



# New take on old traditions

**Brad Crouch**

IN AN ocean of superliners measured in football fields and carrying thousands of passengers, there is room for a classic cruiser.

*Athena* (pictured) is such a ship. It is not exactly small – at 160m long and eight passenger decks high it carries about 550 guests – but as a smaller liner it carries an intimacy that sees passengers soon settle in to their home away from home.

It carries history – built in 1948 as a sturdy Swedish North Atlantic liner, it has sailed under five names, was rebuilt in 1994 and refurbished in 2005 to emerge as Classic International Cruises' *Athena*.

Registered in Madeira, it carries an Iberian flavour, from senior crew such as Captain Pedro Pinto through to the Portuguese-inspired artworks in each cabin.

It also is big on tradition, from the two sittings at set times for dinner in the Olissipo restaurant through to the hurling of streamers at sail-away parties.

Portuguese it may be, but *Athena* is giving thousands of Australians their first taste of cruising, as well as welcoming back many, as up to half the passengers are repeat guests.

It has been based in Perth for the past three seasons, and will call Fremantle and Adelaide home ports next season.

On a four-night Australia Day round-trip voyage from Fremantle calling at Albany and Bunbury, there

was no shortage of new cruisers.

From extended families to cuddling couples, young singles to the more experienced, the ship carried a mixed demographic.

Many people spent the first day exploring the ship, from the library to the piano bar, the lounges and bars, gym, cinema and boutiques.

It was a different story by the final day – many had found their favourite spot, be it simply a deck chair. For most it was the rear deck area, where the gently sloping teak deck wraps around the pool and three higher decks look down on the action. And, of course, you can get a cool drink from the outside Elpinor or Aeolos bars while enjoying the atmosphere.

In the days in between, passengers made friends, enjoyed the water views, dined on excellent food and were entertained by evening shows as the ship wound around WA's southwest coast.

From Fremantle Harbour, the *Athena* made its way south to Bunbury, then rounded Cape Naturaliste, Cape Leeuwin, Point D'Entrecasteaux, Point Nuyts, Point Hillier and West Cape Howe to Albany.

Albany carries some serious history, from its time as a whaling centre to its military role, including as the mass gathering point for Diggers bound for Gallipoli.

Visit the Princess Royal Fortress to soak up the Anzac history, then perhaps hire a bike for the cycle

path around the waterfront to Middleton Beach.

While Albany has its history, it is stepping into the future with its \$70 million Albany Entertainment Centre, which from some angles looks like a whale, and from others a frilly lizard.

From Albany, the *Athena* headed back to Bunbury the following day, where another beautiful harbour awaited. Tours here include the Ferguson Valley, a wine region with 18 wineries, an hour from the better-known Margaret River.

**The writer travelled courtesy of Classic International Cruises.**

