze's new itineraries, Miller decided, against her better judgment, to take a chance on the trip from Nice to Rome. By the last night on board, she'd been won over.

"I guess the ship really needed a face lift," she reported as the waiters served dessert. "The new color schemes work and the upholstery is elegant but unobtrusive. This room, especially, seems brighter.



The harbor-side plaza brings residents together with backpackers and cruise passengers, at Porto Azzurro, Elba.

"I can't get used to the new name or why they call it a yacht. But it's the same ship, same polished brass and teak decks. The bathrooms still have those gorgeous marble counters and big tubs. And the walk-in closet that I don't really need."

A ship or a yacht? According to Birkholz, the "yacht" classification is part of a cruise industry shift toward more narrowly-focused themes. Back in the day, ocean liners were one-size-fits-all. No matter what you paid or how big your stateroom, every passenger boarded the ship in Port A and sailed to Port B. But today's smaller cruise ships tend to tailor their voyages to more specific demographics.

And Windstar's yachts? They're the next best thing to owning your own yacht. "So far, it's a winning combination," said Miller as we disembarked.

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PRICE: To compare discounted fares with listed "brochure fares," go to www.windstarcruises.com. For example, the fare for our 7-day cruise, "Yachting the Riviera," if booked now, is \$2,799 per person. If booked later at the "brochure fare," the cruise costs more than twice as much, at \$6,599 per person.

DATES: The Star Breeze sails to Costa Rica and Panama through February; in April to Morocco and the Canary Islands; in May to Spain and Portugal; in late May to Monaco (includes two days of Grand Prix events); in June-August to Italy, Sicily and Spain; in September and October to Venice and Athens; and in late October the ship returns to the Caribbean.

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