

Cruising

A voyage worth singing about

On a music-themed cruise sailing along the Dalmatian coast, **Caroline Phillips** indulges her inner Pavarotti

As we sail away from the medieval coastal town of Kotor, Montenegro, all ancient walls and 12th-century churches, with a dramatic backdrop of mountains, the warm breeze is filled with the sound of altos and baritones. One minute they're singing Bellini, the next it's Bizet. There's a piano on deck too. Then the ship sounds its horn three times, perhaps in time to "O sole mio..."

I'm on a Bel Canto cruise – Italian for 'beautiful singing'. In other words, opera on the water. We're sung to over dinner, over drinks, over here and over there. As well as three scheduled performances, there are others *en passant*. For some of the guests, the music is as important as the amazing scenery.

I'm indulging my inner Pavarotti on *L'Austral*, a 132-cabin 'super yacht'. It belongs to Compagnie du Ponant, a boutique French cruise line that's going for Brit appeal. It's a week-long Dalmatian Coast cruise, starting and ending in Venice and passing via Croatia and Montenegro. It is, in truth, more than *un peu Français*. Most of the guests – a mix of families and couples as well as the more traditional elderly passengers – are French, and so too are the crew. The ship flies the French tricolore; the food is French; and the girls at reception wear nautical, Brittany T-shirts and I'm-doing-you-a-favour French looks. Even the announcements are made in *la langue* – but afterwards, they're translated, GCSE-style. The Captain's table invitees? *Bien sûr, les Français*. Think of it as Club Med sur la mer.

On some musical cruises, the onboard programme is more important than the ports. But ours is destination-led. After all, the Adriatic boasts water that's clear, gleaming and turquoise. There's a mountainous coastline so beautiful that I don't ever want to 'kill an eye' (the Dalmatian expression for 'getting a bit of shut eye'). There are Roman, Byzantine and Venetian buildings; a sun that shines obligingly over a thousand islands, only 66 of them inhabited; and air so fresh it cannot have been used before.

At the Krka National Park near Sibenik in central Dalmatia, I see a magical underwater kingdom: the perfect reflections of felt-green hills in lakes the colour of vintage-green velvet. There are also brooks and streams and light filtering through air that's thick with the smell of figs. I swim in a natural pool near Skradinski Buk, a waterfall that cascades 125ft. But my Mowgli moment is tainted by crowds



The old town of Dubrovnik, and below, aboard Compagnie du Ponant's L'Austral

from other cruise ships; swimmers' rush-hour.

The restored Baroque town of Dubrovnik is a highlight. It has cobbled streets, that are shiny through wear, narrow alleyways and hundreds of steps for climbing. Where now there are shops and cafés, there were once fireballs, smoke billows and sandbags when Dubrovnik came under siege for 13 months during the Yugoslav Civil War. There's a museum with a memorial book to record the sorrow. The sepia faces of the dead look down from the walls.

But mostly the trip passes like the Papal travel guide. In Dubrovnik there's a cathedral treasury with 138 gold relics: hands, arms and legs, like some antique prosthetics shop. There's a 14th-century Dominican Monastery; 16th-century religious paintings dotted with white plasters, to show where they need restoration work; and a Franciscan Monastery pharmacy that's been trading since 1317. It's only Monday morning and one church is already full for the 11:30 mass – through the door left open for air, we see children fanning themselves and the priest wiping sweat off his forehead with a hanky.

Farther down the coast at the old town of

“It makes the music so accessible; the passengers engaging with the musicians”

Kotor, there seems to be a church or monastery on most street corners. In the churches, there are two shelves of candles – the top for the living, the bottom for the dead. ("I'm in the middle," quips my octogenarian father.) But back to the music. Does *opéra sur l'eau* add up to anything more than women with long dresses and short careers? Peter Avvd, a Brazilian lawyer cum opera buff, travels the world from Verona to the Met, catching a bel canto or two in every place. Even he feels moved to start conducting from his seat at the cruise dinner as we're served helpings of opera and plates of beef fillet with lobster.

Despite the bad acoustics, low ceilings and microphones, it's all *merveilleux*.

There's no orchestra and the performers are only steps away from the audience. It makes the music, particularly opera, so accessible. The audience engages with the musicians, before, during and after performances.

Suddenly a maniac snatches a knife from the table of one of the diners, and brandishes it. Ah, that'll be a prop for Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* then. Life is never again going to be quiet on the high seas. And is that the ship sounding its horn, again?

Need to know

Caroline Phillips was a guest of Compagnie du Ponant (0800 980 4027, ponant.com). A seven-night cruise in the Adriatic on board *L'Austral* departing in spring 2013 costs from £1,823pp. The price does not include flights to and from Venice. Wine is included with meals.