

# *Discoveries of Coastal Europe* *On the Ocean Adventurer* *With Zegrahm Expeditions*

Expedition cruising on a small ship (120 passengers) is a joy. Zegrahm Expeditions is known for its itineraries to the high Arctic, Southern Ocean, and Antarctica. It does a few cultural journeys throughout the year and that is what I am on.



*Discoveries of Coastal Europe* is a bit of “expedition-lite.” In almost all cases, we dock very close to, or in the center of a town and just walk off the ship. We used zodiacs (large, inflatable boats) only twice. (note: this would change on the next cruise)

My fellow passengers are very well traveled and loyal to this company. There are only about 65 people on the this itinerary, so there is rarely a line at meals and everyone can be seated in the lounge for lectures and briefings, with room left over.

Lisbon, our starting point is the largest city we visit and it is only for one night. All our other stops are at sweet little coastal towns with no big stores, supermarkets or shopping centers. I enjoyed wandering in and out of lovely little specialty shops like ones that sell just lace, or buttons, or hats or a certain type of food.



The ship is branded Quark Expeditions and leased to Zegrahm. Several people have sailed on her before and are pleased with the recent renovation, especially the upgraded bathrooms.

There are a few little blips on the trip but Zegrahm staff always finds a work-around and we are able to do everything on the itinerary.

A view of the Ocean  
Adventurer from a zodiac

Meals are excellent. Buffets for breakfast and lunch and we order off the menu for dinner. Crew is wonderful -- 80% are Philippino - one of the most kind and hospitable cultures on earth, and the Zegrahm staff is well-experienced, professional, and friendly.

The itinerary covers bits of Portugal, a stop in Spain and several stops in France.

I've done very little traveling in France and this trip made me realize how stunning this country is. The architecture is lovely and the towns are neat and clean. What impressed as well as shocked me are local prices. France is way more expensive than Spain or Portugal. Cost of clothing is out of this world, and prices in grocery stores are about 20% higher than what we see in the U.S.

## *SOME HIGHLIGHTS*

### **Visiting The Channel Islands**

Guernsey, Jersey and Sark, along with a few other large granite rocks are known as the Channel Islands. Even though they are just a few miles off the coast of France, they belong to Great Britain. They have an unusual status as they are not a part of the United Kingdom but are a Crown Dependency, meaning that they are self-governed and answer directly to the Queen.



And I've been trying to get here forever. I've booked several tours to these islands with Adventures Abroad and three years in a row they cancelled on me. They eventually got rid of the itinerary so I just gave up and never thought I be able see this part of the world.

These little islands are so interesting and yet quirky. Their main source of income is banking and tourism and they love people to shelter their money here.

Though they are happy to take your money, they allow few new residents and it is near impossible to obtain citizenship.

The islands have quite a bit of WWII history as they were were occupied by Nazi Germany troops for five years. In Jersey, we visit the tunnels used by the Germans as their command center, hospital, and storage for tanks and other vehicles. One tunnel (1km long) is now a private museum with excellent displays detailing Jersey's occupation. At the military harbor in Brest, the submarine pens draw a lot of attention. And of course, we visit the beaches in Normandy.

We spent an idyllic morning on the five square mile island of Sark. We are offered the choice of seeing the island on foot, by bicycle or by horse-cart. There are no motorized vehicles allowed except for a few tractors.



It is very easy to imagine this island as a film set. Neat little stone cottages, lovely little gift shops, masses of wildflowers everywhere, horse-drawn carriages for public transportation and picturesque little restaurants serving cream teas dot the island.

Though English is widely spoken, the islands have their own dialect based on Norman French which proved useful during the occupation as the Germans could not understand what the locals were saying.

We visited Sark and Guernsey on May 8th during their Liberation Day commemoration, one of their biggest holidays with parades, regattas and fireworks. Unfortunately all stores were closed, disappointing those who wanted to buy the famous Guernsey sweater.



In Jersey on Liberation Day.

Above: these girls enjoyed a lot of attention dressed in period clothes

Left: Liberation Day Memorial



Those of us who have read the well-researched historical fiction book, *“The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society”* about life on the island during the occupation, are thrilled to learn the movie comes out soon.

### **Mont St.Michel**

A stop at this medieval church-monastery-fortress is one of our much-anticipated events. The gothic church is perched on top of a rock off the coast of France; and the entire rock is surrounded by ramparts so it resembles a fortress. We visit on a day which happens to be a French holiday, so we amble along with what seems like several thousand others.

Luckily our guide knows a shortcut to the top, and even though there are lots of people, it isn't as crowded as trying to walk up the main, and steep, 365 granite steps.

The church is surprisingly bare. It feels more like a museum than anything holy. As we wind our way out thru room after room, it just seems bleak. If our guide hadn't explained the original purpose of the rooms, this could be any old church in any old town.





What I enjoy more about that day is walking around the walled city of St. Malo, where our ship had moored. Stores close at 7pm, but I had a quick look-see at many of them. Of course, restaurants and bars stay open until all hours. Our ship doesn't leave this port until 11pm so those who wish can have dinner ashore.

### **Santiago de Compostela**

It should be no surprise that this is my favorite stop of the trip and my fifth time to this magnificent medieval city. There is one other passenger on the ship who has done The Camino and we enjoy sharing notes. We disembark in Villagarcia, then have an hour ride thru lovely Galicia to Santiago. As we walk in on this grey, overcast day it feels like coming home. I have no idea why I feel this way, but I do. I stay with the group for the tour as each guide always points out something different. During our free time I head to Cafe Casino (est.1875) for a wonderful cappuchino.

In the early afternoon, the group meets at the magnificent Los Reyes Catholicos Parador (historic hotel) for a reception, dance program and luncheon. It is the perfect end to a perfect day.



At left is my favorite statue of Santiago in the Cathedral.

And above, my feet at the last marker of the Camino route in the city's central square.

### **World War II Museums and Sites**

Visiting World War II sites is the secondary theme of this cruise. Throughout the itinerary, we've been in underground bunkers, towers, tunnels, look-out points, submarine pens and excellent museums centering on WWII history.

Our excursion at Normandy is most poignant. We have a early departure from the ship in order to spend the entire day concentrating on the D-Day invasion. We start at Sainte-Marie L'Englise where the US 82nd Airborne Division landed on June 6th, 1944.



We visit the church where one of the airmen's parachute became stuck on a steeple and today there is a mannikin in the exact same spot.

We continue to Utah Beach, Omaha Beach and Gold Beach and investigate Mulberry Harbor at Arromanches and its artificial port. There is still military debris left in situ throughout the area and of course, many memorials.



At Omaha Beach



We spend time at the American Cemetery with its excellent visitors center and museum showing actual footage of preparations for D-Day and of the event itself. Everyone is very respectful at these sites.

Throughout our long day, our knowledgeable local guide brings it all alive for us with her commentary. She continues to stress how grateful locals still are to the Americans who liberated them.

Above: Memorial to the fallen soldiers on Omaha Beach

Right: Remnants of man-made Mulberry Harbor. Look close to see the pilings on the horizon.



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All too soon, disembarkation instructions are slipped under our cabin doors. But seven of us have elected to stay aboard and continue on the next cruise.

The company is nice enough to offer a guided tour to Stonehenge and Salisbury Cathedral on changeover day and we even have Steven Fisher, the ship's archaeologist who has worked at Stonehenge, accompany us.

That evening the cycle begins again when 110 new people join us on an itinerary called "Wild and Ancient Britain."

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