

Hello BUOYS

Bigger, better and going further than ever before—**Kate Simon** introduces the new wave of cruise ships that are setting the standard for the on-board experience in 2010

It's cocktail hour and the bartender is persuading me to try something different from my usual G&T: a mojito, martini, cosmopolitan perhaps? I settle for a Bellini. After all, this is a special occasion. For I'm sitting at the bar on the upper deck of the *Christina O*, the super-yacht created by Aristotle Onassis. The late Greek shipping magnate snapped up this former Canadian warship for \$34,000 in 1953, then lavished a further \$4m on making it the most luxurious pleasure boat of its day.

Christina O is a remarkable craft, still number one in its league, surely beating any 21st-century yacht hands down for sheer elegance and sense of history. Guests boarding today can see many of the original features carefully chosen by Onassis himself: the graceful spiral staircase with its onyx and brass balustrade; the macho nautical-themed bar with its infamous stool covers made from the foreskins of whales; the bronze-lipped swimming pool on the main deck, which turns into a dance floor when covered with a multicoloured mosaic of a bull, copied from an image in the Palace of Knossos in Crete.

The yacht, now owned by an Irish syndicate, has been available for private hire by the week for a six-figure price since 2001. But from





this year it will be possible to buy an overnight sailing, too, in the quieter months of May and June, for just €1,600 per person, courtesy of a new package titled "The Maria Callas Experience". For Onassis wasn't the only strong personality to walk these decks—his lover, the Greek opera diva Maria Callas, was a frequent visitor on board and this is where much of their stormy love affair took place.

Up to 34 guests can join this special cruise, embarking at Monte Carlo in the afternoon and sailing to the Bay of Cannes, departing after breakfast the next day. Along the way, these privileged passengers will enjoy a guided tour of the ship; a truly exquisite eight-course dinner prepared by talented chefs from the three-Michelin-star restaurant Don Alfonso 1890 in Italy; a performance of Callas's signature arias by world-class opera singers Nelly Miricioiu, Claire Rutter and Mary Plazas; and a night in one of the historic cabins where the likes of Winston Churchill, Frank Sinatra and, of course, Jackie Kennedy-Onassis once laid their heads.

This special package from the *Christina O* is not the only new experience that will be enticing us to sail the high seas this year. Richard Branson's newly refitted catamaran, *Necker Belle*, is now available for weekly tailor-made charters in the Caribbean and Mediterranean for groups of up to 12. Unusually for a yacht of its kind, *Necker Belle's* main en-suite cabins aren't buried below deck but sit above the water line, offering undisturbed views to the horizon. For extra fun, the yacht also has an open-air cinema and will soon carry a three-man submarine.

These extravagant offerings may seem out of kilter with the world's financial woes, but the cruise industry has been making good progress despite the stormy economic weather. Even the collapse of Dubai World late last year did not prevent a much-anticipated new cruise terminal from opening in the Emirate in January—Dubai is predicting it will see an 80 per cent boost in cruise tourism as a result. Indeed, rising passenger figures have prompted the launch and refurbishment of a whole host of ships for 2010 to meet demand.

Seven Seas Navigator, the 490-guest ship from Regent Seven Seas Cruises, saw out the old year, setting sail in December after a makeover that refreshed the décor and furnishings and introduced new restaurants Prime 7 and La Veranda. And *Rotterdam*, from Holland America Line, also welcomed back passengers in the same month, after upgrading fixtures and fittings and adding 44 new state rooms, a pool, theatre, restaurant and lounge. Sister ships the *Maasdam*, *Ryndam* and *Statendam* will be similarly enhanced this year. The big news from this cruise line, however, will be the debut of *Nieuw Amsterdam* in July. The fourth generation of this ship, which first launched in 1906 powered by sail and steam engine, will accommodate 2,100 passengers.

Cruise and Maritime Voyages entered the business in January with two refurbished traditional ships, the *Marco Polo* and the *Ocean Countess*, both carrying up to 800 guests. And Italian travel company Costa Cruises launched the *Costa Deliziosa* in February, which can carry up to 2,260 passengers and features a three-storey theatre, 4D cinema, Grand Prix driving simulator and roller-skating track.

Saga Pearl II set off in search of the Northern Lights in March, a 446-guest ship recently acquired and refurbished by the Saga Group. Meanwhile, Thomson Cruises bought the *Costa Europa* and have revamped it as the *Thomson Dream* for an April launch. The ship will carry 1,506 passengers on tours of the Mediterranean and Caribbean.

It promises to be a busy year at P&O, which is bucking the trend with *Adonia*, a ship that accommodates only 710 guests so that it can call



The cruise industry is making good progress despite the stormy economic weather, with a host of new ships meeting rising demand

at destinations that are inaccessible to larger vessels. Previously sailing as the *Royal Princess* for Princess Cruises, *Adonia* will become the smallest craft in P&O's fleet when it first departs in April. Bigger news comes in the shape of *Azura*, P&O's latest super-liner. Ballerina Darcey Bussell will perform the bottle-smashing ceremony in Southampton in April, before the ship, which can carry 3,100 passengers, makes its maiden voyage to the Mediterranean.

April also sees the launch of Celebrity Cruises' *Celebrity Eclipse*, offering its 2,850 guests a mix of itineraries around Europe, ranging from four to 16 nights. Other novel features of this stylish boutique-look ship include a country club on the top deck, complete with manicured lawn.

Norwegian Epic, NCL Preestyle Cruising's next generation vessel hosting 4,200 guests, sets sail in June with 20 bars and 20 dining choices. June also sees the maiden voyage of Yachts of Seabourn's *Seabourn Sojourn*, a replica of sister ship *Seabourn Odyssey*, which was introduced last year. The all-suite yacht



...aves it's hard to
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...nd sense of history
...f *Christina O*.
...op right and below
...oyal Caribbean
...ternational's *Allure
...f the Seas*, which
...n take a staggering
...400 passengers,
...as 16 decks
...vided into seven
...ighbourhoods,
...cluding Boardwalk
...with its pier-like
...musements.
...ar right is the interior
...nd exterior of
...Richard Branson's
...fitted catamaran,
...ucker *Bella*

will take up to 450 passengers on a 12-day trip out of Copenhagen, in July, August and September, calling at Stockholm, Helsinki, St Petersburg and Tallinn.

One of the most exciting launches will take place in September when Cunard's latest ship, *Queen Elizabeth*, succeeds the *QE2*. The luxury liner will bear Cunard's distinctive black and red livery and sport Art Deco features as an homage to its namesake, which set out to sea back in 1938. The ocean liner will carry up to 2,092 guests and the first voyage will call at ports including Lisbon and Las Palmas. She will set sail on her maiden world voyage in January 2011.

Oceania Cruises' first custom-built liner, *Marina*, is due to debut in late 2010. It will be the largest ship in the fleet, with accommodation for 1,252 passengers. Marble, granite, wood and leather have been used in its luxurious design, and wheelchair-accessible state rooms are available in every category for the first time.

One of the biggest launches of 2010 will be Royal Caribbean International's *Allure of the Seas*. The twin of *Oasis of the Seas*

has capacity for a staggering 5,400 passengers—40 per cent larger than any other liner. *Allure* has 16 decks divided into seven neighbourhoods, a new concept that promises experiences to cater for every mood. Head for Boardwalk, for example, and you can enjoy the high aerial thrills of the first zip-line at sea. But one of the ship's most surprising features must be Central Park, an open-air tropical garden the size of a football field, set at the heart of this monster vessel.

The most extraordinary innovation came in 2002 with *The World*, the first and only residential community of its kind at sea; it was able to sell all the 165 apartments aboard its 12-deck structure when it launched. Holland America Line will introduce branded spaces on *Nieuw Amsterdam*, including the "Explorations Cafe, powered by *The New York Times*", and "The Digital Workshop, powered by Microsoft Word". It's clear that such imaginative ideas are becoming crucial to securing a new generation of passengers.

One favourite emerging trend is partnering up with celebrity chefs. P&O has been creating signature restaurants in this vein since it began working with Gary Rhodes in 2005, later signing up Marco Pierre White, too. Now Atul Kochhar, the Michelin-starred Indian chef from London restaurant Benares, will join P&O's new ship *Azura*. And wine expert Olly Smith is getting in on the act, too, launching *Azura's* The Glass House wine bar and restaurant. He will regularly join the ship to do wine-tasting sessions.

Other foodie developments include the chef Tom Alkons' appearance at Crystal Cruises' 14th Wine & Food Experiences of Discovery cruise in 2010. Crystal has also had a long partnership



This year, ships will also work harder at going further, with Alaska, Greenland, and ports in China, Korea and Japan on the itinerary

Clockwise from right: artist's impressions of Cunard's latest ship, *Queen Elizabeth*, and its Art Deco-inspired lobby; plans for the coral pool on board P&O's new superliner, *Azura*; and *St Helena*, one of the more adventurous destinations now on the cruising schedules



with the fêted Japanese chef Nobuyuki Matsuhisa. At tall ships line Star Clippers, German chef Martina Kömpel recently came aboard for a cookery-themed cruise of South-East Asia. And Oceania's new *Marina* will have the first floating state-of-the-art culinary studio with individual workstations for hands-on tutorials.

Spas have also become as essential to liners as landlubber hotels, with cruise companies recently raising the bar by sealing deals with some top global brands. *The World* features a spa by Thai specialist Banyan Tree, its first at sea. Regent Seven Seas has just put a Canyon Ranch SpaClub on its new *Seven Seas Navigator*—the spa company is also a favourite with Cunard. And *Crystal Deliziosa* will include a Samsara Spa featuring a Rock Sauna and Aromatic Turkish Bath.

Pushing the boundaries for on-board entertainment, NCL Pre-style Cruising will see the first at-sea performances of Blue Man Group on *Norwegian Epic*. Meanwhile, the *RMS St Helena*, one of the world's last serving Royal Mail Ships, is introducing a special trip for the 128 passengers who share its decks with vital cargo. "The Napoleon Tour" is a 21-day cultural introduction to the connections between the military leader and the ship's home island, St Helena, hosted by the expert lecturer and author Christopher Danziger.

This year, ships will also work harder at going further. P&O will return to Alaska for the first time in 40 years, Costa Cruises will head for Greenland, and Yachts of Seabourn will call in for the first time at Dalian in China, Busan and Incheon in Korea, and Nagasaki and Kagoshima in Japan.

After all, as luxurious as these ships are, isn't cruising in the end all about seeing that big wide world? ☺