



PORT OF CALL
Clockwise from far left:
Star Flyer at sea; Corfu;
Kotor; Amalfi; climbing
the rigging



Fair Seas

Not normally a family of sailors, **Antonia Windsor** and her daughters test their sea legs for the first time aboard a Star Clippers cruise round the Mediterranean

"Are your daughters enjoying themselves," asks an elegant lady in a concerned voice as she surveys my girls, aged 9 and 13, sitting quietly at the end of the table. "Yes, they're having a great time," I reply. She looks unconvinced and asks the girls directly: "And you're enjoying the food?" The girls nod as one tucks into a plate of pork medallions and rosti potatoes and the other forks couscous and fish.

We are seated at a shared table in the dining room of Star Flyer, a sailing clipper that's touring the waters of the Mediterranean, and my children are the only kids on board.

Earlier in the year at the all-inclusive hotel in Tenerife we visit every Easter, my little one gorged herself on endless plates of chicken nuggets and the eldest showed no restraint when it came to ordering slushies at every opportunity, so it's

not that they're a different species to other children, it's just that they are older now and, although the nightly à la carte menu is not huge, they always find something they like.

"Are your girls enjoying themselves?" asks an American man a few days later as he eyes my girls reading their Kindles on loungers on the sun deck. "There aren't really any activities for kids like on the bigger cruise ships."

We have never been on a bigger cruise ship, so have nothing to compare it to, but the girls have each other. They play games together and they draw. I'd stopped off at Flying Tiger in Rome and bought rock painting pens along with watercolours, so they also paint. But what delights me the most is they read. I'd been a voracious reader as a child and had been feeling increasingly frustrated that my children weren't enjoying books like I did. My eldest had read through

primary school and then promptly stopped when she started secondary school, and my nine-year-old hadn't progressed beyond books with multiple illustrations. However, before this trip I researched titles they might like and filled their Kindles, so within a day of no Wi-Fi they'd both settled into a book that had grabbed them and continued to read for the entire trip.

Yet the American was right. There aren't specific activities laid on for kids, but I was surprised that we were the only family with children on board, because we'd taken advantage of a free child place that the company was offering on select summer sailings and were sharing a triple cabin. Apparently

**"OUR AFTERNOONS
WERE SPENT
POOTLING AROUND
EUROPEAN CITIES"**

there had been four children on the previous sailing, so obviously other intrepid parents were also happy to take a chance on a holiday that offers more than kids' clubs.

And it's not like there aren't any activities at all aboard this rigged sailing ship. There's morning yoga (which I admittedly fail to get my daughters to try) as well as the opportunity to climb the rigging to the crow's nest, karaoke and live music and a ship Olympics of silly races that my 9-year-old actually wins, much to her delight. White Night sees us dress in matching white outfits and watch laser lights dancing on the sails in the dark of the top deck, and the →



ALL ABOARD
Clockwise from far right: Hvar; Antonia and daughters on board; Star Flyer in full sail



oldies dancing to Abba and Queen. The girls and I join the conga line around the pool and I show off my little-known skill of being able to limbo, really low.

Aboard Star Flyer, the atmosphere is deliberately informal.

The ship carries just 170 passengers, and most of the public spaces are open-decked, encouraging conversation and camaraderie. Meals are taken in the dining room at open-seating tables and the entertainment is usually in the

Tropical Bar, the social hub of the cruise. There's also no dress code to speak of, just a request for no shorts at dinner, but men don't have to wear jackets or ties.

We had a dream itinerary for our 11-day cruise, starting in Rome and then working our way around the boot of Italy with stops in Ponza, Amalfi, Messina in Sicily and then round to Corfu, Montenegro and Croatia, before ending in Venice. Prior to our departure I thoroughly researched each stop, finding out where the nearest beaches were, if there was anything particularly child-friendly to do in ports and showing the children pictures so they could get excited. However, I realised on this trip that when you book a cruise

“OUR MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS WERE WHEN WE ENGAGED WITH LOCALS”

on a clipper not every stop is guaranteed, so you can't get too excited (or tell your friends at school you are, for example, definitely going to Greece). I was really looking forward to exploring the island of Ponza, our first stop, a tiny Italian

island that not many tourists get to, known for its pastel-hued harbour, dramatic cliffs and hidden swimming coves. Unfortunately, although we saw the island on the horizon, the sea was just too choppy to safely take the tenders to land and we had to sail on by.

Which brings me to rough waters. I had spent months after booking the cruise looking up whether people onboard had ever complained of seasickness. My youngest has an absolute phobia of vomiting and at first mention of travelling on a ship for 11 days she collapsed in a heap of hysteria and I had to gently coax her round to the idea. That we met stormy weather just one day out of port, after weeks of me telling her the sea would be still, was a challenge. However, I'd stocked up on sea sickness tablets and we all took one preventatively, before any of us felt nauseous, and were absolutely fine. In fact, facing rough seas and getting through them may just have taken away my daughter's fear of being on the water. It

was a joy to see her hopping on and off the tenders (the ship's life rafts) with confidence, and I doubt she'll cry again at the mention of travel by sea. The eldest enjoyed the whole experience so much that she announced she wants to own her own boat when she is older. You can't dream about what you don't know and, as a non-seafaring family, it is great that they have had this kind of exposure to the ocean so that thoughts of the sea can enter into their dreams of adulthood.

We soon settled into the rhythm of our journey. Heading up to deck to watch the crew sail into harbour each morning, chatting to other passengers as the land came closer into view. As we navigated Sicily's Messina Strait, a German woman told the children how this was the stretch of water where Odysseus's ship had been wrecked in Ulysses, while in Montenegro's Bay of Kotor we marvelled at the way the captain steered the ship into the narrowest of channels, flanked by steep mountains and tiny stone villages.

Afternoons were spent pootling around European cities. Eating expensive lemon sorbet in Amalfi and shunning the €40 umbrellas, choosing instead to swim with the locals off the pebbly beach; buying bracelets in Corfu town and finding a swim spot in view of the Old Fort; walking the city walls of Dubrovnik and Kotor in the blazing sun, then cooling off with

heaps of ice cream.

The most memorable moments were when we engaged with locals: the woman in Messina who helped me download the local bus app so I could pay for our fares to the beach and then travelled all the way there with us to make sure we got off at the right stop; the family we met at a playground on the coast in Hvar.

Back on board we enjoyed swimming in the pools (particularly fun when the sea was rough as it was like being in a wave machine) and lounging in the bowsprit netting looking down at the cobalt blue water. Water sports such as paddleboarding, kayaking and snorkelling are also on offer if you sail in the Caribbean, but we didn't have favourable conditions for these on our cruise.

The initiative to welcome more families comes with intent. As Fay McCormack, General Manager of Star Clippers' UK GSA, explains, the goal is to offer something more lasting than passive entertainment: “valuable and transferable life skills” built through shared experiences. That ethos is visible in how the crew encourage participation without pressure, gently drawing children into the rhythm of life at sea.

Whether this experience is viable as a wider family travel option depends on the children, the parents and the other passengers. Most of my fellow passengers found a moment to tell me what they thought about having children on board, and most expressed a wish for a quiet sailing experience that they felt would be marred by, “toddlers running around”. The ship itself, with its ropes and rigging, definitely wouldn't be safe for toddlers anyway and really suits teenagers best, although my 9-year-old had a lovely time and enjoyed being fussed over by the restaurant staff who all knew her name. And for families seeking a break from digital overload and a chance to reset, a Star Clippers voyage certainly offers a holiday that won't be forgotten. ✂

THE LOWDOWN

HOW TO GET THERE

Direct UK flights to Rome from 1 hour, 25 minutes

WHERE TO STAY

Italy & Croatia Star Clipper Cruise 2026,
3-Berth Cabin (2 adults, 2 children)
11 nights from £9,654
including 10% Early Booking Discount
and port charges

2026 itinerary: Civitavecchia; Ponza; Amalfi; Lipari;
Taormina; Crotone; Otranto; Monopoli; Barletta;
Rovinj; Venice
starclippers.co.uk

GOOD TO KNOW

Portrait Roma, Junior Suite (2 adults, 2 children)
from £1,900 per night
lungarnocollection.com
Hilton Molino Stucky Venice, Family King Suite
(2 adults, 2 children) from £644 per night
hilton.com

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