

Cruise control

Depending on what you are looking for – thrills, finer things in life or intellectual stimulation – here are three cruise lines that are great choices. BY TAN KENG YAO

SO they say going on a cruise can be relaxing. But choosing a cruise line to take care of your vacation can be tough – with the mind-boggling number of cruise companies offering myriad itineraries, which one do you go with? We suggest three cruise lines that might be right for you.

If you are a thrill-seeker, go for: Royal Caribbean International

Global cruise brand Royal Caribbean International (www.royalcaribbean.com.sg) is known for cruises stuffed full of exciting activities. And, with the launch of its new liner the *Symphony of the Seas* in April 2018, it ups the fun stakes.

Touted to take the title of the “world’s largest cruise ship” when it starts sailing, the new ship will hold 6,870 guests over 18 decks fitted out with thrillers like the Ultimate Abyss, the tallest slide at sea with a dramatic 30-metre plunge. There is also FlowRider, a 12-metre-long surf simulator for those who want to perfect their surfer-dude fantasies.

Prefer to stay dry? Two rock walls and a 25-metre-long, nine-deck-high Zip Line will give the same adrenaline-pumping effect.

The *Symphony of the Seas* will sail its inaugural season in the Mediterranean from May to October 2018 with itineraries that visit ports in Italy and Spain.

Closer to home, the cruise line’s newest Quantum Class ship, the *Ovation of the Seas*, will be returning to Singapore for two special cruises next April, sailing to places like Phuket and Seoul.

This vessel features exclusive activities such as a RipCord by iFly skydiving simulator; the North Star, a jewel-shaped elevating glass capsule that delivers 360-degree views at 90 metres above the ocean; SeaPlex, where guests can experience bumper cars, roller-skating, basketball, Xbox games and parties at night; and a surf simulator.

For those who enjoy the finer things in life, go for: Silversea Cruises

Upscale Italian cruise provider Silversea (www.silversea.com) knows ultra luxury and the unparalleled amenities and services that guests enjoy on its boutique ships are proof of that.

For starters, the moment you board the ship, white-gloved staff will welcome you with a flute of champagne as they escort you to your suite, which, by the way, is ocean-facing, and possibly with your own private teak veranda. And then there is the butler service, consisting of highly trained personnel who will offer you undivided attention. With almost one staff member for every guest, it means you won’t be kept waiting whether you have ordered breakfast in bed or simply want your ice bucket refreshed.

Dining-wise, gastronomic excellence on board is a given because of the cruise line’s partnership with the Grands Chefs Relais & Châteaux. Two of its ships, the *Silver Muse* and the *Silver Cloud Expedition*, feature a Relais & Châteaux restaurant, La Dame, which serves a bespoke French menu by top chefs from the Relais & Châteaux team.

The cruise line also provides expedition trips, and together, its ships sail to more than 900 destinations on all seven continents, more than any other cruise line. The intimate size of its vessels means they can sail up narrow waterways into the heart of a city.

Its itineraries include many late-night and overnight departures, which give guests more time to experience the local colours and cultures at their ports of call. And if you want to extend your adventure on land, Silversea’s concierge team will help with planning your trips, whether you are interested in insider access to popular attractions or exciting adventures in search of the unusual.

For those in pursuit of intellectual attainment, go for: Cunard Cruise Line

While some are content to spend their holiday paying homage to the sun on a deck chair,



Above: Royal Caribbean International’s the *Ovation of the Seas* features the North Star, a jewel-shaped elevating glass capsule that delivers 360-degree views at 90 metres above the ocean.

Cunard (www.cunard.com) understands that there are others who prefer to pursue intellectual stimulation even on their breaks.

And the Cunard Cruise Enrichment Programmes is here to help with that. On this programme, luminaries such as writers, actors, film-makers, politicians, explorers, scientists, historians and even Nasa astronauts are invited on board to host talks and discussions with guests on contemporary issues.

Celebrated English explorer Ranulph Fiennes, for example, will be on board the *Queen Mary 2* in December 2017 on the transatlantic Southampton to New York journey. He will share insights about his incredible adventures with guests – he was the first person to reach both the North and South Poles by surface means and the first to completely cross Antarctica on foot, among many other achievements.

There is also The Cunard Book Club, which offers the opportunity for literary discussions among passengers.

And then when you’re full-up on things in-



Above left: Silversea Cruises provides a butler service, consisting of highly trained personnel who will offer you undivided attention. Above right: Cunard Cruise Line has a thoughtfully planned slew of entertainment options, including ballroom dancing.

tellectual, kick back and relax with the thoughtfully planned slew of entertainment options – culturally enriching ones, of course – such as live music, from jazz ensembles to classical recitals, singers and soloists, as well as ballroom dancing and West End-calibre theatre and dance productions.

Cunard’s three vessels – the *Queen Elizabeth*, the *Queen Mary 2* and the *Queen Victoria* – sail all around the world in a variety of itineraries that run from short trips to legendary journeys, such as its 35-night cruise that sails from Sydney to Singapore on the *Queen Elizabeth* in February 2018.



Left: In between excursions on the Irrawaddy River, enjoy life on board Sanctuary Retreats’ Sanctuary Ananda with activities like meditation sessions on the sun deck.

Smooth sailing

By Tan Keng Yao

RIVERS are the lifeblood of the earth, their waters sustaining the communities of people living along the shores. Get a glimpse of the rich tapestry of river life through a cruise, which allows you to get up close. Here are some rivers and bodies of water in Asia to visit – and the luxury cruises that sail you down.

IRRAWADDY RIVER

Myanmar is home to some of the most fascinating Buddhist temples, pagodas and monasteries in the world, and one way of taking in the charms of the country is by sailing along the Irrawaddy River, the longest river there.

And to do it in style, roll your luggage aboard luxury safari lodge and cruise provider Sanctuary Retreats’ (www.sanctuaryretreats.com) cruise ship, *Sanctuary Ananda*. Almost like a floating palace, the vessel has just 21 suites, each with its own balcony.

Sanctuary Retreats is offering an 11-night Bhamo Cruise, which sails between Mandalay and Bagan via the city of Bhamo. On this journey, the vessel will wind its way past riverside pagodas, green paddy fields and distant hills. Land excursions include visits to local markets, archaeological sites, handicraft workshops and landmark attractions such as Mandalay’s U Bein Bridge.

Guests can also opt for a visit to the village of Sin Kyun, which Sanctu-



Above: The *Mekong Pandaw* is a replica of a colonial steamer used by the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, with its intimate size keeping things friendly.

ary Retreats Philanthropy adopted following the village chief’s request for a library and a house for an English teacher. An unspoilt village, Sin Kyun has a population of just under 1,000 people who specialise in farming and hat-making.

In between excursions, enjoy life in the slow lane on board your vessel with cultural demonstrations such as how to wear a *longyi* (sarong), educational lectures, meditation sessions on the sun deck and movie screenings.

MEKONG RIVER

The Mekong, which flows through six countries – China, Laos, Burma, Thai-

and, Cambodia and Vietnam – supports a mind-boggling diversity of human cultures, with numerous minority groups and hill tribes settling along its banks.

A cruise provider that plies the 12th longest river in the world is Pandaw Cruises (www.pandaw.com), which specialises in journeys exploring remote and often hard-to-navigate waterways on small, luxurious vessels.

It offers several itineraries, but for the ultimate experience, opt for its seven-night Classic Mekong experience, which sails between Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam and Siem Reap in Cambodia.

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*Prices are in SGD per person, cruise only, on selected sailings and based on double occupancy. Cruise must be booked before July 31, 2017. Offer applies to select 4-night and longer cruises departing Aug 1, 2017 to Apr 30, 2019. Offer on selected sailing and excludes Galapagos, repositioning, transatlantic and transpacific cruises. Savings Offer amount is per person and based on stateroom category. SGD\$70 for inside, SGD\$140 for ocean view and onwards, SGD\$210 for Conqueror Class, SGD\$280 for Suites. Savings applied to cruise fare at checkout. Offer applies to all guests in the same stateroom. All fare subject to associated taxes and port expenses ranging from \$300 – \$530. All promotions are valid for new bookings. All of the above information is correct at time of print, subject to availability and change without prior notice. Other terms and conditions apply. TA648

Hot alpine spot

Tasmania's popular Cradle Mountain has plenty of attractions for visitors, including a scenic landscape, walking trails and free-roaming native wildlife.
BY TAN KENG YAO

THERE are many things going for Tasmania's Cradle Mountain. For one, it is where a visitor can see a ridiculously scenic landscape of ancient rainforest and alpine heathlands, icy streams cascading out of rugged mountains and glacial lakes with deep blue waters. Also, it is where Australia's premier alpine walk – the 65km Overland Track – starts, leading trekkers into the heart of the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park, which Cradle Mountain is part of. And then there are the free-roaming native wildlife – wombats, pademelons, wallabies, possums – which delight many urban visitors who spot them.

It is a given, of course, that Cradle Mountain is one of the Australian state's most popular destinations. Here are some things to do when you visit.

DO: VISIT DOVE LAKE

Dove Lake, which lies at the foot of Cradle Mountain, is a lake of stunningly blue water formed by the process of glaciation. To explore the lake fully, put on your hiking boots and venture onto the Dove Lake Circuit, a six-kilometre-long loop that is widely considered one of Tasmania's best walks.

The trail, which is mostly boardwalk, hugs the shores of the lake and leads you beneath the jagged peaks of the mountain, through a magnificent temperate rainforest and past lakeside beaches. Allow two to three hours to complete this circuit.

There is also an often-photographed boathouse 10 minutes into the walk. The historic structure, which has withstood many freezing winters and survived a few bushfires, is no longer in use but still remains an icon at the lake.

It is possible to drive right up to the lake's car park, but the access road will be closed once the parking area is full, so it is a better



Above: Dove Lake, which lies at the foot of Tasmania's Cradle Mountain, is a lake of stunningly blue water formed by the process of glaciation. PHOTO: TOURISM AUSTRALIA

bet to park at the Cradle Mountain Visitor Centre and ride a shuttle bus to the lake. All visitors to Tasmania's national parks must pay for a park entry permit, whose price varies depending on the type of pass you buy. The use of the Cradle Mountain shuttle bus is included in your pass.

GO ON SHORT WALKS

Not all of us are endurance walkers excited by the thought of hours-long treks in the wilderness. But don't let that put you off visiting Cradle Mountain, because a number of short and easy trails exist for those whose most strenuous exercise is getting up from the office chair.

A highly popular trail is the Enchanted

Walk, an easy 20-minute circuit with scenery that helps it live up to its name. Follow the boardwalk and it will take you past a rainforest of moss-covered trees and ponds with water so still and reflective, they look like mirrors on the ground. The trail then hugs the lush banks of a stream and crosses a small but no-less impressive waterfall. Keep an eye for wombat burrows along the path and if you go at dawn or dusk, you may just run into one of the creatures.

The Enchanted Walk starts from the Peppers Cradle Mountain Lodge, which is a short distance from the Visitor Centre. You do not have to be a hotel guest to access this walk.

There is also the 30-minute Pencil Pine Falls and Knyvet Falls Walk, which takes you through a still, mossy forest, past a lively river

and leads to the two waterfalls that are particularly spectacular after periods of rain. This easy walk starts opposite the Peppers Cradle Mountain Lodge shop. Wildlife such as pademelons, wallabies and possums roam this area.

TASMANIAN DEVIL SANCTUARY

Although wildlife like wombats and pademelons can be easily spotted by visitors to the area, it might take an extraordinary amount of luck to run into a Tasmanian devil, which are not only shy but also nocturnal, their black coats helping them to blend into the darkness of night.

You can still see them though, at the Devils@Cradle Tasmanian Devil Sanctuary (devilsatcradle.com). The sanctuary, which con-



Above: There is an often-photographed boathouse 10 minutes into the Dove Lake Circuit. The structure is no longer in use but still remains an icon at the lake. Below: A highly popular trail is the Enchanted Walk, an easy 20-minute circuit with scenery that helps it live up to its name. PHOTOS: SEAN SCOTT PHOTOGRAPHY (ABOVE), TAN KENG YAO (BELOW)



ducts a number of conservation programmes, also runs guided day and night tours of its premises. The night tour includes a devils feeding session which visitors get to watch standing next to the creatures' pens. If you've never heard the vicious snarls of the devils as they fight one another for food, here is your chance.

STAY: PEPPERS CRADLE MOUNTAIN LODGE

Spending time in the wilderness need not mean roughing it out. For those who appreciate the comfortable things in life, an accommodation they might want to opt for is Peppers Cradle Mountain Lodge (www.cradlemountainlodge.com.au). The multiple award-winning Lodge, which is on lists such as the Lonely Planet Extraordinary Places to Stay in the World 2014, offers luxuriously cosy guest cabins scattered around its expansive grounds.

While the cabins look rustic on the outside, set amid thickets of trees and shrubs and visited by the occasional wombat, they are lavishly well-appointed on the inside. The King Billy Suites, in particular, feature a private outdoor hot tub, a deep spa bath and a fireplace for those chilly nights.

The Lodge also has a spa and a fine-dining restaurant that serves food inspired by seasonal Tasmanian produce.

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As your vessel takes you from the bustling French colonial port of Ho Chi Minh City to the tranquility of the Cambodian countryside, you will visit attractions such as floating markets, a Cham tribal village and a catfish farm.

Guests also spend one day in Phnom Penh, touring the city on their own private cycle.

And, for a treat, the vessel will make its way to the charming French colonial town of Kratie to see rare, freshwater dolphins. Pandaw is the only cruise that goes to Kratie.

Smooth sailing

The vessel you sail on, the *Mekong Pandaw*, is a replica of a colonial steamer used by the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, with its intimate size keeping things friendly. Rooms feature luxe furnishings and panoramic French windows leading to personal deck space.

On-board activities include cultural performances, educational talks and cooking classes.

YANGTZE RIVER

The 6,300km-long Yangtze River, Asia's longest river and the third longest in the world, is home to the impressive Three Gorges as well as the immense dam that is China's largest construction project since the Great Wall.

A journey with Avalon Waterways (www.avalonwaterways.com) allows you to experience the magic of the gorges. It has a three-night Yangtze

sailing itinerary bundled with its land tours, which give you the option of visiting cities like Shanghai, Beijing or Hong Kong before and after your cruise.

During the cruise, dramatic high-lights are, of course, the gorges – Xiling, the largest; Wuxia, known for its beautiful forest-covered mountains; and Qutang, so magnificent as to be surreal – you can almost touch the perpendicular walls rising from the riverbanks as the captain negotiates this narrow gap.

Shore excursions include a walking tour of Shibaozhai with its 400-year-old, red wooden pagodas perched high on a cliff side, and a boat ride down the emerald-hued Shennv Stream with its mysterious hanging coffins.

And while the scenery outside your cruise ship is stunning, so are the luxuries offered aboard your vessel, the *Century Legend*. For starters, there are the spacious Deluxe State-rooms with balconies, as well as on-board facilities like a large indoor swimming pool, restaurants, bars, a spa and a cinema.

BACKWATERS OF KERALA

The backwaters of Kerala state in southern India are a 900-kilometre network of lagoons and lakes joined by canals – man-made and natural – and dotted by towns, villages and



Left: A journey with Avalon Waterways allows you to experience the magic of the gorges along the Yangtze River.

palm tree-fringed rice paddies. The waters are home to a unique ecosystem vibrant with aquatic, plant and bird life.

You can explore this watery ecosystem on board luxury ship *The Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda*, Kerala (www.oberoihotels.com/kerala-backwaters).

While the ship stays docked at a private jetty at Vembanad Lake at night, it makes excursions out to different parts of the waterway during the day. On its three-night itinerary,

you will cruise past picturesque stretches on the way to Alleppey, known as the "Venice of the East".

You will also visit a traditional Kerala *tharavad* (family residence), as well as attractions such as the half-statue of Lord Buddha.

Come night, relax on-board with cultural performances such as a *Mohiniattam* recital, a classical dance form distinctive to Kerala.

Afterwards, retreat to one of eight deluxe cabins while a 24-hour personal butler helps to make your experience even more comfortable.



Right: One of the eight deluxe cabins on board the *The Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda*, Kerala, that travels along the state's backwaters. PHOTO: OBEROI HOTELS & RESORTS

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