

SMALL SHIPS – BIG EXPERIENCES WITH NOBLE CALEDONIA - BOOK EARLY AND SAVE £500 PER PERSON



Wonders & Wildlife of Costa Rica & Panama

An in-depth exploration of the wonders of Costa Rica and Panama aboard the MS Serenissima
18th January to 2nd February 2016

Costa Rica is a small country, yet its particular topography and position between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans result in it being one of the most biologically diverse places on earth. It has, over the past decade, grown in its appeal to the UK traveller. No wonder when you consider its attractions: teeming rain forest, cloud forest, hot volcanoes, sugar sand beaches and a remarkably diverse landscape and culture. Added to this is the famous wildlife of the region: spider, howler and capuchin monkeys, coatimundis and over 300 species of birds including brilliant toucans and scarlet macaws. In addition to exploring Costa Rica in some depth and visiting a wealth of national parks, our voyage has the added advantage of some calls in Panama. After our daylight transit of the Panama Canal, we spend a day exploring Panama City followed by a visit to the truly remote Darien Province as well as the island paradise of Isla Coiba.

Exploring by small ship is the perfect means to discover the diversity of Costa Rica and Panama; skip the arduous and lengthy land travel which a trip to this part of the world often entails and instead relax onboard as we deliver you to a new and exciting destination each day.

MS Serenissima

Previously known as the MS Andrea, the MS Serenissima was launched after an extensive refurbishment in April 2013. The vessel accommodates just 107 passengers in attractively designed cabins which feature air conditioning, modern shower and toilet, telephone, flat screen televisions and other thoughtful appointments. There are eight different grades of cabin arranged over five decks and with the exception of the five inside cabins, all staterooms feature either windows or portholes. Onboard facilities include a lido area with a bar and Jacuzzi, two lounges, a small library, a spacious observation deck, fitness area and massage. The free seating Venice Restaurant accommodates all guests in one sitting. In addition there is an outside dining area for when the weather and itinerary permit.



The Itinerary in brief

Day 1 - London to San Jose, Costa Rica. Fly by scheduled indirect flight. Arrive this evening and transfer to the Intercontinental Real Hotel (or similar) for a two night stay.
Day 2 - San Jose. Enjoy a morning tour of San Jose including the Gold Museum and the National Museum with a wealth of archaeological and historical artefacts.
Day 3 - San Jose to Puerto Limon. After a relaxing morning we enjoy a scenic drive through the hills to Puerto Limon on the Caribbean coast enjoying a local lunch along the way. Embark MS Serenissima in the early afternoon.

Day 4 - Cahuita National Park & Tortuguero National Park. This morning we head south to the Cahuita National Park. The area is filled with beautiful wildlife that includes howler monkeys, white-faced capuchin monkeys, raccoons, sloths, otters, coatis, agoutis, armadillos and porcupines. Our naturalist guides will lead us through the trails of the rainforest, sharing their vast knowledge of this fragile ecosystem. Return to the vessel for lunch and this afternoon is free to relax or join an excursion to the Tortuguero National Park.
Day 5 - Bocas del Toro, Panama. The Bocas del Toro archipelago is an area of pristine islands which are now part of a national marine park. We spend the morning surrounded by astounding beauty and using local boats will explore the mangroves where we hope to see sloths, dolphins in the water and find a remote beach to swim and snorkel.
Day 6 - Panama Canal Transit. An undisputed destination on the travel bucket list has to be the Panama Canal. The Canal is around 50 miles long and takes between eight to ten hours to cross. Unlike many cruise ships we are planning a daytime transit allowing us the best conditions to experience this engineering marvel.
Day 7 - Panama City. Panama City is a combination of the historic old town, declared a UNESCO Historical monument, and the ultra-modern new town. We will stroll along the cobblestone streets of the Casco Viejo visiting the colonial mansions and 17th century churches and convents before continuing to Panama Viejo and the original ruins of the city founded in 1517.
Day 8 - Darien. The Darien Jungle is recognised as one of the world's top ten birding sites, and we hope to see many bird species such as the colourful crimson-collared tanager, green and chestnut-fronted macaws, rufous-tailed and snow-bellied hummingbirds. We will explore this pristine, seldom visited area by local canoe, navigating up the tidal Mogue River to an Embera Indian settlement which offers a fascinating glimpse of an ancient world.
Day 9 - Isla Coiba. This once infamous prison island, now a National Park, has reverted to an island paradise. We will anchor off the ranger station and use our Zodiacs to land on the island. Here our onboard naturalists will lead some



guided walks as we explore the main island, which boasts some 147 species of birds.
Day 10 - Golfo Dulce, Costa Rica. This morning we will visit the famous gardens at Casa Orquideas (Orchid House), see a profusion of over 100 varieties of orchids and look out for tanagers, parrots and colourful toucans. Over lunch we position to the Esquinas River. Here we will use Zodiacs to search for wildlife on the river whilst on shore, guided hikes will explore the indigenous rainforest.
Day 11 - Corcovado National Park. Resting on the northern side of the Osa Peninsula, Drake Bay (Bahia Drake) is our gateway to the Corcovado National Park. We will use the Zodiacs to land on one of the beaches before enjoying a walk through the primary and secondary forest with our naturalist guides locating and explaining the extensive rainforest wildlife and flora. The rich biological diversity of Corcovado National Park is astounding and bird lovers will be enchanted by a wide variety of birds. We return to the ship for lunch and this afternoon hope to find a local beach for snorkelling and beachcombing activities.
Day 12 - Manuel Antonio National Park. From our berth in Quepos we travel to the Manuel Antonio

National Park which is one of the most stunning and bio-diverse areas of the world. Spread out over 683 hectares it is filled with diverse wildlife, has both primary and secondary forests, boasts a stunning shoreline ideal for bird watching or swimming, and is home to a number of endemic species of plants and animals. We will make an early start this morning to get the best viewing of monkeys, vividly coloured birds and the lethargic three-toed sloth.
Day 13 - Curu National Park & Isla Tortugas. Spend the morning exploring the Curu National Wildlife refuge. This small reserve boasts a rich and diverse wildlife in five different habitats ranging from marine zones, including a 200 metre wide beach area, mangrove swamps and tropical forests. Here on a range of walks we will find over 200 species of birds, howler and capuchin monkeys, mammals such as otters, ocelots and pumas and turtles. Over lunch we sail the short distance to Tortuga Island where we have the chance to snorkel over the volcanic reef or spend the afternoon relaxing on the white sand beaches.
Day 14 - Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. Our berth at Punta Arenas is our starting point for a full day excursion to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, a nature reserve boasting over 3000 species of animals and plants. On guided walks we will learn how the forest's location ensures it receives a steady supply of clouds and the moisture they contain sustains and supports this eco system.
Day 15 - Punta Arenas to London. Disembark this morning and transfer to San Jose for our scheduled indirect flight to London.
Day 16 - London. Arrive this afternoon.

Prices and Inclusions

Special offer prices per person based on double occupancy range from £5395 for a category 1 cabin to £7195 for an owner's suite. Single cabins from £5695.
Price Includes: Economy class scheduled air travel, two nights hotel accommodation in San Jose on a bed and breakfast basis, light dinner on day 1, San Jose City tour, 12 nights aboard the MS Serenissima on a full board basis with house wine, beer and soft drinks with lunch and dinner onboard, Noble Caledonia expedition team, shore excursions, gratuities to crew and whilst on excursions, transfers, port taxes.
NB. Ports and itinerary subject to change and the release of flight schedules. All special offers are subject to availability. Travel insurance and visa not included in the price. Our current booking conditions apply to all reservations.

Discovering the pleasures of privilege

Gabriella Le Breton samples a cruise that promises tranquillity, privacy and an air of calm

As a solo traveller I tend to avoid travelling during school holidays, when prices are higher, places busier and children noisier. However, reasoning that even parents must occasionally seek respite from their "angels", I considered MSC Cruises' answer to tranquil family cruising: a voyage on one of the Italian cruise line's Yacht Club ships.

The Yacht Club aims to create "a ship within a ship", dedicating the prestigious foredecks of four Fantasia-class ships to guests who sign up for this unashamedly elitist experience. The fortunate few (up to 142 passengers) enjoy benefits including superior cabins, inclusive fares, a butler and concierge, access to exclusive dining and pool facilities, priority check-in and an air of calm – a tall order on a ship with hundreds of children on board.

To put the Yacht Club to the test I chose a Mediterranean voyage in mid-July, when the 3,274-passenger MSC Splendida was guaranteed to be popular with families. I embarked with my mother in Barcelona; MSC offers the unusual option of boarding at various ports of call on many Mediterranean voyages, handy when it comes to selecting convenient dates and flights.

Splendida is big on bling, with an eye-popping golden Swarovski-crystal-inlaid staircase in the Yacht Club's double-height foyer. Yet, as we discovered during a ship's tour with our butler, Donny, this pales into insignificance when compared with its larger sister in the main atrium.

Fortunately, the Yacht Club's other public areas are more restrained. Ocean views are the focus of the Top Sail Lounge, where light breakfasts, afternoon tea and sundowners are served. The private sun deck, with a small salt-water pool and two hot tubs, is home to the One Bar, which serves alfresco lunches and, with its curved teak and steel counter, really does exude the atmosphere of a private yacht.

MSC serves quintessentially Mediterranean cuisine in all restaurants except the speciality Tex-Mex Santa Fe. Dinner at the dedicated Yacht Club restaurant, L'Olivo, was a delight: bathed in evening sunshine, it was decorated like an Italian garden and had charming, efficient staff.

Our first day on board was spent at sea. Pottering around Splendida's restaurants, bars, pools and shops, we had to agree that the Yacht Club truly is a ship within a ship. Back in our serene pool area, and looking down three decks, there was barely an inch of space visible between bodies flanking the main pool. While most children were being kept

Summer in the Med: main picture, Portofino; below, from left, harbourside in Malta; MSC Splendida; tea on board; Lower Barrakka Gardens, Valletta



amused in the popular kids' clubs, plenty more roamed the decks, pools and games areas, splashing and shouting (the wind whipping their cries out of Yacht Club earshot).

The full extent of our Yacht Club benefits became apparent when we used the concierge to make independent sightseeing arrangements in Tunis rather than join coach tours or haggle with a local taxi cartel.

On an MSC excursion from Genoa to Portofino, Yacht Clubbers were escorted off Splendida first, enabling us to bag coach seats of our choice.

However, by the time the ship reached Civitavecchia, half-price treatments in the Aurea Spa (linked to the Yacht Club by

a dedicated lift) held more appeal than battling the crowds in hot, sticky Rome.

In Malta I had booked a half-day private tour of Mdina and Valletta through Viator (viator.com). Meeting us off the ship, our guide, Christine, ushered us into a Mercedes and related Malta's turbulent history as the car took a winding coastal road to the fortified town of Mdina. As our schedule was the reverse of that followed by bigger groups, we could appreciate the "Silent City", resplendent with medieval and baroque architecture, before the tourist buses arrived. In Valletta we visited the Barrakka Gardens and Grandmaster's Palace before a walking tour of the

city's stately buildings, churches and museums.

Just as Viator offers options for those keen to create their own shore itinerary, MSC's Yacht Club allows guests to choose between small- and big-ship life. On occasion we watched impressive theatre shows, slurped gelatos in the Piazzetta and tucked into fajitas in Santa Fe restaurant. On other evenings we ordered room service from the Yacht Club menu and booked a private out-of-hours shopping expedition with Donny.

The Yacht Club's appeal is diverse. It is ideal for families, as children can enjoy the kids' clubs while their parents relish peace and quiet. It suits

cruisers who don't want to forgo big-ship facilities but like a small-ship ambience. And, as an all-inclusive holiday, early-booking offers make it good value for money.

As a glamorous, and amorous, 40-something couple said: "We love the anonymity of Yacht Club. On small ships you're invariably sucked into conversations but here you can get lost in the crowd and simply focus on each other."

● **MSC Cruises offers seven-night Mediterranean voyages with departures year-round. From £299pp in a standard inside cabin excluding flights; from £1,539pp in a Yacht Club suite including flights (020 3426 3010; msccruises.co.uk).**



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