



# island hopping

MORE AUTHENTIC PORTS AWAIT SMALL-SHIP CRUISERS.



**THE PRIVILEGE OF SAILING THE WORLD** on your own private megayacht with a full-service crew may be something reserved for the world's rich and famous, but today's small-ship cruise lines are making similar experiences accessible to us "real folks." The choices vary greatly, but each consistently provides the feeling of indulgence — and for us island lovers, the chance to see coastal destinations that are simply inaccessible via the larger-ship cruise lines.

Yacht charter company **The Moorings** was able to make my dream of being a yacht owner a reality — well, at least for one week. There were eight of us, four couples, onboard the Moorings 6200 crewed catamaran as we explored the British Virgin Islands, celebrating nothing special except our friendship and that we were away from work and responsibility. *The Big Dog*, our 62-foot private, live-aboard yacht, was custom-built exclusively for The Moorings and had four double staterooms with

en suite bathrooms. Our journey started and ended in Tortola, with a course that took us through sheltered waters and protected bays.

Along with five-star service, the yacht came with kayaks, snorkeling gear and fishing gear that we used daily to explore the magnificent waters that surround the more than 50 islands in the region. Our captain created a customized itinerary for us, which included full days enjoying those waters, sometimes anchoring near a lively beach bar and other times in secluded bays to feel as if we alone existed. Our onboard personal chef filled us with delicious meals, hors d'oeuvres and snacks. And did I mention that the all-inclusive flat rate for the yacht charter also included the premium bar — which led to many a sunset toast?

When we decided to leave our floating haven for land, our captain found the ideal spots for our interests. Cane Garden Bay on the north side of Tortola offered us the most perfect of Caribbean

beaches, with white sands, palm trees and calm waters to swim or kayak. After dinner onboard, our group headed to Quito's Gazebo, where we sipped on Bushwackers, a drink made of four different kinds of rum, and listened to the tunes of owner Quito Rymer and his band The Edge. Anchoring at The Bight on Norman Island, we snorkeled at Treasure Point, with its four flooded caves. The water is shallow, with depths of only four feet. We continued north to Pelican Island and The Indians, four rock pinnacles extending 50 feet above and below the water's surface, for more snorkeling.

The Moorings Crewed Yacht Vacations sail from 12 destinations throughout the Caribbean, Mediterranean, Mexico, South Pacific, Far East and Indian Ocean. In addition to all-inclusive crewed yacht charters, The Moorings offers powerboat and bareboat charters, as well as the ability to simply book a single stateroom if a full yacht is more than you need. 888-952-8420; [moorings.com](http://moorings.com)

ALL PHOTOS PROVIDED BY  
THE MOORINGS & VARIETY CRUISES

## NEW MEGAYACHT EXPERIENCE

My husband and I decided to go it alone without our friends on our next yacht vacation, and we opted for the new *Variety Voyager* from **Variety Cruises**. The newly built 223-foot mega yacht has 36 cabins for 72 passengers, with 28 crew members. It offered that yacht-like experience as we journeyed along the French and Italian Mediterranean coasts roundtrip from Nice on its seven-night "Romantic Rivièras" itinerary. *Variety Voyager* is the first seagoing vessel to become a member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts' Preferred Boutique Collection, and you can appreciate the upscale touches throughout.

Variety Cruises has a fleet of 11 fully owned vessels including megayachts, sail cruisers and private luxury yachts that host 12 to 75 passengers. A majority of its "experiential" itineraries include Greece and Turkey, but you can also find voyages to the Adriatic, West Africa and the Seychelles.

Dining was either indoor or outdoor in an intimate, casual setting showcasing local recipes and foods garnered from the local markets. For night owls, late-night entertainment was available from the resident DJs. Watersports equipment and access to the sea during anchorages was set up in the aft section of the ship. An onboard Balinese spa offering massages, sauna and a fitness area enabled us to get in even more pampering between ports.

Though *Variety Voyager* provided a magnificent way to experience the Riviera, Variety Cruises stresses that "the ships aren't the destination — they're only the best way to get there," and we found that to be true. Our itinerary included the larger ports you'd want to visit while in this part of the world — including Nice, Monte Carlo and Portofino — with the off-the-beaten-track beauties also accessible because of the small ship size. We loved exploring Italy's Elba Island, once home to the exiled Napoleon Bonaparte. He was a lucky man to be forced to live there among its scenic beauty! We visited the Palazzina dei Mulini, the home Napoleon shared with his sister in 1814, and the lovely Villa of San Martino, Napoleon's summer residence, and the Demidoff Gallery next to it before stopping at a local winery. 800-319-7776; [varietycruises.com](http://varietycruises.com)

## A SAILING ADVENTURE

Offering an intimate experience much like sailing on a private yacht with friends and family — but with more of the traditional amenities you would find on a cruise ship — **Star Clippers** sails through less-frequented ports throughout the Caribbean and Costa Rica. Its three ships carry only 170 or 227 guests and are sail-powered vessels, which mean that guests experience the thrill of moving under the power of the wind as much as possible.

Our seven-night cruise on *Star Flyer* roundtrip from Puerto Caldera, Costa Rica, featured port stops each day throughout Costa Rica and Panama's most scenic coasts, with an emphasis on the natural beauty of the region, animal encounters and jungle explorations.

When we set out on this exciting eco-adventure, I was simply awed by the 170-passenger *Star Flyer's* massive masts and sails. The 360-foot ship has four masts that reach 226 feet above waterline and 16 sails with a sail area of 36,000 square feet. And yes, the crew allows you to climb the mast for a better view, thus starting the "adventure" part of the cruise. It's not that easy to negotiate the rope riggings, but when I got to the mid-level platform some 50 feet high I felt like a great explorer of yesteryear searching the sea for pirate ships. What I saw instead was the pure, endless beauty of aquamarine waters.

As a reward for my efforts, I grabbed a book and spent some time on the *Widow's Net*. That's another feature of Star Clipper's ships you won't find on traditional large cruise ships: the *Widow's Net* is made of braided heavy-gauge netting and reaches out ahead of the bow supported by the bowsprit. Looking down through the netting, you feel as though you are flying above the water as the ship plies onward.

Star Clippers' land excursions really delivered what they promised in terms of getting up close to the beauty of the landscape. My favorite excursion was horseback riding at Drake Bay along the Osa Peninsula. We explored deserted beaches and tropical rainforests that were still so pristine. Our guide pointed out the amazing diversity of flora and animal life, such as humming birds, hawks, monkeys and orchids bursting with color. 800-442-0551; [starclippers.com](http://starclippers.com)

## QUEST FOR CULTURE

The snow was pretty much the only thing missing (but certainly not missed) from our nine-night "South America, Christmas" cruise onboard the 694-passenger *Azamara Quest*. Waking up in beautiful Punta del Este, Uruguay, on Christmas morning was just one of many spectacular moments along our voyage, which started in Rio de Janeiro and ended in Buenos Aires and included overnights in both Punta del Este and Buenos Aires.

The European boutique-style ship is one of two sister ships that make up the fleet for up-market **Azamara Club Cruises**. The small-ship cruise line, which was founded in 2007 and relaunched in 2009, offers immersive experiences with itineraries that feature more late-night departures and overnight stays at ports of call. Beyond South America, Azamara sails to European destinations — including the Baltic and Scandinavia, British Isles, Western Europe, French and Italian Riviera, Greek Isles, Croatia, Holy Land and Black Sea — as well as Asia and lesser-traveled islands of the West Indies.

While on board the ship, we were amazed at all the things we didn't have to worry about that you might have to while on a larger cruise ship. Azamara inclusive amenities featured complimentary bottled water, sodas, specialty coffees and teas, and boutique red and white wines during lunch and dinner. Plus, gratuities for housekeeping, dining and bar staff are also part of the inclusive rate.

More than half of the ship's staterooms feature verandas, and for us it was a must. We loved the privacy of our special view as we cruised along the coastline and into some of the world's most fascinating destinations. Our port excursions enabled us to take in both the cultural life and natural sights. We enjoyed walking along cobblestone streets (no cars allowed) to see the architecture that dates back to Brazil's colonial era of the 1700s in historic Parati and were happy that we had until midnight to explore. Just over a mile from Old Parati's historic area is Aventura Park, where we hiked through the park's rainforest. The early morning call at Porto Belo gave us a full day to enjoy Ilha do Porto Belo, a little island just off shore.

We lounged at the beach, snorkeled, and dined on the house specialty "Porto Belo Island Shrimp" for lunch at the charming Porto Belo Restaurant. 877-999-9553; [azamarclubcruises.com](http://azamarclubcruises.com)

Whether the ships we choose for our vacations accommodate 8 or 700, the small-ship experience is one that we will continue to explore. That is, until we purchase our own yacht — and that could take a long, long time. ●

many destinations

CARIBBEAN

COSTA RICA

MEDITERRANEAN

PANAMA

SOUTH AMERICA