

Which of the following European capitals is farthest north: London, Warsaw, Berlin or Amsterdam? Answer below.

COMING SOON

Virtual reality rides set to invade theme parks

It's beginning to look like 2016 will be the year that virtual reality takes theme parks by storm with plans for nine VR coasters in the works and VR dark rides, thrill rides and haunted mazes already on the drawing board.

Canada's Wonderland amusement park outside Toronto will add VR headsets to the Thunder Run roller coaster in 2016 for an up-charge fee after testing the devices on the ride during the off-season, according to company officials.

Thunder Run riders wearing VR headsets will fly on the back of a fire-breathing dragon above a medieval village and experience an imaginary corkscrew element on the inversionless mine train coaster. The VR experience will require riders to travel twice around the track without knowing exactly when the second lap begins. Daily capacity for the virtual reality experience will be limited to continue to allow non-VR riders on Thunder Run.

VR headsets will likely be added to another coaster at one of the 11 locations in the Cedar Fair amusement park chain, said CEO Matt Ouimet during a recent interview.

"It'll be a different type of coaster because we want to see about the different types of physics," Ouimet said.

Test runs are expected to start soon on the unnamed second coaster that will feature a different virtual backstory than Thunder Run. Ouimet eventually envisions riders being able to buy a package of VR coaster rides with multiple storylines.

Don't expect to see VR headsets on high-energy coasters such as Silver Bullet at Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park, California, or Top Thrill Dragster at Ohio's Cedar Point. Instead, VR will be used to boost ridership on coasters that aren't running at full capacity, Ouimet said.

Cedar Fair is partnering on the coaster upgrades with Mack Rides, which has been working with virtual reality design and engineering firm VR Coasters. Mack has been testing the VR technology on the Alpenexpress mine train coaster at Germany's Europa Park, which serves as a proving grounds for the ride maker.

The 360-degree 3-D VR experience synchronizes with the motion of the coaster to fully immerse riders in a virtual world of nonstop action. The trick is syncing the steep drops, airtime hills and G-forces of the ride with the visuals on the screen. So far, the tests have found that coaster riders don't experience motion sickness while wearing the VR headsets.

Mack Rides expects to add VR headsets to nine coasters in 2016 and is working with several intellectual property holders on branded VR ride experiences, according to Attractions Management magazine.

—Brady MacDonald  
Los Angeles Times

GEOQUIZ ANSWER

At 52 degrees, 31 minutes north latitude, Berlin is slightly farther north than the Dutch capital of Amsterdam (52 degrees, 23 minutes). Warsaw is at 52 degrees, 15 minutes, and London is at 51 degrees, 29 minutes. All are farther north than the border between the lower 48 U.S. states and Canada.

—Gazette staff

# DESTINATIONS

## The Gazette

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Tribune News Service photos

Passengers partake in a cocktail hour on the deck of the Star Breeze, a 208-passenger ship owned by Windstar Cruises that sails the Mediterranean Sea.

# Tuscan coast calls out

By Anne Z. Cooke  
Tribune News Service

**P**ORTOFERRAIO, 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. If nothing else, you'll have time to decide which shore excursions—if any—promise to be that one and only magical mystery tour.

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."

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 sendoff at the Monte Carlo Casino, we sailed on to Portofino, the oft-pho-



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

tographed celebrity hideaway whose harbor and village are as famous as they are tiny.

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 climbed the ridge behind the village for lunch at the Hotel Splendido, an annual contender for the world's best hotel award.

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.

If you're a fact-freak, you might know that that Elba is the island where Napoleon, self-proclaimed emperor of France and the scourge of Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was exiled. Why Elba? If Elba's a barren,

storm-tossed rock like Alcatraz (as I'd always imaged it was), I'm not wasting my day going ashore.

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.

THE NITTY GRITTY

**For prices:** To compare discounted fares with listed "brochure fares," go to [windstarcruises.com](http://windstarcruises.com). For example, the fare for our seven-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.

**2016 sailing dates:** The Star Breeze sails to Costa Rica and Panama in January and 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.

And the shore excursions I'd expected to blow off? Two choices offered rich dividends. The first, a visit to Napoleon's in-town quarters, the gardens, a museum and his country residence, would cure my ignorance. Napoleon, in fact, didn't live on Elba very long, escaping within the

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Left: Visitors absorb the best of "La dolce vita" at the harbor in Portofino, Italy. Right: The cruising yacht Star Breeze and the British-flagged sailing yacht Eureka share the sea off Portofino, Italy.



# Climbing high on the Emerald Isle

By Sarah de Crescenzo  
The Orange County Register

How many islands dot Ireland's Clew Bay? As many as days of the year, goes the saying.

Scanning the green mounds peppering the white-capped sea below while visiting last summer, I tried futilely to distinguish from the other islands the grassy knoll where my grandmother was born.

They all looked the same from my vantage halfway up Croagh Patrick, the mountain that overlooks the bay, so after a swig of water and a few lungfuls of air, my husband and I continued our trek to the peak.

The mountain—referred to locally as the Reek—rises to about 2,500 feet above sea level and is five miles outside the seaside village of Westport in County Mayo. It draws about 100,000 people to the area each year.

Visitors at the start of the climb are greeted by a white statue of St. Patrick, the nation's patron saint and the mountain's namesake. At its summit is a small chapel where Masses are celebrated on Reek Sunday, the last Sunday each July when thousands turn out to walk together to the top. Some among the trekkers who make the annual pilgrimage take the rocky trail barefoot.

We set off for the summit on a clear morning in June, with light jackets zipped over stomachs filled to bursting by the breakfast cooked to order by the proprietor of Plougastel House, the cozy bed and breakfast where we were staying in Westport.

Heading out, I remembered the first time I had hiked Croagh Patrick as a teenager, more than a decade ago: My memory was of me and my family bounding upward under a warming sun.

But on this climb, about halfway up the mountain the crowd began to thin as the temperature dropped and fog dampened the loose shale and rocks.

Before leaving Southern California for our honeymoon, I told my husband I'd like us to climb the Reek together. But I hadn't said anything about the clouds that often roll over the top of the mountain, or how the top

third of the climb becomes more of a crawl as rocks shift underfoot without warning



**Above:** A statue of St. Patrick waits at the foot of Croagh Patrick. **Below left:** Kylemore Abbey is the former boarding school run by Benedictine nuns. **Below right:** Ruins stand at the monastery of Clonmacnoise, situated on the River Shannon, south of the town of Athlone.



on the narrowing trail.

That day, our final steps onto the plateau were witnessed by only one other climber, a woman calmly feeding blueberries to a lone sheep.

Stepping by her onto the plateau, we felt the full force of the wind. I pulled my phone from my pocket for a photo, and my stiffening fingers nearly lost it to a powerful gust.

With the realization that the wind was so strong our voices were lost to it, we ran

to the fog-shrouded chapel and hunkered down against its leeward side.

Minutes later the cold became too much, and we descended, skidding down toward the sun-dappled stretch of the trail visible below.

That afternoon, our spirits fully revived by a thimbleful or two of Jameson, slices of homemade cake and attaboys from the relatives for reaching the top, we set out to the first of two islands we would visit during our trip.

We cast off from the shore

in a small boat with two relatives and a sea-loving mutt to visit the island where my maternal grandmother had lived before she emigrated to Chicago.

Motoring by islands of deep green scattered throughout the bay, we saw seals lounging on rocks and herds of cows and sheep grazing contentedly.

As we neared our destination, the wind picked up noticeably, whipping up spray and rocking the boat.

Docking, we knew the visit

would have to be a quick one.

With our four-footed friend bounding ahead, we walked up to an intricate and rusted gate and through it found a path leading to the house.

Once we reached the doorstep, we walked around the building, peering through the windows as if we would see the faces of those who once lived there. Then, as the sky darkened, we hurried back to the boat.

Many still speak Gaelic on the Aran Islands, three of

## IF YOU GO

### Getting to Westport:

Renting a car and driving from Dublin is about a 3½-hour trip. Or take Ireland's national bus service, Bus Eireann, from Dublin to Castlebar (via Athlone), then on to Westport.

### Aran Islands: From Westport, head south via bus to Galway (a ticket is about \$17) and book a day tour of the islands at the Galway Tour Company office on High Street. If you have free time, keep an eye out for signs offering free walking tours of Galway to get insight into the city's history (and be sure to tip your guide).

### Lodging in Westport:

Castlecourt Hotel, Castlebar Street, westportplaza.hotel.ie; Plougastel House B&B, Distillery Road, plougastel-house.com; McCarthy's Lodge & Bar, Quay Street, mccarthyslodge.com

which are inhabited and reachable by ferry. We decided to visit the smallest, Inis Oirr, or Inisheer, and as we rode the ferry, a pair of dolphins played in the waves caused by a boat chugging alongside us.

Once on Inis Oirr, we picked out a block of Man of Aran fudge from a stand smartly situated near the ferry drop-off. The creamy chocolate sustained us as we pedaled rented bicycles past thatched cottages with horses in the yard.

Stacked stone walls—the farther west in Ireland you go, the rockier it gets—crisscrossed the land, penning in livestock.

Along our ride, we stopped for a time to goggle at the wreck of the Plassey, a cargo ship driven ashore in a storm in 1960. Today its rusted shell sits on the island's shore, dwarfing a nearby coffee stand and looming over visitors as they use the iron carcass as a photo backdrop.

Just before turning back so as not to miss the ferry, we spotted a lighthouse at the island's edge. The white pillar, like the chapel swathed in cloud cover atop Croagh Patrick, looked ghostly.

As it had during our short time on the island in Clew Bay, it was easy to feel as if nothing had changed there for at least a century.

# Tuscany/Relatively cozy ship allows for more intimate socialization

Continued from 1C

year (more fool he, considering how things turned out.) But the second excursion, a circle-island tour, offered a chance to see the real Elba, geography, topography, warts and all.

Piling into the bus, we were off, following a winding two-lane road across the island, stopping here and there for photos, heading for La Chiusa vineyards and a wine tasting served with fresh bread, local olive oil, cheese and fruit. Hillsides 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 nearby, 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-worry paradise where novelists go to find inspiration and the rest of us can only dream about.

Sitting on the piazza, watching the slow pace of life, the residents shopping, tourists carrying backpacks and fishermen tying their boats to the dock was so pleasant I wondered why Napoleon wasn't tempted to stay. But the day on Elba was a testimonial to Windstar's con-



Tribune News Service

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

viction 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 the gym.

With fewer than 200 passengers on this cruise, meeting people and learning names was easy. The crew

members, too, made a point of remembering not just our names but our preferences. And the longer we were onboard, the more comfortable it felt.

But it was a couple of sad-tears days for the Seabourn Cruise Line fans on board, passengers who had sailed on the ship before Seabourn sold it to Windstar.

"We've celebrated some very special birthdays and anniversaries 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. And now, just like that, everything's changed."

Miller's family knew the ship and their favorite stateroom so well that they felt like owners, she told me. When Windstar announced the Star Breeze's new itineraries, Miller decided to take her chances with a one-week voyage from Nice to Rome. By our last night on board, she'd had a change of heart.

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

"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."

For most us, the Star Breeze was still a ship. But as Birkholz explained, the "yacht" classification is part of a cruise industry shift toward more narrowly focused cruise experiences.

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.

Students and bargain hunters bought inside staterooms on D Deck, sometimes called third class; middle class travelers booked second-class, or "Cabin Class" staterooms; and celebrities and corporate millionaires booked first-class suites, with a separate first-class dining room.

But with today's larger pool of frequent cruise travelers looking for new destinations, cruise lines are targeting more narrowly defined demographics.

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 new dimension to the Windstar fleet, continuing to offer authentic experiences in off-beat 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.