



## **Captain's Pick Their Favorites Ports**

By Ashley Kosciolik

With hundreds of ocean cruise ports across the globe, guests can choose from a wide variety of itineraries for their memorable cruise vacations. Given their expertise, cruise ship captains helming the approximately 320 ships in the fleet of member cruise lines of Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), have their own perspectives – and favorite ports of call.

Ten senior officers share their insights and emotions about the places they've sailed.

### **The allure of the Mediterranean**

"As an Italian and a lifelong seafarer, the Mediterranean holds a special place in my heart," says Captain Marco Nocera, at the helm for Regent Seven Seas Cruises.

"There's nothing quite like navigating into the fjords of Kotor (Montenegro) at sunrise or arriving in historic Valletta (Malta). Sailing to smaller ports like Izmir (Turkey), Hvar (Croatia), and Gythion (Greece) is another highlight; the warmth and hospitality of the locals make each visit meaningful," Captain Nocera adds. "For me, the Mediterranean isn't just a route. It's home, heritage and adventure all in one."

Other captains also note the beauty of the scenery and deep history of the region.

"For me, my favorite destination we visit would have to be the Greek Isles," says Captain Bram Jacobsen, who helms the Scarlet Lady for Virgin Voyages. "The itinerary on the Aegean Sea and Ionian Sea is simply stunning. It's rich with history and fantastic food, as well. The beautiful sail into the port of Kotor, paired with a couple of Greek islands, I personally don't think it gets much better than that."

"From the bridge, arriving in Valletta never gets old," says Captain Ricardo Pinzón of Windstar Cruises. "As the ship approaches the entrance to the Grand Harbour, you sail between impressive stone fortifications that have stood for centuries. It almost feels like steering the vessel into a scene from a historical film rather than a modern cruise port. It is a very satisfying maneuver. The harbor entrance is narrow, the surroundings are dramatic, and bringing the ship

alongside right next to such a beautiful city always gives you a sense of accomplishment. After many years at sea, Valletta remains one of those arrivals I always look forward to."

Atlantic ports also hold a special allure for sea captains. "I am constantly fascinated by light and how it changes any perspective," says Captain Serena Melani of Explora Journeys. "There is a very special and magical light that pierces and sharpens the landscapes of two cities nestled along the Atlantic, Lisbon and Tangier (Morocco)," she says. Captain Melani was the first to sail Explora II into the two ports. At both, she climbed the nearby hills for views, and says seeing the ship, "surrounded by such history and unique maritime tradition, was an unforgettable experience."

### **An emotional connection**

Captain Leo Lujak, who sails for Oceania Cruises, is especially fond of sailing to Croatia, and his hometown, and favorite port, Dubrovnik.

"As I steer between the shores of Koločep and the crags of Grebeni, I'm not just navigating a channel; I'm sailing through my own history," Captain Lujak says. "These are the waters where I first learned to swim, where I took the helm of my first boat, and where I shared my first kiss."

Captain Lujak adds, "To every Dubrovnik captain, there is a profound, quiet magic in finally making the turn into Gruž harbor. While my charts have taken me to spectacular places – the towering skyline of New York, the winding beauty of Stockholm, the icy silence of Alaska's Hubbard Glacier, and the rugged fjords of Norway's Ålesund – none of them hold the heart like the waters that raised me."

For Captain Dario Guerrieri of Azamara Cruises, his favorite destination – the Italian city of La Spezia – also has a lot to do with returning home. "Porto Venere is my favorite cruise port," Captain Guerrieri shares. "It's incredibly special to me. It's where I grew up. Coming back now by ship feels surreal. As we approach, I can see the village in the distance where my parents still live. When I was a kid, I used to sit on the rocks watching boats come and go, dreaming about one day becoming a captain. Now, sailing into that same harbor and seeing it from the water brings everything full circle."

Originally from Sorrento, Captain Gennaro Arma of Princess Cruises says arriving in port in nearby Naples is a favorite experience. "From a professional standpoint, it's an incredibly strategic port. Ships dock right in the center of the city, which means guests can step off the ship and immediately experience the energy, history, and culture of southern Italy," he says. "On a personal level, sailing into the Bay of Naples is always a special moment for me. Approaching the port by sea with Mount Vesuvius overlooking the city is one of the most spectacular arrivals in the Mediterranean, and it never loses its magic no matter how many times you experience it."

## **Captain choices in the Caribbean and Bahamas**

Ports in the Caribbean, Bahamas, Bermuda region -- the most popular cruise region in the world -- draw praise from cruise ship captains.

"One of my favorite cruise ports is Terre-de-Haut, Iles des Saintes, Guadeloupe," says Captain David Bathgate, who helms Seabourn Ovation for Seabourn Cruises. In addition to the scenic bay, he says he is impressed by the "charm and beauty of the quaint streets, with delightful local boutiques." Captain Bathgate adds, "A hike up to the historic Fort Napoleon provides breathtaking panoramic views across the island. With gorgeous beaches and turquoise waters, it is indeed a perfect Caribbean paradise."

The cruise lines private islands are highly rated by cruise guests and cruise ship senior officers, alike. Longtime Disney Cruise Line Captain Jason Preston says Disney Castaway Cay in the Bahamas will always hold a special place in his heart.

"When I first visited Castaway Cay, it was such a contrast to anywhere I had been during my previous role on oil tankers, and I knew I was going to love this magical new chapter in my maritime career," Captain Preston says. "Over the years, I've called at Castaway Cay hundreds of times and have watched the excitement on our guests' faces as they enjoy the island. I've also created my own happy memories with my family and colleagues there. Castaway Cay will always be a special place to me personally and professionally."

Cozumel, Mexico is a favorite of Carnival Cruise Line Captain Niccolò De Ranieri, who says the food and beach resorts with their clear waters are among the finest anywhere. For officers, he adds, there are additional attractions.

"Professionally, navigation there highlights a captain's expertise, thanks to the dynamic currents in the channel leading to the port," Captain De Ranieri says. "On the personal side, Cozumel is one of those rare ports where multiple ships often dock side by side, creating a unique opportunity to reconnect with colleagues from across the Carnival fleet, and even other cruise lines. Those moments ashore, walking the pier and catching up, exchanging a few words, are part of what makes life at sea special."

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