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INSIDER CRUISE REVIEW

Queen Victoria rules the waves

The little sister to Cunard's Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary II crams in a sense of occasion at every turn. Read our verdict in the first of a new weekly series from our Insider Cruise experts

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Insider rating 8/10

There's no denying it, Cunard does style brilliantly. Queen Victoria may be, by a tiny margin, the smallest of the line's three ships, but it still crams in a sense of occasion at every turn. Even on "informal" evenings, passengers dress up to the nines: no flip-flops and shorts after 6pm, please, sir. There are kids' facilities on board, but this is one for couples or the more mature cruiser.

Cabins 8/10

Neutral decor, comfy queen-sized beds and, best of all, enough storage space for a fortnight's worth of posh frocks. No tea-making facilities, though, which knocks a few "quintessentially British" points off. The small TVs don't let you check your bill or do any of that hi-tech stuff you find on some other ships, but there are 32 channels, and you're not here to watch telly. The fixed shower heads and plastic curtains in the small bathrooms of the standard cabins are far from royal standard, a fact the plentiful Penhaligon's Quercus toiletries don't quite make up for. If you want more space, upgrade to a Grill Suite — the poshest of these get you butler service and a wraparound balcony big enough to host a party on. Nine cabins for solo travellers were added in a 2015 refurbishment, all but one with ocean views, and they are quite rightly popular.

Eating and drinking 8/10

For a snapshot of life on board, pull up a chair for afternoon tea in the Queens Room. At 3.30pm on the dot, dapper waiters in white gloves appear and float under the chandeliers serving scones, cakes and the daintiest of finger sandwiches, all to the accompaniment of a string quartet or pianist. It's an enchanting spectacle, and free.

The atmosphere in the Britannia Restaurant, the ship's largest dining space, is just as refined: luxuriate amid the polished wood and gold leaf.

Not everything is buttoned up. You can watch the footie on widescreen TVs in the Golden Lion pub, and Cunard guests aren't above queuing with their trays in the Lido buffet: unlike many ships, it doesn't have separate food stations, which on sea days can lead to a backlog and a bunfight for seats. The Eat the Atlas nights are fun, with food from Asia, South America, Italy and India, but they are \$17.50 extra, and you can never quite shake the feeling that you're eating in a glorified canteen. (Prices are in US dollars, even on this very British ship.)

Our pick of the paid-for options is the French food in the Verandah restaurant, though it's a bit naughty to charge an extra \$10 for the Dover sole when you've already paid a \$35 cover charge to get in. The food's great, though, and the staff are all smiles. Nice touch to hand out specs to those of us struggling to make out the menu. Booking is essential.

EDITOR'S TIP

- The Verandah does an afternoon tea for \$26.50, which we don't think is worth it, even with a glass of champagne thrown in. Stick with the Queens Room ritual — much more atmospheric.

What's on board 7/10

Hot tubs and two generously sized pools for those seeking the life aquatic; for the rest, paddle tennis, shuffleboard, deck quoits and table tennis. It's all very civilised and sedate.

The easy-on-the-eye spa offers a long menu of beauty treatments. If you're really serious about looking your best for dinner, order lip enhancements and dermal fillers. A \$35 day pass gets you into the Thermal Suite, with its top-notch sauna, steam grottos and hydrotherapy pool. The gym does the usual yoga and Pilates sessions; more unusually, all Cunard ships offer free fencing classes, the only ones at sea. Challenge that know-it-all at dinner to a duel...

Bookworms can hunker down in what has to be the finest library at sea (so good, Cunard's Queen Elizabeth has a replica of it): 6,700 books, spread over two decks and connected by a wooden spiral staircase.

Queen Victoria is far from family-oriented, but it does lay on treasure hunts and story times. There's a sheltered outside area where kids can burn off energy on tricycles and little cars, while teens get video games, discos and squishy floor cushions to chill out on.

Entertainment 7 /10

Don't miss out on an evening in the swish theatre, which has sumptuous brocade fabrics, velvet curtains and grand wall murals. To really do it in style, book a private box: it's \$55 for two (plus a 15% service charge). For that, you get glasses of fizz, canapés and chocolates, a uniformed bellboy to escort you to your seat, and your photo taken in the box before you watch that night's show. In our experience, the guest comedians, singers and classical musicians are rather better than the ship's in-house entertainers.

More relaxed are the Golden Lion's pub quizzes, and the Hemispheres nightclub stays open until the last stragglers are ready for bed. The dancing is more regimented in the Queens Room, where you can show off the moves you picked up in your ballroom class that afternoon. Ladies, no dance partner? No worries: lovely gentlemen hosts will accompany you.

EDITOR'S TIP

- The best cocktails on board are to be found in the Hemispheres nightclub. Try the rhubarb mule — vodka, homemade rhubarb purée, lime and ginger beer.

What's ashore 8/10

When life on deck gets too sedate, crank up the thrill factor by kayaking around Dubrovnik's city walls or jumping in a helicopter for a bird's-eye view of St Kitts. Romantics can be serenaded by a gondolier in Venice.

What's the competition?

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