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I saw Elba: Island of Napoleon's first exile a no-worries paradise

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By Anne Z. Cooke

Tribune Media Services • Sunday February 14, 2016 4:08 AM

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PORTOFERRAIO, Italy — When you sail on a ship like the 208-passenger Star Breeze, a vessel nimble enough to squeeze up to almost any tiny cove or narrow gorge, it's a good idea to bone up on the ports of call in advance.

Researching local history — anecdotal and otherwise — always adds zing to a day spent in an unfamiliar destination.

And so it was as we sailed down Italy's west coast on the Star Breeze, one of Windstar Cruises' three refitted all-suite yachts.

My husband, Steve, and I couldn't resist the lure of Tuscany's distant shore, a siren song of rugged cliffs, green hills and secluded coastal villages. After a busy first day in Monaco and a glittering sendoff at the Monte Carlo Casino, we sailed on to Portofino, the oft-



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Going ashore for a wake-up coffee, we set out to explore Portofino's steep streets, poking through cheese shops, bakeries, art galleries and souvenir stands.

But later that evening, as I studied the ship's next-day port of call, the town of Portoferraio, I suddenly realized we were headed for the island of Elba, best known beyond Italy as one of European history's most infamous prison sites. Elba is the island where Napoleon, the self-proclaimed emperor of France and the scourge of Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was exiled for the first time, in 1814. I envisioned a barren, storm-tossed rock like Alcatraz.

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 climbed the hill, half hidden among groves of trees. Elba wasn't a prison at all.

A visit to Napoleon's in-town quarters, the gardens, a museum and his country residence cured my ignorance. Napoleon, in fact, didn't live on Elba long, escaping within a year. But the second excursion, a circle-island tour, offered a chance to see the rest of Elba.

After piling into the bus, we were off, following a winding two-lane road across the island, stopping occasionally for photos, heading for La Chiusa vineyards and a wine-tasting served with fresh bread, local olive oil, cheese and fruit. Hillside planted in pines and olive trees gave way to pastures, milk cows and vegetable gardens; seaside rental cottages perched above sand-and-pebble beaches.

The tour ended with an hour in another tiny seaside town, Porto Azzurro, leaving enough time to stretch our legs on narrow cobblestone streets, shop for souvenirs and postcards and sit in the sun with a glass of wine. Elba, it seemed, was the kind of no-worries paradise where novelists go to find inspiration while the rest of us can only dream about it.

The day on Elba was a testimonial to Windstar's conviction that small ships and offbeat destinations are the answer to the growing demand for more innovative and authentic cruises.

On the Star Breeze, luxury set the pace. But it was the ship's size that felt so manageable. It took me just an hour to explore from top to bottom, learning my way around every space from the decks and the dining room to the lounges, library and gym.

Because the cruise had fewer than 200 passengers, meeting people and learning names was easy. The crew members, too, made a point of remembering not just our names but also our preferences. And the longer we were onboard, the more comfortable it felt.

In the early days of cruising, ships were a one-size-fits-all product. If you were sailing on the Muddy Duck, you and every other Muddy Duck passenger boarded the ship in Port A and disembarked 10 days later in Port B.

But with today's larger pool of frequent cruise travelers looking for new destinations, cruise lines are targeting more narrowly defined demographics. Passengers' ages and income levels still matter, but their interests come first.

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Expedition ships can be Spartan or deluxe, but they invariably offer demanding or even strenuous shore tours and single-themed trips: polar bears and Arctic ice; the Amazon jungles, coral-reef health.

The biggest, most affordable ships, the 2,000- to 4,000-passenger giants, sell onboard vacation fun as low as \$100 per person a day, with poolside parties, loud music, drinks by the pitcher, glittery theater shows, casinos and basketball courts.

And in the yacht category, the Star Breeze adds a dimension to the Windstar fleet, continuing to offer authentic experiences in offbeat places, with all the creature comforts anyone could want: Spacious suites, fine cuisine, personal service and kindred spirits to share the pleasure at every turn.

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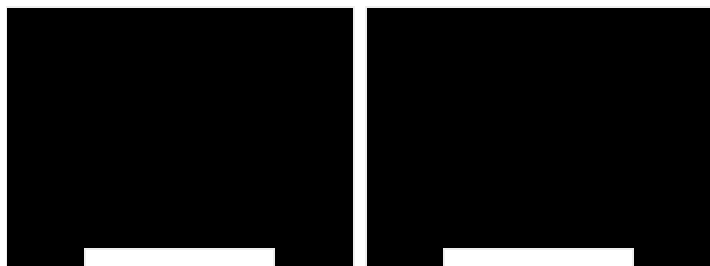


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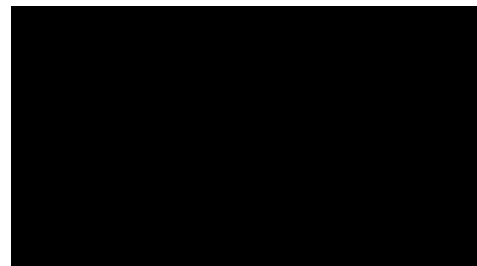


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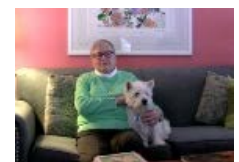
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