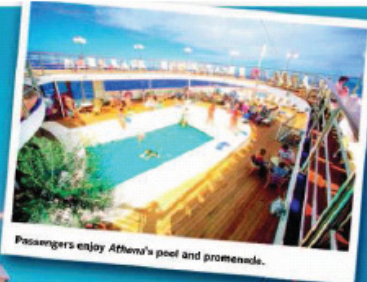




More fun afloat from Fremantle

"Local" cruise line continues to offer a wide range of options for passengers sailing to and from Perth aboard the fun ship *Athena*.



Passengers enjoy *Athena's* pool and promenade.

On board the *Athena*...
 Registry: Madeira, Portugal
 Flag: Portuguese
 Gross tonnage: 30,444 tonne
 Built/Refurbished:
 1994/2004
 Beam: 21m
 Length: 160m
 Cruising speed: 16.5 knots
 Passenger decks: 8
 Passenger lift: 2

It came as a surprise to me that despite being a coastal City, Perth has very few cruise lines based in it.

One company has been making waves by operating a liner from our City for the past seven years.

Classic International Cruises brought cruise ships back to Perth after an absence of 15 years in 2004 with the *Funchal*, which was replaced by the larger *Athena* in 2008.

My wife and I recently went on the *Athena's* "Sweetheart sojourn", a four-night cruise from Fremantle to Albany and back.

The *Athena* was originally a trans-Atlantic liner before a change of ownership in 1994 and a \$US150 million redesign.

She was refurbished in 2005 and now has a marbled reception foyer, pool, fitness centre and sauna, a small chapel, five bars and lounges, nightclub, show lounge, casino and two restaurants.

Accommodation-wise, the *Athena* has 276 cabins and 43 suites, including eight balcony cabins with jacuzzi baths.

Most of the cabins have sea views from either a porthole, windows or, at the upper end of the price scale, private balconies.

It was only my first cruise but I already prefer it over flying. There is no mad scramble to get checked in, no feeling of being squashed in like sardines and no race for baggage at the other end.

Better yet, unlike when travelling by plane, you are able to move around and do things instead of having to remain seated with the only movement being going to the toilet and back – and air turbulence.

Of course, some cruise passengers may encounter seasickness, like my wife and I did during the first day.

However, medication can help, as well as traditional remedies such as fresh air, bread, water and staring at the horizon – and if that doesn't help, the bar staff are happy to offer alternative

remedies.

Going for a cruise is proof of the adage that "getting there is half the fun".

In some cases, it is all the fun, with the *Athena* holding two-night cruises to "nowhere", departing Fremantle and sailing out into the Indian Ocean before returning to port three days later.

While the shorter cruises may entertain them, children may not enjoy longer cruises.

The on-board activities are not geared towards the little ones, although if there are enough numbers, special activities can be arranged and there are dedicated children's activities during the school holidays.

Onboard activities during our cruise included quizzes, craft lessons, games, dance lessons and floor shows in the evening.

Unfortunately, because of domestic regulations the *Athena's* casino was unable to operate, but the daily bingo games proved surprisingly addictive.

This was my wife's second cruise, her first being on a much bigger liner from Singapore to Phuket.

She said the *Athena* compared very favourably, with its smaller size making it much easier to get around.

The captain, Pedro Pinto, said the *Athena* was smaller than most cruise ships, but he preferred it that way.

"On bigger ships it's not easy for passengers or staff to make friends," he said.

"On these smaller to medium ships you can make friends easily. It's nice to come here to the same market and see the same faces; it's like a family."

Classic International Cruises managing director for Australia Grant Hunter said *Athena's* 2009-10 season delivered more than \$3 million to the local economy and attracted hundreds of interstate visitors to WA.

"*Athena* will be the only cruise ship based in WA next summer," Mr Hunter said. "Between one-third and half of all passengers on our cruises from Perth have sailed with us before."

The *Athena* will hold 13 cruises to and from Fremantle from November 14, 2010, to April 14, 2011.

Cruises from two to 39 nights will be available, including a Christmas cruise from Perth to Christmas Island and Bali, weekend cruises along the WA coast and the first-ever return cruise from WA to SA. There will also be two traditional line voyages

between Europe and Australia.

Next summer, the *Athena* will be joined in the region by its sister ship *Princess Daphne*, a 500-passenger ship that will hold six fly, cruise and stay holidays in the Far East, from Singapore and Hong Kong.

Michael Palmer

■ *The writer and his wife travelled courtesy of Classic International Cruises.*