

A weekend of playing and partying

Taster cruises get the thumbs-up from **Phil Davies** and family

I wasn't entirely sure that taking my wife and young children on a P&O Cruises short sailing would be the most suitable choice for a weekend away. After all, this was a full-on two-night party cruise, jammed to the rafters with stag and hen parties – including groups of “sailors”, “nuns” and “pirates” – plus passengers celebrating all sorts of events, from 50th birthdays to wedding anniversaries. There was even a group of 60 on board Ventura aiming to carry out the wishes of a recently deceased friend who had wanted his ashes spread across the English Channel.

Add to this colourful passenger mix the self-styled godfather of British cooking, Marco Pierre White – who was spending time at sea in return for overseeing speciality restaurants on certain P&O Cruises ships and running culinary skills classes – and you have a potentially combustible combination. Fortunately, the only things going up in flames were the devilled kidneys Marco served during a Saturday morning cookery demonstration in the open kitchen section of East, the ship's oriental dining spot.

The volume of luggage being manhandled on board the vast family-friendly superliner at Southampton might have suggested we were all embarking on a world circumnavigation rather than a short sailing to Zeebrugge to visit Belgium's chocolate, beer and moules-frites capital of Bruges. This may have been down to the fact that one of our two nights on board was a formal one, requiring extra suitcase space for dresses, shoes and dinner jackets (or fancy dress, depending on which party you belonged to).

Prices for trips of this kind are as low as £249 and include meals in the main dining rooms and buffets, childcare and entertainment – in this case *X Factor* 2005 finalists Journey South, a belting Four Tops tribute band, bawdy comedians and a George Michael sound-alike. Representing such great value, it's no surprise that P&O Cruises expects to take some 20,800 passengers away on short breaks at sea this year, with a further 9,000 in 2012 as more taster cruises are scheduled.

With 3,000-plus passengers to get on board for our Friday afternoon departure, I was impressed when the 115,000-ton Ventura pulled away from the dockside bang on schedule. Despite the queues at check-in – a mission equivalent to boarding more than eight jumbo jets at once – the embarkation process at Southampton's Ocean Terminal went remarkably smoothly for me, my wife and our two children, Tilly, aged nine, and six-year-old Hal.



Channel-hopping: clockwise from left, view of Bruges from the Belfry; Tilly and Hal Davies in front of P&O's Ventura; the on-board spa pool; Marco Pierre White runs cookery classes on some of P&O Cruises' sailings

Why we liked it

The Surfers Club was great. On chocolate evening we played games to win yo-yos, water balloons and toy guitars.

I loved the yummy pizzas from Frankie's (pizzeria) because there was garlic in them and they were covered in stringy cheese.

The pools were really big, so there was lots of space for swimming. The cabins were quite large too and the beds were so comfy, much nicer than the ones in a hotel.

HAL

I loved waking up in a different place without having to fly there.

The Scuba Club was such fun because they had air hockey and a jukebox playing songs by Katy Perry and Cheryl Cole. I was able to stay up late because we were playing games with the Reef Rangers. Everyone was really nice and it was easy to make friends.

The meals were much better than hotel food and at the buffet you could choose whatever you liked.

I learned to swim on Ventura a couple of years ago so I love spending time in the pools. This felt like a proper holiday even though we were only away for a weekend.

TILLY

The clamour for cabins did put a strain on the lifts – it seemed to take an age to reach our designated deck, one of 15 across the ship. Yet once we had located our cabin, complete with a sofa bed for the children, an unusual sense of calm descended on my family.

Not for long: Tilly and Hal were eager to explore the decks, and youngsters of all ages escaped en masse to see if they could spot Noddy and Mr Bump during their regular appearances around the ship.

I was surprised to see so many children on board, but they were more than adequately catered for in four different clubs. Hal joined the Surfers, the club for those aged five to eight, who let off steam in the Jumping Jacks room, complete with an adventurous soft-play area.

Tilly felt far cooler as a member of the Scuba Club for nine- to 12-year-olds, hanging out in the Den with its big-screen television, beanbags and dance floor. She made friends with other girls of her age so quickly that I was ordered away when I tried to pick her up for bed at 10.30pm on our first night. Needless to say, it was even later the next evening.

A full range of activities, including a chocolate party, bungee trampoline jumping, music quizzes and sports were organised by the all-enthusiastic Reef Rangers youth crew, who run the supervised activities on board for junior cruisers.

Teenagers (up to the age of 17) could make use of the Decibels activity room, complete with computer games, game shows and DJ contests. On longer sailings there is a Rock School, which gives them the chance to play in a band.

As for the grown-ups, the bars and nightclubs – 12 of them across the vast ship – were busy from our Friday afternoon departure until the early hours of Sunday morning.

Given the seamless nature of our break – with plenty of adult time to chill in the spa, take a dip in the main pool (protected from the elements by a retractable roof) or dine in Marco's restaurant, the White Room – I can see why more people are opting for mini breaks on cruise ships. It's a great way for novice cruisers to dip a toe in before taking the plunge and booking a longer holiday at sea.

A booze cruise to Bruges it may have been for many, but that didn't detract from the sense of getting away from it all to indulge in a rare dose of relaxing family bonding... once we had managed to prise our little Surfer and Scuba members away from their new-found playmates.

© P&O Cruises offers a two-night Cruise Break from Southampton to Zeebrugge (for Bruges) on Ventura, departing March 23, 2012. From £1,052 (£329 per adult and £197 per child aged 16 or under) for a family of four sharing a cabin. (0845 3 554 444; www.pocruises.com)