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THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR • THE.SPEC.COM

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TRAVEL

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STEVE HAGGERTY, TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

Windstar's newly-acquired and refitted "yacht," the Star Breeze, lies dock-side at Porto Ferraio, island of Elba.

Exploring Tuscany's distant shores

The 208-passenger Star Breeze is nimble enough to squeeze up to almost any tiny cove

ANNE Z. COOKE

PORTOFERRAIO, ITALY — When you sail on a ship like the 208-passenger Star Breeze, a vessel nimble enough to squeeze up to almost any tiny cove or narrow gorge, it's a good idea to bone up on the ports-of-call in advance.

Researching local history, anecdotal and otherwise, always adds zing to a day spent in an unfamiliar destination. If nothing else, you'll have time to decide which shore excursions — if any — promise to be that one and only magical mystery tour.

And so it was last spring, as we sailed down Italy's west coast on the Star Breeze, one of Windstar Cruises' three newly acquired and refitted all-suite yachts, a move that Windstar CEO Hans Birkholz describes as the company's "first venture into ships without sails."

Like Odysseus sailing home from Troy, we — my husband, Steve, and I — couldn't resist the lure of Tuscany's distant shores, a siren song of rugged cliffs, green hills and secluded coastal villages. After a busy first day in Monaco and a glittering send-off at the Monte Carlo Casino, we sailed on to Portofino, the oft-photographed celebrity hideaway whose harbour and village are as famous as they are tiny.



STEVE HAGGERTY, TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

Sunset over the coast marks the cocktail hour on the Star Breeze's top deck.

Italy as one of European history's most infamous prison sites.

If you're a fact-freak, you may know that Elba is the island where Napoleon, self-proclaimed emperor of France and the scourge of Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was exiled. Why Elba? If Elba's a barren, storm-tossed rock like Alcatraz (as I'd

dends. The first, a visit to Napoleon's in-town quarters, the gardens, a museum and his country residence, would cure my ignorance. Napoleon, in fact, didn't live on Elba very long, escaping within the year. (More fool he, considering how things turned out.) But the second excursion, a circle-island tour, offered a chance to see the real Elba, ge-

ny seaside town, Porto Azzurro nearby, leaving enough time to stretch our legs on narrow cobblestone streets, shop for souvenirs and postcards and to sit in the sun with a glass of wine. Elba, it seemed, was the kind of no-worry paradise where novelists go to find inspiration and the rest of us can only dream about.

Sitting on the piazza, watching the slow pace of life, the residents shopping, tourists carrying backpacks and fishermen tying their boats to the dock was so pleasant I wondered why Napoleon wasn't tempted to stay. But the day on Elba was a testimonial to Windstar's conviction that small ships and offbeat destinations are the answer to the growing demand for more innovative and authentic cruises.

On the Star Breeze, luxury set the pace. But it was the ship's size that felt so manageable. It took me just an hour to explore from top to bottom, learning my way around every space from the decks and the dining room to the lounges, library and the gym.

With fewer than 200 passengers on this cruise, meeting people and learning names was easy. The crew members, too, made a point of remembering not just our names but our preferences. And the longer we were on-board, the more comfortable it felt.

But it was a couple of sad-tears days for

TRAVEL

NICE TIME TO SEE NICE
CONTINUED FROM // G1

Miller's family knew the ship and their favourite stateroom so well that they felt like owners, she told me. When Windstar announced the Star Breeze's new itineraries, Miller decided to take her chances with a one-week voyage from Nice to Rome. By our last night on board, she'd had a change of heart.

"I guess the ship really needed a facelift," she reported as the waiters began to serve dessert. "The new colour schemes work and the upholstery is elegant but unobtrusive. This room, especially, seems brighter."

"I can't get used to the new name or why they call it a yacht. But it's the same ship, same polished brass and teak decks. The bathrooms still have those gorgeous marble counters and big tubs. And the walk-in closet that I don't really need."

For most us, the Star Breeze was still a ship. But as Kirkholm explained, the "yacht" classification is part of a cruise industry shift toward more narrowly focused cruise experiences.

In the early days of cruising, ships were one-size-fits-all products. If you were sailing on the Muddy Duck, you and every other Muddy Duck passenger boarded the ship in Port A and disembarked to days later in Port B.

Students and bargain hunters bought inside staterooms on D Deck, sometimes called third class; middle class travelers booked second-class, or "Cabin Class" staterooms, and celebrities and corporate millionaires booked first-class suites, with a separate first-class dining room.

But with today's larger pool of frequent cruise travelers looking for new destinations, cruise lines are targeting more narrowly defined demographics. Passengers' ages and income levels still matter, but their interests come first.

Expedition ships can be Spartan or deluxe, but they invariably



The harbor at Nice, France, the Star Breeze's port of embarkation.

offer demanding or even strenuous shore tours and single-themed trips. Polar bears and Arctic ice, the Amazon jungles, coral reef health.

The biggest, most affordable ships, the 2,000- to 4,000-passenger giants, sell on-board vacation fun as low as \$100 per person a day, with poolside parties, loud music, drinks by the pitcher, glittery theatre shows, casinos and basketball courts.

And in the yacht category, the Star Breeze adds a new dimension to the Windstar fleet, continuing to offer authentic experiences in offbeat places, with all the creature comforts anyone could want. Spacious suites, fine cuisine, personal service and kindred spirits to share the pleasure at every turn. "So far, it's a winning combination," said Miller as we disembarked.

Tribune News Service

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IF YOU GO

FOR PRICES: To compare discounted fares with listed "brochure fares," go to www.windstarcruises.com. For example, the fare for our 7-day cruise, "Yachting the Riviera," if booked now, is \$2,799 US per person. If booked later at the "brochure fare," the cruise costs more than twice as much, at \$6,599 US per person.

2016 SAILING DATES: The Star Breeze sails to Costa Rica and Panama in January and February; in April to Morocco and the Canary Islands; in May to Spain and Portugal; in late May to Monaco (includes two days of Grand Prix events); in June-August to Italy, Sicily and Spain; in September and October to Venice and Athens; and in late October the ship returns to the Caribbean.

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<p>CAESARS CASINO & RESORT WINDSOR, ONTARIO MAY 20-22 MAY 22-26 JULY 17-19 (3 DAYS/3 NIGHTS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 nights deluxe accommodation of Caesars Spa Resort Hotel 2 Deluxe Dinner Buffet \$125.00 credit A total of \$25.00 Cash Credits Free Beer on Shopping <p>\$269 PPH/In (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>SOARING EAGLE CASINO & RESORT</p> <p>Dates include the following shows: Mar. 13-16: Showers of Ireland May 8-11: Quality Chequer July 21-24: John Denver Experience Aug 21-24: The Beatles 1964 Tribute</p> <p>ALL PACKAGES INCLUDE: • Deluxe Accommodation at Soaring Eagle Resort • \$95.00 U.S. Free Play Coupons • \$45.00 U.S. Hard Credits • Premium Play Gift with \$100 (MAY 13-16) <p>\$499 PPH/In (TAXES INCLUDED)</p> <p>Shipping Vests • Only Free Shows</p> </p>	<p>"SPECIAL EVENT DAY" AT SENECA CASINO NY WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 24TH, 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$30 SLOT DOLLARS FREE LUNCH BUFFET FREE GIFT 5 HOURS OF GAMING <p>Must have valid Canadian passport and meet 21 years of age</p> <p>\$35 PP TAXES INCLUDED</p>								
<p>THE CHICAGO EXPERIENCE MAY 16-19, 2016 • 4 DAYS/3 NIGHTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 night deluxe accommodation at the Four Seasons Hotel Breakfast on shopping 3 dinners including Dinner & Entertainment at Four Seasons, Lounge & Entertainment Shopping and Free Beer at Four Seasons and the Magnificent Mile Exclusive City of Chicago Guided Chicago Tour of Chicago Free Beer on Shopping <p>\$665 PPH/In (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>TURNING STONE RESORT & CASINO MARCH 26 - 30, 2016 • 3 DAYS / 2 NIGHTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 nights deluxe accommodation at the award winning luxurious Turning Stone Resort Hotel \$105.00 U.S. Free Play Coupons \$45.00 U.S. Hard Credits Optional Shopping <p>Book early for other dates: April 18 - 21 \$399 PPH/In (TAXES INCLUDED) June 8 - 9 \$375 PPH/In (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>HILTON DU LAC LEAMYS CASINO APRIL 24-27, 2016 • SEP 11-14, 2016 (4 DAYS/3 NIGHTS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Nights deluxe accommodation at the 5 star Hilton Leamys Casino, Gaming & Entertainment \$100.00 U.S. Free Play Coupons 3 Full American Breakfasts Value of \$20.00 Food Coupons Guided Tour of Ottawa Delicious breakfast and Edward Market <p>\$565 PPH/In (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>								
<p>AKWESASHE MOHAWK CASINO RESORT APRIL 10-12, 2016 • 3 DAYS/2 NIGHTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 nights deluxe accommodation at the Akwesashe Mohawk Casino Resort Hotel \$95.00 U.S. Free Play Coupons • \$30.00 U.S. Hard Credits 10% Discount on Shop Purchases 20% Discount on Entertainment Site or Entertainment Site giftware Optional Shopping credit to local shopping mall <p>\$319 PPH/In (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>KINGSTON & 1000 ISLAND ESCAPE JUNE 22-24, SEPT. 7-9, 2016 • 3 DAYS/2 NIGHTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 nights deluxe accommodation at the luxurious Hotel by Kingston 2 delicious dinners, hotel & restaurant 2 hr. Seaside Dinner Cruise of the 1000 Islands Guided Tour of Kingston Admission to the Persepolis Museum with book at the Chancellors Optional Visit to the 1000 Island Castles <p>\$489 PPH/In (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>SPRING VACATION! MYRTLE BEACH APR 23 - MAY 2, 2016 • 10 DAYS/9 NIGHTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 nights onshore 2 nights ocean front accommodation at the Beach Cove Resort 2 Continental Breakfasts • 5 Full American Breakfasts • 3 Dinners • Shows Sightseeing • Shopping & more! <p>\$1475 PPH/In (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>								
<p style="text-align: center; background-color: red; color: white; padding: 5px;">DAY TOUR SPECIALS</p> <table style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td style="width: 25%;"> <p>Seneca Casino May 14, 19 Apr. 17, 22, May 11</p> <p>5 hours of gaming \$20 slot dollars FREE Lunch Buffet</p> <p>\$45 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p> </td> <td style="width: 25%;"> <p>Mount Airyline Tour Wednesday, March 23, 2016 Enjoy and picnic for the day Mount Airyline</p> <p>\$110 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p> </td> <td style="width: 25%;"> <p>MAMMA MIA Thursday, April 7, 2016 Enjoy a fantastic lunch Family Entertainment</p> <p>\$125 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p> </td> <td style="width: 25%;"> <p>St. Jacobs Thursday, April 21, 2016 FREE Admission Enjoy a delicious lunch at the Inn Bike Rental</p> <p>\$79 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> <p>Pepper Shakers Wed, May 20, 2016 Enjoy a delicious lunch at the Inn Bike Rental</p> <p>\$115 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p> </td> <td colspan="3"> <p>Special Event Day THURSDAY APRIL 14, 2016 • 12-3PM</p> <p>Join us for a fun afternoon at Michelangelo's, with the entertaining Pepper Shakers Band & great, over-the-top high energy band. Enjoy a delicious 6-course meal, coffee and dessert. Optional trip to Beautiful Ontario Inc. 55 Centennary. Dinner prices.</p> <p>\$45 PP (TAXES INCLUDED) \$65 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p> </td> </tr> </table>			<p>Seneca Casino May 14, 19 Apr. 17, 22, May 11</p> <p>5 hours of gaming \$20 slot dollars FREE Lunch Buffet</p> <p>\$45 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>Mount Airyline Tour Wednesday, March 23, 2016 Enjoy and picnic for the day Mount Airyline</p> <p>\$110 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>MAMMA MIA Thursday, April 7, 2016 Enjoy a fantastic lunch Family Entertainment</p> <p>\$125 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>St. Jacobs Thursday, April 21, 2016 FREE Admission Enjoy a delicious lunch at the Inn Bike Rental</p> <p>\$79 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>Pepper Shakers Wed, May 20, 2016 Enjoy a delicious lunch at the Inn Bike Rental</p> <p>\$115 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>	<p>Special Event Day THURSDAY APRIL 14, 2016 • 12-3PM</p> <p>Join us for a fun afternoon at Michelangelo's, with the entertaining Pepper Shakers Band & great, over-the-top high energy band. Enjoy a delicious 6-course meal, coffee and dessert. Optional trip to Beautiful Ontario Inc. 55 Centennary. Dinner prices.</p> <p>\$45 PP (TAXES INCLUDED) \$65 PP (TAXES INCLUDED)</p>		
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