

Come Sail away: Part 1

Passengers aboard a tall-ship cruise get an authentic taste of island culture

Article by: Paul Marshman

The sun is sparkling off the Caribbean as I stand on deck, watching a half-dozen crew members pulling valiantly on the lines that hoist the mainsail. With straining muscles and reaching hands, they haul away with all their might, and slowly the giant sail rises, bellying in the wind. Past them, over the rail, I glimpse the forest-clad coast of Guadeloupe—and beyond it, a week of adventure.

Any sailor will tell you that there's nothing like the joy of setting off to sea. But I'm no sailor, and this is no nine-metre sailboat. I'm on the coastal sailing vessel Caledonia, a majestic, 75-metre, square-rigged barquentine run by [Canadian Sailing Expeditions](#) (CSE) of Halifax, and I'm on a seven-day cruise—but a cruise with a definite difference.

You might call it the course less charted by those who love to vacation at sea. The Caledonia carries a maximum of 77 passengers, not thousands like the giant cruise ships. And there's no movie theatre or 24-hour casino—just the adventure of wandering the Caribbean like an early explorer, visiting ports that most cruise ships never see, in a floating boutique hotel that's also a sleek replica of a 19th-century merchant vessel. On this voyage, we're exploring the lesser-known islands of the French Caribbean. Flying into and sailing out of Pointe-à-Pitre on the island of Guadeloupe, we're bound for the islands of Les Saintes, Dominica and Marie-Galante. Where French and British sailing ships once traded cannon fire, we are cruising in a vacationer's paradise.

Sailing away from Pointe-à-Pitre by night, we wake up to find ourselves anchored off Guadeloupe's west coast for a visit to the storied Pigeon Island. This small island, a mecca for divers since the late Jacques Cousteau proclaimed it one of the world's best dive sites, is now home to the Jacques Cousteau Underwater Reserve.

deck. With the small passenger list, it doesn't take long for everyone to get acquainted as we mingle over wine and French cheeses. There's roughly an even mix of Canadians and Americans aboard. Most range from their 30s to 70s, but a family from Texas has brought their three children, aged 11 to 14. After dinner, there's dancing to the music of a local band, one of the company's efforts to give passengers a taste of island culture.

The ship also offers hands-on experience in sailing, for the willing and able. As we sail southward, Bob Jamison, a 57-year-old retirement consultant from Atlanta, jumps in to haul the lines beside 20-year-old Gordon Crimp, one of the ship's incredibly friendly crew of young Canadians. They bend their backs in unison, and after 20 minutes Jamison walks away happy. "This will get me into shape," he says somewhat breathlessly.

Come Sail Away: Part 2

Life onboard the ship is breezy with top-notch service from the Caledonia's crew

Article by: Paul Marshman

Les Saintes appears on the horizon, the picture-book blue bay of Terre-de-Haut scattered with sailboats and yachts. We wander on our own, climbing the hill to see historic Fort Napoleon, discovering the town's cafés and tourist shops or heading to the many beaches. At the palm-lined Pompierre Beach, I snorkel out to find myself surrounded by translucent fish that flow around me like a silvery stream.

As we sail on, passengers make themselves at home, reading on deck, fishing or just watching the horizon for sea turtles, flying fish or the plume of spray that signals a surfacing sperm whale. Some snorkel off the ship when it's at anchor or venture forth in sea kayaks.

David Fayle, a retired professor of forestry who lives near Hockley, Ont., occupies himself painting small watercolours of each port we visit. Having sailed on mid-sized cruise ships, Fayle says he and his wife, Janet, welcome Caledonia's no-pressure lifestyle. "You can do what you want," he says. "I hope they keep it relaxed and informal."

"I like the smaller number of people," adds Janice Hamilton, a mill employee from Nanaimo, B.C., and an independent traveller. "On the big cruise ships, by the time 10 or 11 days are over, you're tired of fighting your way through 3,000 people."

Mealtimes are a highlight of each day, and we eagerly gather at long tables in the nautical-style dining lounge to sample the creations of the ship's talented young chefs. Among the offerings are prosciutto-and-Emmenthal quiche with endive-and-watercress salad, Asian hotpot of tuna, kingfish and mahimahi in lemongrass broth, jerk-rubbed pork loin with root vegetables—the menu changes daily as the chefs improvise with local ingredients on each island.

“When we’re in port, we go see the butcher and the baker, buy our food locally,” says Doug Prothero, Canadian Sailing Expeditions’ 43-year-old president. “We use local guides, too.” This search for real experiences, he says, is part of the company’s unique philosophy, which combines a love of the sea with a desire to take passengers on “personal voyages of discovery.”

Started in 2001 by Prothero and his partners, Michelle Clark and David Evans, CSE offers trips on a variety of classic windjammer vessels, from day-sailing out of Halifax to the exotic voyages of the Caledonia. The ship itself is the result of a \$9.5-million overhaul that saw a former research vessel completely rebuilt to create a historic ship with modern comforts. The rebuild includes 32 diminutive staterooms that are masterpieces of efficient design, with comfy single and double bunk beds, compact Euro-style bathrooms and flat-screen TVs with DVD players (most popular title: Master and Commander).

In Dominica, we anchor off a forested mountainside near the capital, Roseau, and a local historian comes aboard to explain the island’s history and culture. But Dominica is best known for its natural beauty—which can be seen in the movies *Pirates of the Caribbean 2* and *3*—and the next day’s excursions let us experience it fully.

Come Sail Away: Part 3

This ocean adventure ends with a little self-reflection and a lifetime of memories

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Local guides take us up steep mountain roads with stunning views of the island’s volcanoes and some of its 365 rivers to ride an aerial tram through the dense rain forest. Later, we swim in a shaded grotto where a waterfall slices deep into the heart of the forest. It’s an unforgettable experience.

The last stop on the voyage is the big island of Marie-Galante, known for its sugarcane plantations and potent rum. Our visit coincides with a holiday and the island is shut tight, so we swim or comb the long beach for lovely white seashells.

And all too soon, we’re bound for Pointe-à-Pitre again. All hands gather for the last sunset on the rear deck as we raise a glass and watch the sun’s last pink rays disappear over distant islands.

It’s been an adventure, as promised. And for many, a few days to relax, get away from everything and spend some time reflecting—a chance, as the ship’s T-shirts say, to “find yourself at sea.”

Getting Your Sea Legs

The Caledonia sails the Caribbean from November to May 2009 with new itineraries that include visits to St. Maarten, St. Barts, St. Lucia and Grenada. Then it returns to Canada until mid-October for cruises in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec and Lake Ontario.

Here are a few tips if you're interested in coming aboard:

- **Shipshape**—you don't have to be young and athletic to sail on the Caledonia. However, negotiating the ship's doorways and boarding the Zodiacs could be difficult if you have serious mobility problems.
- **Sea life**—while the ship is generally quite stable, it's wise to bring medication if you're subject to motion sickness.
- **Excursions**—you can sign up on board for excursions, which vary in number depending on the port.
- **Getting connected**—The Caledonia currently has only emergency Internet access, but high-speed access is planned for winter 2009. In addition, it's possible to use your cell phone at many destinations.
- **Money matters**—some shops in the French Caribbean accept only euros. Cash machines are available in major ports.
- **Going casual**—don't worry about bringing formal wear; functional clothes, good walking shoes and beachwear fit the bill.