

Thank goodness for stabilisers. There's a three-metre swell running but the 2,222 guests and 900 crew on board *Rotterdam VII* wouldn't know it.

It also helps that we're doing just 16 knots. Unlike voyages of the late 1800s and 1900s, which shipped hundreds of thousands of migrants from Europe to the Americas, there is no urgency to get to our destination. Quite the opposite. Many guests on this historic transatlantic voyage are lifelong cruisers, spending happy months at sea – today part of a blue-green palette with splashes of white on the tips of waves.

This journey is the reverse sailing of Holland America Line's first voyage from Rotterdam to New York in 1873 and the mood on board the ship is cheery and light.

Captain Bas van Dreumel set the tone shortly after departure from New York, performing a 360-degree turn in front of the Statue of Liberty – only the second time in history that a cruise ship has done so. It's fun and gives us extra time to snap photos of Lady Liberty before the city lights meld with the horizon and the ocean wraps around us for the 11-day crossing.

The journey is one of adventure and reflection. In my smart stateroom, 21st-century luxuries peep from every corner – New York's best gourmet chocolate by Jacques Torres and delicious cookies called Stroopwafels from Holland, a mini bar of cocktail mixes, French champagne and Italian prosecco, fresh ice, nice glassware, a plump bed with good linen, embossed bathrobes and blankets, should I need them on the private balcony.

WELCOME TO THE FLEET

Rotterdam VII is the newest addition to Holland America Line's fleet of 11 and is the seventh ship to bear the name, continuing the company's tradition of repeating ship's names.

She's a beauty – outside and in. I feel I'm on a floating gallery and getting lost on board (which I achieve every day) becomes a mystical, magical art tour. Lobbies, stairwells, decks and staterooms showcase around 2,645 pieces – contemporary and historical – photos, paintings, sculptures, prints and mixed media worth close to \$6 million. There are Picasso ceramics, and the Atrium centrepiece is a creation called 'Harps' – a 7.5-ton stainless steel sculpture over three decks, with mirrors and

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT SEA

A transatlantic crossing still has all the thrill, drama and excitement of yesteryear. For Holland America Line's historic 150th anniversary voyage from New York to Rotterdam, guests and crew embraced both the past and present on Rotterdam VII.

WORDS BY SUSAN ELLIOTT

Guests have the chance to gather at the stern, bow and balconies as Holland America Line's *Rotterdam VII* arrived in Rotterdam.



coloured lights playing ‘artist-in-residence’, changing the vision, at whim. It’s magnificent.

RETURN TRAVELLERS

Ninety-nine cruises? What! Over coffee and cakes, cruise aficionados Ann Marie and Pat Bunts tell me they’re on board to celebrate their 1,000th night at sea with Holland America Line, their 99th cruise and 43rd wedding anniversary. Four generations of the family have sailed with the line including their son Brendon who, aged four in 1990, helped create Holland America Line’s first kid’s menu. (He’d been served a ‘peanut butter and jelly’ sandwich that wasn’t on white bread and didn’t have the crusts trimmed. *Quelle horreur!*) But that was promptly fixed by the youngster, and to date Brendon has sailed 50 cruises himself and his young son, two.

“We are four generations of very happy sailors,” says Ann Marie. Flashbacks to the past are a daily event, celebrated through food and drink, old-fashioned deck games and pop-up events with different themes. At ‘Throwback Happy Hour’, special 150th anniversary martinis fly off the bar for \$1.50 and glasses of wine for just 75 cents – old-fashioned prices that have us pining for that part of the past.

In Tamarind restaurant, a mixology class celebrates ‘The History of HAL in Four Cocktails’. We start with a ‘Side Car’ (1870s), which is chased by ‘The Bees Knees’ (1920-1933), followed by a ‘Tuscan Lemon Drop’ (1980s) and ‘Trader Vic’s Mai Tai’ (1933-1940s). The event is new for this crossing but will be on all Holland America Line ships throughout 2023.

Tamarind’s menu is my favourite. Well, equal first with every other dining venue: Rudi’s Sel de Mer, the Dining Room, Pinnacle Grill, Canaletto, Tamarind, Dive-In, New York Pizza, Nami Sushi and Lido Market. In Tamarind, the satay tasting menu is exquisite, a beautiful plate (literally) of Malaysian lamb, Chinese beef, Thai chicken, Indonesian pork and Vietnamese shrimp. A pop-up rijsttafel dinner is another nod to history (Indonesia was a Dutch colony) followed the next day with an Indonesian High Tea in the Dining Room. There’s a Dutch High Tea, too, with treats made especially for the voyage – oliebollen (a doughnut), speculoos (crispy spiced

Clockwise from far left: Tamarind Panang Red Curry; 150th anniversary celebrations onboard; A commemorative wreath is cast overboard when the ship sails over the wreck of the *Titanic*; High Tea onboard is a must; A comfortable verandah stateroom; The delicious Smoke-infused Rotterdam VII; International dining at the Lido Market.

cookies), Bossche bollen (a cream puff similar to a profiterole) and the biggest apple tart I’ve ever seen. At Rudi’s Sel de Mer, the seafood bouillabaisse is pipped only by the side of truffle parmesan fries which are wickedly good. Lido Market, I adore you too. From sunup to sundown, this corridor of cuisine is a world-class show-and-tell – Germany one day, then China, France and The Netherlands. I convince my stomach to squeeze in another feast only eight hours after the last one. Yes, I am growing my own stabilisers. On the decks, pickleball is the same craze on sea as it is on land, and there’s sjoelen – the Dutch table-version of shuffleboard.

“WE ARE FOUR GENERATIONS OF VERY HAPPY SAILORS.”

ANN MARIE

The softness and slowness of the ocean is calming. Hours are spent scanning the view for seabirds and marine life but it’s no Attenborough documentary. A lone whale surfaces before diving back to the depths, a pod of dolphins flashes past and a solitary gull seems to struggle in the swell. No stabilisers.

A MEETING WITH HISTORY

I’m also looking for icebergs. It’s 111 years, almost to the day, that *RMS Titanic* sank in these waters and claimed more than 1,500 lives. It’s impossible not to think of it.

Rotterdam VII slows to a complete stop. We’re floating over the *Titanic*. Well, what is left of her. The world’s most famous ship is 3,700 metres beneath us, debris from the wreck now scattered over the ocean floor.

It’s another surprise from Captain van Dreumel, who invites guests to the stern for a speech and a minute’s silence. There’s a long blast from the ship’s whistle, a wreath is cast overboard. My skin prickles. Some shed tears. “It was a tragic event and most companies wanted to forget the event as quickly as possible,” says Captain van Dreumel. “But it’s because of that we are here, with

much safer conditions, better communication and that’s why I decided to take a moment, stop, reflect on the past, and then move onwards.”

The *Titanic* is long gone, but the icefields, in case you are also wondering, are not. “We are currently 150 miles south of the closest icebergs,” says Captain van Dreumel. “In fact, from 1991 to 2020 the icefields were even further south than they were in 1912, so it still happens. It is a thing I must take into consideration when we plan this voyage, and this is also the reason I have chosen this route. It is not the shortest distance between the two points but that would mean we would travel right in between the icebergs, and we try to avoid that.” I nod yes, far too enthusiastically.

The devastation caused by an iceberg was to be eclipsed, many times over. “Since then, we’ve gone through two World Wars, through great depressions, prohibitions, economic crises, even COVID-19, perhaps one of the hardest things we’ve ever had to go through,” says Karlijn Verpalen, Holland America Line’s Cruise and Travel Director.

The boom of air travel in the 1970s was another massive blow to the cruise industry. “But we’re still here, resilience is one word that comes to mind,” says Verpalen.

Eleven days after leaving New York, there’s land ahoy. Plymouth, England is the first port of call, followed the next day by Dover. But it’s *Rotterdam VII*’s namesake port in the Netherlands that has us on the stern, the bow and the balconies at 6am – to the very spot where the Holland America Line was founded, on the same day, April 18, 150 years ago. My eyes tear up (from the icy breeze), and on the ship’s bridge the captain of Holland America Line’s newest flagship vessel is possibly a little misty-eyed as well.

At a gala event that evening, guests tiptoe through masses of tulips around the Lido pool, champagne is poured, toasts are made and there’s music, dancing and a light show to celebrate a remarkable anniversary. There’s no swell, but the *Rotterdam VII* is rocking and this time everyone on board can feel it. 

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