



New take on old traditions

The modern and elegant Athena offers an intimate cruise experience for a select few, writes **Brad Crouch**

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

Athena is such a ship. It is not exactly small – at 160m long and eight passenger decks high she carries about 550 guests and has facilities ranging from pool to nightclub to spa to showlounge – but as a smaller liner it carries an intimacy that sees passengers soon settle in to enjoy their home away from home.

It carries history – built in 1948 as a sturdy Swedish North Atlantic liner, it has sailed under five names, undergone a comprehensive \$150 million rebuild in 1994 and was updated with a full refurbishment in 2005 to emerge as Classic

International Cruises' flagship *Athena*.

Registered in Madeira and flying the Portuguese flag, it carries a distinct Iberian flavour, from senior crew such as Captain Pedro Pinto through to the Portuguese-inspired artworks in each cabin (each cabin also has a bath, a rarity in modern liners).

It also is big on tradition, from the two sittings at set times for dinner in the Olissipo restaurant – there is also casual dining in the Lotus buffet – 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 others, on trips where up to half the passengers are



repeat guests. Due to its popularity, 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 “virgin” cruisers glad they had joined the party.

From extended families to cuddling couples, young singles to the more experienced, the ship carried quite the mixed demographic, including 16 members of the Red Hat Society – ladies over 50 who leave their husbands at home while they holiday, identified by their red hats and purple outfits.

As with most voyages, many people spent the first day exploring every nook and cranny of the ship, from the warm library to the piano bar, the various lounges and bars, gym, cinema, card room, boutiques and deck areas.

It was a different story by the final day – many had found their favourite spot, be it a deck chair or a comfy lounge chair while music played. 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, ranging from bands and games to people-watching.

And, of course, you can get a cool drink from the outside Elpinor or Aeolos bars while enjoying the scenery and atmosphere.

From the sail-away party as we left

Fremantle Harbour (including an exuberant conga line around the pool), the *Athena* gradually 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 an important whaling centre to its military role, including as the mass gathering point for a convoy of Diggers bound for Gallipoli.

For many leaving Albany on November 1, 1914, in a convoy of 26 Australian and 10 New Zealand ships, this was the last sight of home.

Today, you can visit the Princess Royal Fortress to soak up the Anzac history, then perhaps hire a bike for the cycle path around the picturesque waterfront to Middleton Beach and lunch at Bay Merchants.

While Albany has its history, it is stepping into the future with its just-opened \$70 million Albany Entertainment Centre.

Likened by some to the Sydney Opera House for its exterior design, from some angles it looks like a whale, from others a frill-necked lizard.

From Albany, the *Athena* gracefully wound its way back to Bunbury the following day, where yet another beautiful harbour awaited.

Tours here include the Ferguson Valley, a wine region about an hour from the better-known Margaret River. This scenic valley has 18

wineries, such as St Aiden Wines, named after a nearby historic church, where the valley views unfold nicely during an al fresco lunch.

Bunbury also has its rustic Wildbull Brewery, yet another place with spectacular views, as well as six tasty in-house brews.

For a taste of nature, visit the Dolphin Discovery Centre to swim with dolphins or take a boat trip to watch them in Koombana Bay.

On the final afternoon back on the *Athena*, before changing for dinner and taking in the last show, it was time to ask a few first-time cruisers their views.

Mark Smith and Simone Downey of Perth had never cruised before and liked the idea of a short cruise to see if it suited them. It did.

“It has been terrific – we’ve had a great time, the food and service has been tremendous and we will do it again,” Mark said.

Mike and Lynda Tamplin, also of Perth, were similarly impressed.

“We were not quite sure what to expect but we have just had the best time,” Mike said. “We’ll be telling our friends to try it.”

Word of mouth like this is winning *Athena* quite a loyal following of travellers who enjoy the classic cruise experience.

The writer travelled courtesy of Classic International Cruises.



ALL ABOARD: Classic cruiser *Athena* (above); passengers soak up the sun on the deck (top) and happy travellers Lynda and Mike Tamplin, Simone Downey and Mark Smith (above right).