

On Caribbean

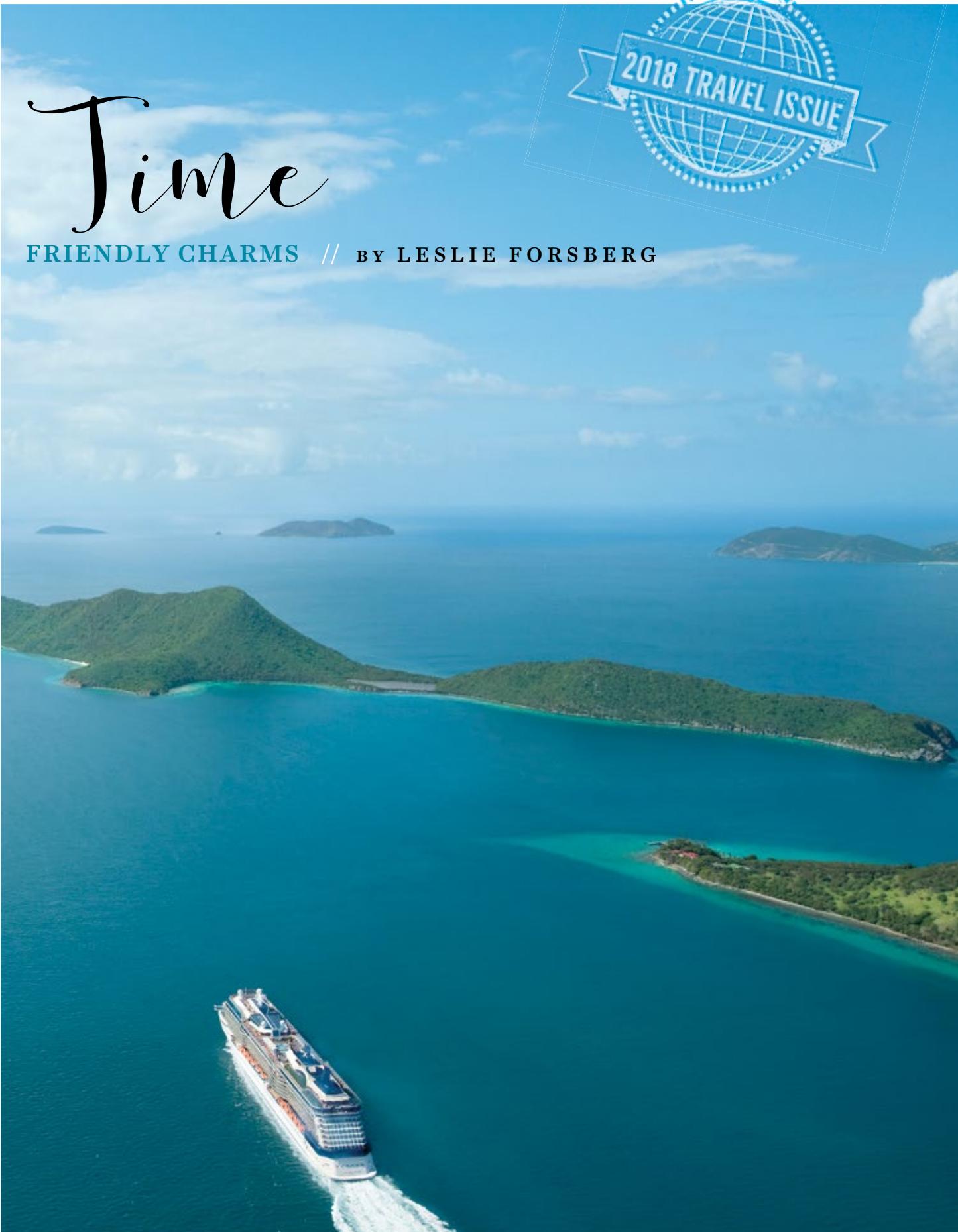
CRUISE-SHIP COMFORTS ENHANCE THE ISLANDS' WARM,

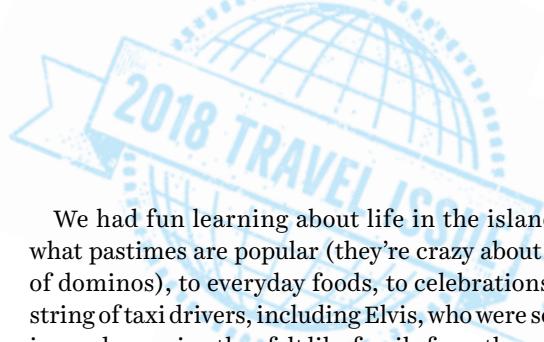
The cheery beach shack, plank tables topped with yellow plastic tablecloths, offered welcome shade from the intensity of the sun as our new cruise friends, Steve and his wife, DeeDee, and my partner Brian and I settled onto benches, plastic cups of sweet red rum punch in hand. The slightly burnt aroma of a wood-fired barbecue wafted out of an open-air cubbyhole tacked onto the building. Moments later, the faded green shuttered doors to the cubby squeaked open as our waitress approached with heaping platters of jerk chicken and the biggest lobster I've ever seen. >>>>

MICHEL VERDURE / COURTESY OF CELEBRITY CRUISES

Time

FRIENDLY CHARMS // BY LESLIE FORSBERG





Steve closed up the two halves of his crustacean's shell to better judge its size: about the same as a bunch of bananas. "Oh no! Looks like you're about to eat the grandpa of Frigate Bay!" I laughed. Steve just smiled as he tucked into the Caribbean delicacy.

Back out in the sunshine, we watched as a brown pelican with an immense wingspan folded its wings like a Swiss Army knife and plummeted into Frigate Bay, sending up a 6-foot-high geyser. As the afternoon went on we did our own splashing, swimming in the warm, turquoise water where the roll of each wave raked shells out to sea. Looping around the St. Kitts bay on Jet Skis, we passed rocky, scrub- and cactus-covered headlands and a rounded hillside sprouting cottages with blue tile roofs, surrounded by vivid yellow flowering trees.

Returning to our cruise ship aboard a water taxi, I couldn't help but shimmy along with the other tourists as our captain, a burnished, muscular man, cranked up Reggae tunes and did a wave-tossed impromptu dance performance while holding onto the wheel with one hand.

On our 10-night Celebrity *Equinox* Caribbean cruise out of Fort Lauderdale, each day brought new delights as we marveled over the vibrant land- and seascapes and the astonishing variety of ways to spend our time, whether on the islands or aboard ship. Adding to this was the warmth we experienced from locals.

We had fun learning about life in the islands—from what pastimes are popular (they're crazy about the game of dominos), to everyday foods, to celebrations—from a string of taxi drivers, including Elvis, who were so welcoming and engaging they felt like family from the moment we met them. And on St. Kitts, when I peered inside the huge doors of St. George's Anglican Church, a kind church lady urged me to try out their 1872 pipe organ. Seating myself at the bench, I read sheet music for "Amazing Grace," surprising myself with what I'd retained from childhood piano lessons, and savoring the chords echoing throughout the arched space. Turning around after, I was surprised and somewhat embarrassed to see tourists clapping for my impromptu performance.

Only a few months after the cruise, our joy was tempered by news of the hurricanes that raked the Eastern Caribbean, and we wondered how island residents had fared and were managing to put their lives back together. The picture, of course, is different for each island. While some islands face long recoveries, up to 70 percent of the region was not affected by the hurricanes. Cruise authorities have noted that more than 40 Caribbean ports were unaffected and are open for business. Given that tourism is the backbone of the economy in the Caribbean, it makes sense to do what we can to support this region by continuing to visit.

Cruise experts say that the odds of encountering a hurricane while cruising are low. Most cruise lines don't sched-

ule sailings during the Caribbean's hurricane season, yet all cruise ships have high-tech monitoring systems and the ability to move swiftly and change itineraries, as needed. The Caribbean remains a beautiful, friendly and peaceful region to visit, with three distinct cruise regions offering different flavors.

Eastern—with a string of islands in an apostrophe shape comprising the British and U.S. Virgin Islands, independent island nations, and French and Dutch territories—offers sand beaches, historic sites and leisure- and adventure-oriented activities. The Western Caribbean includes Mexico's spectacular Costa Maya, Belize and other destinations, while the Southern Caribbean, with Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and the ABC islands, is closer to the equator, and has more of an exotic feel.

I'd always wanted to experience more of the Caribbean, and it was Brian's first visit to the islands—actually, his first cruise. As I consulted with AAA's travel experts, I learned that shorter Caribbean cruises attract the younger (and more party-hearty) set, and that longer cruises attract an older, more well-heeled clientele.

With this in mind, we chose a four-island itinerary aboard the *Equinox*, since the ship's rock 'n' roll vibe seemed a good match for Brian's avocation. We couldn't have chosen better. On our first night, the fabulous DJ Jason played pop hits in the Martini Bar, with its ice-topped bar and frozen back wall, and contemporary martinis. The bartenders were clearly selected in part for their showmanship—and juggling skills.



IN ST. KITTS, SHIPS DOCK AT BASSETERRE, THE CAPITAL.

We joined a couple dozen dancers, bobbing as one high-energy song smoothly segued into the next. It was only the beginning of an amazing array of activities onboard.

On port days, our options included much more than beach breaks. Towns were visually arresting, with white gingerbread trim on tangerine-, aqua- and lime-colored buildings, and wooden stands selling everything from cornbread to coconut juice—freshly prepared by a guy with a machete. Dozens of excursions beckoned.

On Barbados we chose a visit to the Mount Gay Rum Visitors Centre, since the island is reputed to be where rum originated; the Mount Gay Rum Distillery was established in 1703. A massive distilling vessel from 1760 reigned over the tasting room, where we started by sampling molasses, a byproduct of sugar production, the main crop produced on Caribbean plantations in the 17th through 20th centuries. Amina, with a short, fluffy ponytail, doe eyes and a mischievous smile, was our guide, pouring several varieties of rum for us to taste.

Swirling our glasses, we inhaled fragrances of caramel, vanilla and bananas, and learned to observe the maturity of the rum by how fast the legs (streaks on the sides of the glass) ran down. Their top-of-the-line product, aged up

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2018 CRUISE TRENDS

>> The world of cruising is constantly evolving, with exciting new options every year. AAA cruise expert **LISA ANCIAUX** offers her pick of top cruise trends for 2018:



GREEN CRUISING

New vessels with eco-friendly operations are breaking barriers, such as Hurtigruten's new hybrid *MS Roald Amundsen*, launching this October. The ship, built specifically for voyages in polar waters, will run partially on electrical propulsion (using rechargeable lithium-ion batteries), allowing silent cruising in world-class, sensitive natural areas such as Antarctica (left).

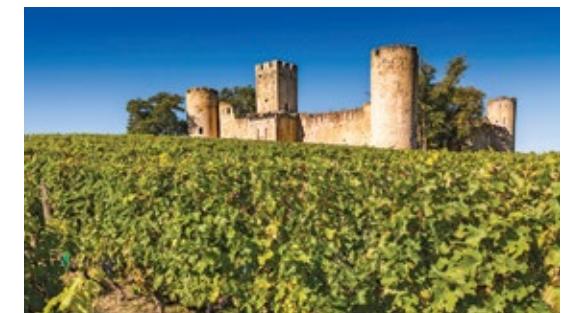


CUTTING-EDGE DESIGNS

Cruise ship design is constantly evolving, and the new Celebrity *Edge*, debuting this fall, is a leading example of the latest revolution. Its key feature is the "Magic Carpet," a movable deck (above). Cantilevered over the side of the ship, it will transform into a restaurant, nightclub and other settings, depending on which floor it's moved to. In addition, the *Edge*'s "Infinite Veranda" cabins each have a glass wall that opens with the push of a button, turning the entire room into a veranda.

WINE TASTING

Cruise lines are also answering the call for wine-tasting experiences, with a number of them offering excursions deep into the heart of Europe's wine country. Among the options are Viking River Cruises' Chateau, Rivers & Wine itinerary, with visits to the cellars of Bordeaux (below) and the opportunity to create a personal blend of Cognac at the Camus distillery.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PABTRAVEL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; JERÓNIMO ALBA / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; COURTESY OF CELEBRITY CRUISES; COURTESY OF HURTIGRUTEN



MOUNT GAY MIXES IN RUM HISTORY WITH ITS TASTINGS.



THE EQUINOX AT SEA.

to 30 years in a barrel, is used for special occasions only, Amina said. “Weddings, divorces, special birthdays ... in my family, every Christmas we have this. You don’t share it. If someone sees you drinking some, you go into the kitchen to get them some, and then give them this,” she said with a grin, holding up another bottle.

The gentle, good-natured humor of the locals and languid pace of the islands made us relax more with each day. Finally, it was time for our ship to turn around. We had two sea days ahead of us.

The idea of two entire days at sea in each direction had originally sounded a little sleepy to me. I’d envisioned myself relaxing at the pool with a book, and taking afternoon naps. I was dreaming. Our ship, like any large cruise vessel, was a floating city, with so many entertainment options it

became a private joke as we explored the farthest reaches daily, repeating the refrain to each other, “I didn’t know this was here!” On our daily forays, we encountered surprises ranging from passenger vs. crew game shows to a bocce court to an entire movie theater that we hadn’t known existed. And we still had time for lounging by a pool and visiting with new friends.

On our last evening, balmy breezes danced about as a sprinkle of stars flecked the vast, dark bowl of the sky. Walking across the grass lawn on the top deck, we chanced upon one of our ship’s most extraordinary features, the Hot Glass Show. A trio of talented young women artists in front of glowing kilns expertly dipped and spun glass, passing around intricate vases they’d just made. We didn’t linger, since we were bound for a comedy show by a comedian whose credits included Comedy Central. After, the ABBAlicious show in the futuristic Sky Lounge had us lip-syncing.

To top off the evening, the cruise activities director announced that we were the first Celebrity guests to try out an exciting new innovation, Silent

Disco (which has become a hit at dance parties nationwide). We disco danced around the darkened Solarium pool to funk, pop and oldies favorites, including the Village People’s “Y.M.C.A.,” while wearing headphones that glowed red, blue or green, depending on which music channel we chose. When a particularly compelling song came on, smiles flashed and dancers gestured excitedly to each other as most headsets throughout the space shifted to the same color, with outbursts of singing, and the occasional conga line forming. To our surprise and delight, we realized that we were surrounded by dancers from ages 10 to 70, including more than a few newfound friends, in what suddenly felt like a close-knit community. While we were hundreds of miles from the islands by then, the friendly, laid-back vibe of our adventures there carried on. 🎧

OVERNIGHT STAYS

More cruise lines are featuring overnight stays in ports, allowing immersive experiences and the opportunity to enjoy local evening entertainment. Azamara Club Cruises offers overnight stays in 90 ports, mostly in Europe, including Venice and Florence, with guided nighttime walks and after-hours museum visits among the nighttime excursions. Celebrity Cruises features the most overnights in the Caribbean, and Crystal Cruises and Regent Seven Seas Cruises are among lines increasing their overnight offerings in Europe and beyond.



FLOATING FOODIES

Culinary travel is hotter than ever, and cruise lines are responding with fun, experiential options. Holland America Line (left) has partnered with America’s Test Kitchen, creating highly specialized new kitchens aboard all their ships; in addition to cooking demonstrations, guests can take hands-on workshops on topics such as how to make pasta or perfect pies. Meanwhile, guests aboard Regent Seven Seas’ *Explorer* can expand their kitchen skills at top-of-the-line culinary workstations.