

Mediterranean Isles: Viking Mars Reunion Cruise for Viking Sky Survivors

The audience stood up and cheered loudly as the 24 crew members walked onto the stage. The guests were passengers of the ill-fated Viking Sky that nearly ran aground off the coast of Norway on 23 March 2019. The crew was some of the staff who were on duty that unfortunate day. The applause continued while some folks blinked back tears. Viking Chairman, Torstein Hagen, had generously invited the survivors for a Viking Mars reunion cruise for Viking Sky survivors.

It happened to be the inaugural sailing of Viking's newest ocean liner, Viking Sky. A few days earlier, the Countess of Carnarvon, owner of Highclere Castle of Downton Abbey fame, had named and christened the ship Viking Mars in a private ceremony in Valetta, Malta.

A Warm Welcome (with Mimosas)

We were seated in the state-of-the-art Star theater, where Torstein's daughter, Karine Hagen, and the Viking family gave us a mimosa welcome. I could not help but think back to the day when the Viking Sky theater was a muster station during the drama. The atmosphere was taut with emotion, the shared experience an invisible connection between us. Karine ran a series of video clips featuring the reaction of other Viking ship personnel during the ordeal, sending messages of support and best wishes to their Viking Sky colleagues. Then, as one team started singing the song, 'We are family,' a ripple ran through the audience, and tears began to flow. Indeed, the Viking Sky passengers also became family that day. Karine underscored the feeling by quoting what the staff had to say: "Because the passengers were so calm that day, we could do our jobs."

Safety First

Viking staff members had been on hand to welcome me on arrival at the Civitavecchia airport in Rome. Soon after, more guests filled the two buses, ready to take us through the rustic countryside to Civitavecchia Port, about an hour's drive northwest of Rome, where our ship was waiting. Civitavecchia, meaning 'Ancient City,' dates to the second century. I looked at the people on the bus, wondering what each one was thinking. Our ship, Viking Mars, loomed in the harbor, and there was a murmur of excitement.

Viking has a strict health and safety protocol in place. It is the first and, to date, the only cruise ship to have a fully equipped PCR testing laboratory on board, checking daily each person for Covid. Passengers streamed in during the day and late afternoon. Viking personnel are highly trained, skilled, and very friendly. One also senses this team spirit amongst the workers.

Viking Mars is identical in design and furnishings to Viking Sky. So, when I boarded the luxury vessel, it gave me quite a jolt to see the same two-story-high mural displaying images of works by Edvard Munch in the Atrium. The familiar layout of the decks was comforting, though. I sighed with pleasure as the cabin crew fussed around me, and I sank into the comfortable bed for a few hours' rest before heading out to the Explorer's Lounge on Deck 7.

As I entered Mamsen's lounge, I realized that this was exactly where I had been photographing the monstrous waves before heading to my stateroom when, twenty minutes later, the emergency bell rang. As I sipped my tea, I overheard snippets of conversation from a nearby table. "We were on the first helicopter. One moment, they strapped us in, and twenty seconds later, we were inside the chopper." My phone rang, and I walked away to answer it. While I talked, I looked at the sea through the glass window, and suddenly my stomach lurched. I had a momentary flashback to those forty feet high waves.

My cabin mate, Debby Harrison, arrived late afternoon from Texas. As a qualified first responder, she helped the crew attend to people and administer to their needs that traumatic day. She grinned as she greeted me. "I did a double-take when I boarded and saw that this ship was identical to the Sky. And did you notice that we are in the same cabin that we were in before?" We were happy to reunite and quickly fell into a comfortable routine together. The stateroom is well-designed and quite spacious. Each room and suite onboard has a balcony with two chairs and a small table.

Dining at the World Café

For most of us, this was the first cruise since the disaster. We were having dinner in the World Café on Deck 7 when the ship gave a gentle tug, and we quietly chugged out of the harbor. There were smiles as one saw a familiar face or old acquaintances bump into each other. The main topic of conversation was what happened to each person that day. "Where were you when the emergency call came?" "Were you airlifted?" During the whole time on the cruise, I encountered only two people who refused to talk about the incident.

The Viking Daily

The cabin crew would put a four-page Viking Daily on our coffee table every night. This brochure contained a daily weather report, dining options, and detailed entertainment and excursion information. Viking prides itself on being a 'thinking' ship with extensive libraries on different decks. Onboard were a resident historian and three highly qualified guest lecturers. One of them, Corey Sandler, a charming, best-selling author of more than 300 books, was also on the Viking Sky. He provided many light-hearted moments, for instance, when he referred to our 'Poseidon Adventure!' One could either attend presentations in person or watch recordings on the TV in the cabin. The Viking Daily certainly helped one plan one's activities for the next day, and believe me, there was

quite a choice!

Palermo, Sicily

We visited two cities in Sicily, Italy. At lunchtime, we docked in our first port, Palermo, a city more than 2700 years old. The bus took us along a hair-raising steep, winding road up Mount Pellegrino with beautiful views of the city and the bay below. At the top, we admired the Santa Rosalia Sanctuary, a sacred pilgrimage site. Our last stop was the beautiful seaside resort of Mondello, a former fishing village.

Syracuse, Sicily

The following day, we docked in the picturesque harbor of Syracuse, Sicily. A walking tour explored Ortigia, the oldest part of the city and today a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Ortigia is an ancient island founded by the Corinthians in 734 BC. Syracuse is also renowned for its ancient ruins, such as the Temples of Athenea and Apollo, dating back to the 5th and 6th centuries BC.

We were excited to hear Chairman Torstein Hagen give an update on Viking's business and future plans. I could not help but admire the vision and growth of the Viking company. As Karine had done early that morning, Mr. Hagen warmly welcomed us as part of the family. He appreciated the fact that 640 of the 900+ passengers joined him on this personal invitation cruise. He had us all smiling as he explained that he liked to keep things on the Viking ships elegant but simple. For example, the shower should clearly indicate the hot and cold streams and where to turn them on and off.

Opportunities for Both Learning and Dancing

The cruise held some surprises in store. As a featured enrichment speaker, Dr. Anna Fisher, retired NASA astronaut and godmother to Viking Orion, shared her experiences as one of the "original six" women accepted into the Astronaut training program. Fellow astronaut, Dr. Rick Linnehan, joined her for an enlightening question-and-answer session.

We also had time to let our hair down, relax, and have fun. The Viking Vocalists and Band entertained us with three wonderful shows featuring music from the Seventies, ABBA, and the Beatles. As is customary on Viking ships, the Explorers' Society invites guests who have sailed with Viking before to mark the occasion with a toast. The Cruise Director, Aaron Syfert, raised a laugh when he commented that it was the first time that all onboard qualified and that they had a full house. The roof was open on the pool deck, and we celebrated by dancing under the stars.

Memories Recounted

As I sat in various locales around the ship, bits of conversation would drift to me, often about the event, and I realized that many people felt the need to share their ordeal and feelings with people who could relate to the incident. It also struck me that people's experiences depended on where they were on the ship that day. Nibbling on my breakfast waffle in Mamsen's in the Explorer's Lounge, I overheard, "The piano slid past us. I was pinned under a coffee table and thought that I would drown. Then the ship tilted to the other side, releasing me, and I was free."

I was having lunch in The Restaurant on the second floor when a couple joined me. Soon, they pointed out, "We were sitting here when the waves crashed through the glass. Then, we were lodged in that corner. We had to try and catch people by the arm as the water swept them past us. It was terrifying."

The Viking Mars Spa

The Spa on the Viking Mars reminded me of the unique Nordic Bathing experience I had on the Viking Sky. I signed up for a relaxing full-body massage. The hot tub and snow cave beckoned me a few times as well. While enjoying the Spa, another guest chatted with me. It turned out that Anne was from Australia. Before the incident, she had broken her leg, and the crew speedily airlifted her to safety. Sadly, her husband passed away a few weeks before this scheduled cruise. On informing Viking, the company sent her a beautiful bouquet of white roses and invited her to bring one of her children on the cruise. Like so many on board, she had only praise for how the Chairman handled the situation.

It was remarkable that so many guests traveled so far for a seven-day sailing along the Mediterranean. Anne remarked, "This cruise had brought me closure and comfort." Throughout the journey, I heard those words of appreciation. Remarkably few people declined to talk about their experience, and I only came across three guests who disapproved of how Viking handled the incident.

Valetta, Malta

I was looking forward to exploring Valetta, a popular tourist destination and the smallest capital in the European Union, on the beautiful island of Malta. First, our bus took us past the cobalt-blue sea, fishing villages, and colorful traditional Maltese luzzu fishing boats, stopping for a view of the Blue Grotto, a series of sea caverns. Then, we continued to St Paul's Bay, named for the island's patron Saint who was said to have survived the shipwreck in 60 AD.

Caligari

I was thrilled that our visit to Cagliari in Sardinia would include a visit to the municipality of Maracalagonis, where we could experience folk music and dancing and taste local sweets and wine. We traveled through lush countryside, and ancient stone villages tucked in between valleys. The artists warmly welcomed us, proud to share their culture. I was fascinated by the three-thousand-year-old reed instrument, a triple flute, called launeddas. The sound reminded me of a Scottish bagpipe. After every performance, the dancers fed us homemade sweets and a new type of wine. Most of us napped on the way back to the ship!

Sailing for Spain: Palma, Mallorca

The following day we sailed for Spain. I was sitting on the balcony of our stateroom when an announcement came over the intercom. "Due to very windy conditions, we cannot enter the scheduled port, Mahon, Menorca. We will continue to Palma, Mallorca." Déjà vu! And sure enough, the ship rolled quite a bit throughout the night. I wasn't worried, but I read some Facebook posts, and some passengers found it quite disturbing, i.e., "My stomach is all over the place!"

But we docked at beautiful Palma de Mallorca without a problem and were ready for our final excursion. This island is truly a paradise, living up to its reputation as a haven for Europeans and Spanish royalty. I was intrigued to see the place where Chopin composed some of his best works. We enjoyed strolling through a small village where we tasted a delicious almond drink and visited a Carthusian monastery. The island is known for its lush plantations, pine forests, and almond groves. We stopped to admire the honey-colored La Sue Cathedral, built over a mosque. As we entered the harbor, we admired the hundreds of luxury yachts. What a sight!

Tribute to the Viking Staff on the Viking Mars Reunion Cruise

We had come to the end of a remarkable journey. The cruise has been a catharsis for many passengers and even crew members. We had a chance to reconnect with like-minded traveling friends, enjoy being pampered on board, see new horizons, and finally lay to rest the harrowing experience. Thanks, Torstein Hagen and the Viking company, for this reunion cruise.

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-Photos by Elsa Dixon. Cover photo depicts Palma, Mallorca, Spain.