

Currents

Head for the hills in Western Canada

Combine indoor luxury and outdoor adventure during “ski for free” specials through The Fairmont Chateau Whistler, The Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge, The Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, and The Fairmont Banff Springs. The packages offer free lift tickets based on the number of nights you stay: a one-day lift pass for a two-night stay, a two-day pass for a three-night stay, and a three-day pass for a four-night stay, all per person, per night, based on double occupancy. Starting rates run from \$229 per night (Jasper) to \$399 (Whistler). The Lake Louise package also includes \$100 resort credit per room, per day, and transportation to the Lake Louise Ski Area. Promotion ending dates vary, ranging from mid-April (Jasper) to May 23 (Banff Springs). Some other restrictions apply. 800-441-1414, www.fairmont.com

Bass fishing in Big Easy

See 50 of the world’s top anglers compete for cash and trophies at the Bassmaster Classic in New Orleans, Feb. 18-20. The competition, known as the Super Bowl of bass fishing, features daily launches at Bayou Segnette State Park and official weigh-ins at the New Orleans Arena. During the tournament, the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center hosts the 2011 Bassmaster Classic Outdoors Expo, which features hundreds of tackle, boat, and motor manufacturers geared to freshwater and saltwater anglers. Free. 407-566-2295, www.bassmaster.com

KARI BODNARCHUK

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Destinations

FOOD

Spice, heat, sausages, and spears

MARCH 4-14
MELBOURNE
Melbourne Food & Wine Festival: According to festival planners, Melbourne’s love of food and wine is nothing short of “infamous.” It’s certainly hard to imagine that anyone does anything besides eat and drink during the weeks when this annual festival sweeps the city and nearby parts of Victoria state with more than 250 events in restaurants, markets, museums, hotels, historic sites, wineries, gardens, and more. From an Afghan Spice Banquet to an Australian Native Foods Feast, Beer Degustation to Coffee Appreciation Class, there’s literally something for every taste. Various locations, many free events, ticketed events \$25-\$595. 011-61-03-9823-6100, www.melbournefoodandwine.com.au

MARCH 4-6
ALBUQUERQUE
National Fiery Foods & Barbecue Show: Never underestimate the appeal of a mouth on fire. This annual event began in 1988 with 37 exhibitors and now attracts more than 200 from around the world. Part of each day is reserved for the trade, but there’s plenty of time for chile pepper aficionados to wander among the booths and challenge their taste buds with the newest offerings of barbecue, salsas, marinades, spice rubs, oils, and vinegars with a little — or a lot of — kick. No wonder Budweiser is a sponsor. Sandia Resort & Casino, Interstate 25 and Tramway NE, advance tickets adults \$10, ages 18 and



CATHERINE SUTHERLAND/MELBOURNE FOOD & WINE FESTIVAL

Even the films are about food at Melbourne’s two-week food and wine fest.

under \$5, at the door \$15/\$5. 505-873-8680, www.fieryfoodsshow.com

MARCH 3-6
PARIS
Paris Cookbook Fair: The publishing industry may be struggling overall, but there’s a hearty interest in wine and food. So you might observe negotiations between publishers and authors at this self-proclaimed “world’s largest fair devoted to cookbooks and wine books.” This trade fair opens the door to the general public so that everyone can enjoy the cooking demos and master classes and can belly up to the international bar to taste wines and spirits from around the world. Le 104, 5

rue Curial, one-day pass for public days (March 5-6), \$10.75. www.cookbookfair.com

MARCH 26-27
HERMANN, Mo.
Hermann Wurstfest: The good folks of Hermann have apparently never heard that old maxim that the making of laws and sausages is best left unseen. Indeed, a sausage-making demonstration and professional and amateur sausage competitions are among the highlights of this festival and celebration of the town’s German roots. Dachshund owners can dress up their “weiner dogs” for the dog derby. Everyone else can sample the wares of the

state’s top sausage makers and tap their feet to the live music and folk dancing. Hermannhof Festhalle and Stone Hill Pavilion, \$7 per day. 800-932-8687, www.visithermann.com

PLAN AHEAD

APRIL 15-17
STOCKTON, Calif.
Stockton Asparagus Festival: Last year, the winner of the deep-fried asparagus eating contest downed eight pounds and seven ounces of the tasty spears. But that was really only a drop in the bucket. Overall, visitors consumed about 36,000 pounds of asparagus — deep-fried, in sandwiches or burritos, with pasta, even in “refreshing” drinks. Perhaps everyone worked up an appetite in the Spear-It run, the hole-in-one golf competition, or on the amusement rides. If you want to envy the California climate, check out the farmers’ market with its fresh strawberries and cherries as well as, of course, asparagus. Downtown, adults \$12, college students, teens, ages 60 and over, and people with disabilities \$7, children free. 209-644-3740, www.asparagusfest.com
PATRICIA HARRIS AND DAVID LYON

Events are sometimes canceled, rescheduled, or sold out; check online. Patricia Harris and David Lyon can be reached at harris.lyon@verizon.net. Read their food and travel blog at www.hungrytravelers.com.

High style on a small ship to historical places

By Deborah Etzel
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ISTANBUL — What could be better, we thought, than spending eight days cruising the Black Sea aboard a luxury yacht, touring ancient Greek and Roman ruins dotting the coastline and sites such as Balaklava on the Crimean Peninsula.

As we began our Tauck Tours cruise sailing north on the Bosphorus toward the Black Sea at sunset, sipping champagne and watching the Istanbul skyline slide by, we knew we had gotten it right.

Tauck is known for high-class, intimate tours. They arrange for guests to see things out of the ordinary and cater to people who expect an intellectual experience and personal attention along with their sightseeing. As you might expect, this is not a low budget experience, but we were not disappointed. The 90-passenger Le Levant was the perfect vessel for getting an intimate glimpse of the countries along the coast while being spoiled on a well-appointed floating inn.

On our trip, the gathering was even more intimate: just 57 passengers.

The “our” on this tour was my mother and I. Traveling for fun

with a parent as an adult child can be a risky venture. Their delights are not necessarily yours. But if you find a method of travel and the appropriate destination, the time together can be something to be treasured. We had found just that and experienced a memorable trip.

It began with three days of sightseeing in Istanbul before departure. The captain, who met us each as we boarded, was extremely personable. The staterooms were well designed with beds designed to be split in two if needed, a large closet, and plenty of shelves and drawers. The bathroom was large enough to comfortably dry your hair. The shower with both a fixed shower head and a hand-held was circular in design.

There was a small desk and chair, two armchairs, and a flat screen TV with a DVD player. The ship library had a wide selection of movies. Access to the Internet was available (for a fee). None of the rooms had a balcony, but there was plenty of outside space to catch the sun and the sea breezes.

The bar on the pool deck served tropical drinks during the day and the large cocktail lounge with a grand piano hosted after-



Balaklava, Ukraine, is part of the city of Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula.

noon tea, the nightly cocktail hour, and a nightly DJ after dinner. The ship had two dining facilities: casual for breakfast and lunch and formal for dinner. There was a beauty salon and fitness room. The crew numbered around 50.

All drinks during the cocktail hour were included for Tauck guests as was unlimited house wine with dinner. Dinners were three or four courses with a meat or fish choice, though one night was a barbecue buffet. The first night the waiters wore white gloves and our dinners arrived under silver covers that were removed in unison as they were served. The dining room had 12 tables for eight or 10 set with floor-length white tablecloths and stunning flower arrangements. The waiters quickly learned our names and preferences. From that point on, at lunch and dinner, one of the waitstaff always remembered that Miss Lorraine — as they called Mom — preferred skim milk with her meals.

The Levant’s size enabled us to dock on the shoreline wherever we went. At every stop, a tour bus with plush seats, large windows, air conditioning, and a bathroom was waiting for us a few feet from the ship. In addition to our tour director, Tauck provided two native guides at each stop.

Our first two excursions (Nes-sebar, Bulgaria, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and Constanta, Romania) were sleepy fishing villages nestled among Greek and Roman ruins that become bustling summer beach resorts in season. As well as exploring the historical sections, Tauck had arranged special visits in each country: a mountainside farm in Bulgaria, where two of our fellow passengers were dressed in local folk costumes and we sampled yogurt and pastries, and then lunch at a winery with folk dancers as entertainment; and in Romania, a downtown shopping area and then lunch at a seaside resort.

If you go . . .

Tour: Tauck’s Division of Small Ship Cruises (www.taucktours.com) also covers the Mediterranean, the Baltic including St. Petersburg, Iceland, Panama, the Galápagos. The **11-day, 10-night** Istanbul and the Black Sea tour runs from \$6,500-\$8,000 per person without airfare but including 27 meals and all gratuities.

Flights: We flew nonstop on Delta Airlines from New York’s Kennedy Airport to Istanbul. Airfare can be purchased along with the tour package or on your own. We saved \$300 each purchasing it on our own. **Visas:** Turkey requires a visa, but it is purchased at the airport for \$20 before clearing immigration control. US dollars or euros are accepted. **Neither visas nor passports** were

needed when the ship docked in Bulgaria, Romania, and Ukraine.

Currency: US dollars were accepted and calculators were handy to compute exchange rates.

Dress: Good walking shoes are a requirement as is the ability to walk for prolonged distances. **Mosques** require that women’s shoulders and knees be covered and a scarf to cover your hair is appreciated. **Smart casual** dress sufficed, but be sure to have warmer clothing if you want to sit outside at night.

Precautions: As the ship is small, there is more motion than on a river cruise or on a large cruise ship. Knowing your tolerance for motion sickness medication and having it with you is advisable.

Odessa was the first of three stops in Ukraine. We saw important sights, the Odessa National Academic Theater of Opera and Ballet, the Potemkin Steps, and the promenade along the seashore. But Tauck took it a step further: We were serenaded by a string duet from the local conservatory in the underground passageway of the Fine Arts Museum while sipping native sparkling wine.

The Crimean Peninsula was the site of our last two stops. The weather in this area is more like the Mediterranean than in the rest of the Black Sea, thanks to the Crimean Mountains blocking the cold north winds. It has long been a coveted vacation spot.

Sevastopol, our first city, is a natural harbor and has been a naval base since the time of Catherine the Great. When it was part of the former Soviet Union, it was closed to outsiders until 1995, particularly because of its nearness to the former super secret

submarine base carved into and under a mountain. Walking into the dark and imposing entry of the now historical museum immediately brings up images of old James Bond movies.

Last up was Yalta, famous for the conference where Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt divided Europe as World War II drew to a close. The area had long been used as a favorite vacation retreat of the czars.

Our last day was spent at sea, giving us a chance to reflect on our adventure, exchange contact information, and pack up for our trip home. A farewell dinner followed a champagne cocktail party and was an excellent four-course affair where the silver domes reappeared.

We had explored off the beaten track, piqued our curiosity, and been pampered. A nearly ideal trip.

Deborah Etzel can be reached at TawnyLeather@gmail.com.

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