



COSY CRUISING

Athena is a comfortable, classy liner that suits an older crowd spoiled by easy fun and intimacy, writes JAMES SHRIMPTON.

Cruise companies today believe that big is beautiful, but there's a lot to be said for smaller vessels such as Athena, sailing currently out of Fremantle and Adelaide.

The world's largest cruise ship, Allure of the Seas, at 220,000 tons and carrying up to 6290 passengers, is nearly 14 times larger than the Athena, which has room for just 600 on board.

This is not to knock the big guys, but many cruisophiles would prefer Athena for her relaxing atmosphere, comfortable cabins and praised cuisine.

The Portuguese-registered Athena, launched in 1948, rebuilt in 1994 and refitted in 2004, is the flagship of Classic International Cruises, which has operated in Australia since 2004.

She and her four sister ships of similar size in various parts of the world specialise in providing "a home from home" feel. Athena guests are "welcomed to the family" by captain Pedro Pinto and cruise director Marcus Teixeira.

The ship spends five months each year in Australia and Europe, linked for 2011-12 by voyages from Rome to Fremantle via Suez in November and from South Africa to Portsmouth, UK, next April.

With between 375 and 600 passengers it's easy to make and keep friends on a smaller liner.

The authoritative *Berlitz Guide to Cruising* describes Athena as "really one of the old classics that has been lovingly maintained and holds a special charm for those not seeking the newest large resort ships".

Our recent cruise was an 11-day round trip, with the ship about two-thirds full, from

Fremantle to Port Lincoln, Adelaide and Kangaroo Island in South Australia, then Esperance on the WA south coast.

Long-time traditions on Athena saw a sailaway with streamers thrown and a conga-line dance on deck, and later the captain's cocktail party, and two formal dress-up dinners – the second with a waiters' parade of the flaming Bomb Alaska dessert.

Three of the four ports visited were enjoyable, but alas, a too-high-for-comfort sea swell prevented ship's tenders from being launched to carry passengers to Kangaroo Island with its rich wildlife.

The crew quickly substituted a day of events from a large program that includes quizzes, lots of word games and other competitions inside and on deck.

There are also rooms for playing games such as cards and Scrabble, and a library.

(A small casino remained closed by laws which ban their use in Australian waters).

The program suited the passengers, whose average age was probably nearer 70 than 60, with many veterans of previous voyages aboard the ship, some in wheelchairs and with walking sticks.

Games were conducted by jolly "animators" (the ship's name for entertainment staff).

On a table on the Calypso deck was a 1000-piece jigsaw of the four US presidents carved into Mount Rushmore in the US; most passers-by stopped to add pieces to the picture and it was completed on the 10th day – maddeningly missing just one piece.

Among other diversions were bingo, dance and cooking lessons, craft workshops,



exercises, walks around the promenade deck bridge and movies in the cinema.

The Los Uruguayos duo, pianists and singers played and sang at in lounges or on deck.

An energetic team of dancers performed nightly in the 350-seat show lounge and won special applause one evening after missing barely a step and avoiding collisions while Athena rocked and rolled in rough seas.

Meals were in the Olissipo Restaurant, where the waiters were most attentive, or buffet-style in the Lotus Grill.

Big swells are frequent on the Bight; Athena's stabilisers reduced the effect but some passengers have their own way of dealing with it. Captain Pinto recalled one day finding two elderly woman seated on stairs, sliding down step by step on their bottoms!

The skipper described his job as "26 hours a day, but incredibly satisfying" as he deals with technical matters involving passengers and crew, social functions and officiating at weddings and renewals of vows.

Unusually in these days of high security, tours of the bridge were organised for passengers to see how the Athena works.

While everyone we met aboard enjoyed the cruise, especially the gourmet meals, there were some minor criticisms. Some people commented that the ship's two lifts were inadequate. Also, while the ship's daily program included a few items of Australian news, there was no Australian TV channel among about 10 from Europe, with no signals at all in remote regions.





SHIP SHAPE: The Athena's pool on the Calypso deck, right, and the ship in open water, facing page.

During Athena's five months in southern Australia in 2010-11, she offered 13 cruises to and from Fremantle ranging from two to 11 nights.

Internationally, the ship listed an 11-nighter to Bali via Christmas Island, another to Bali a three-day stay, and one of 20 nights past Christmas Island and Indonesia's Krakatao volcano between Java and Sumatra plus ports in Malaysia and Thailand.

In the 2011-12 summer, Athena on her return from Europe will widen its area of activity with 10 cruises from Perth and five from Adelaide.

They include a 38-night return "Cherry Bossom" voyage departing from Fremantle on March 7, 2012, to 11 ports in Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, China and Indonesia.

Out of Adelaide, Athena's program includes an



eight-night cruise to Melbourne and Sydney, and one of seven nights to Burnie, Port Arthur and Hobart in Tasmania.

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The writer was a guest of Classic International Cruises, and in Perth of Western Australia Tourism, staying at the Pan Pacific Hotel.

IF YOU GO

- Christmas Cruise to Bali – 12 nights from Perth – return cruise via Christmas Island and two days in Bali – from \$2250 pp twin share – December 18, 2011. Kids cruise free. Taxes and conditions apply.
- Seven-night cruise to Tasmania from Adelaide departing February 5, 2012, taking in Burnie, Port Arthur and Hobart. From \$1375 pp twin share. Kids under 18 cruise free. Taxes and conditions apply.
- Bookings through travel agents. For general information, see classicintcruises.com