

Swept Away



The Sea Cloud under sail and (opposite) crew members.



ON BOARD A VINTAGE SAILING YACHT,
A MEDITERRANEAN VOYAGE THROUGH GREECE AND
TURKEY TURNS BACK TIME – AND TURNS HEADS.

BY KIM BROWN SEELY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS

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E'RE NOT GOING TO BREAK ANY speed records," says Tom O'Brien, our expedition leader, gauging the wind and the complex web of lines and masts soaring above us, which support almost an acre of sail stretching 178 feet into the sky. "But what a joy to

have a beautiful day of light sailing!"

While O'Brien explains the nautical basics of our 357-foot, square-rigged yacht, *Sea Cloud*, his voice projecting through a speaker system, my 49 fellow passengers are finishing up an alfresco lunch complete with local feta and fish freshly caught from the harbor in Bodrum, Turkey, we've left just minutes before. Now - with 26 of *Sea Cloud*'s 30 sails unfurled against a pale blue sky - we're cutting across the Aegean toward Greece's Cyclades Islands.

"Too bad they don't need any extra help!" someone quips as the sail crew hits the rope ladders.

"I was thinking about it," another passenger replies, pausing for effect. "But I had wine at lunch."

IT'S DAY THREE OF A SEVEN-DAY LINDBLAD EXPEDITIONS cruise through the eastern Mediterranean, and my husband and I are falling fast for the romance of *Sea Cloud*, built in 1931 for Wall Street businessman E.F. Hutton and cereal heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post. It was, at the time, the largest privately owned sea-going yacht in the world. Unlike most great sailing ships of the 1920s and '30s, *Sea Cloud* has survived more than half a century - last year undergoing a refurbishment so spendy its German owners don't disclose the amount. Today its white hull shimmers, its honeyed teak gleams, and outfitters such as Lindblad are redefining its elegant spaces with a sense of ease and adventure.

Earlier in the week, we'd landed in Istanbul ahead of the group and met up with guides from Virtuoso on-site tour operators Nurdan's United Travel Services and Sea Song. We ricocheted from one sight to the next (Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace) and took a private boat ride up the Bosphorus, which divides Istanbul between Europe on one side and Asia on the other. We'd rendezvoused with Lindblad representatives at the Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet, flown south to Izmir, then strolled



back in time at Ephesus (Anatolia's most densely populated city in the first and second centuries, now a remarkable site containing the eastern Mediterranean's largest collection of Roman ruins) before boarding the ship in Kusadasi.

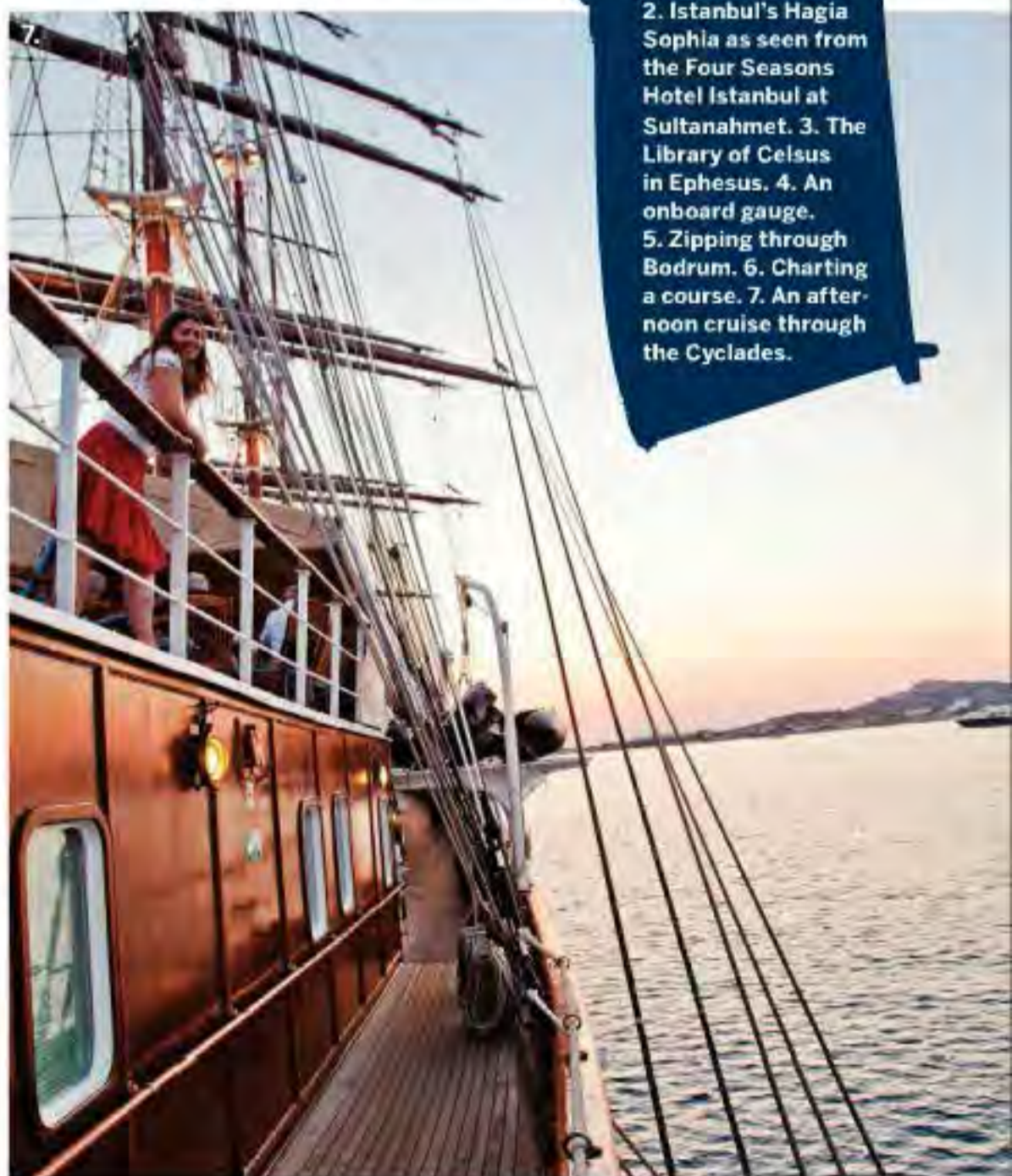
"You'd better stop right here so I can snap a photo of you and your yacht," my husband says on the Kusadasi dock, grinning, as we approach *Sea Cloud* with its delicate filigree of tall masts guarding the harbor. We can't believe how graceful it is.

On board, things get even better: There is the rich patina of beautifully aged teak decks, mahogany benches, art deco light fixtures, just-polished brass. I'd wondered whether a sailing ship from the 1930s might feel musty or cramped, but have to laugh at myself the minute we see our light-filled cabin. It has two single beds made up with linens custom woven for *Sea Cloud* in Germany, a marble bathroom with elegant fixtures, and large picture windows. None of the staterooms have balconies, but since the ship is so intimate, with teak decks just steps from each cabin, you don't miss them.

Departing from Kusadasi, our route follows the Turkish coast

to Bodrum, then crosses the Aegean, circling through the Cyclades Islands to Athens. The itinerary is billed as a journey to the home of Western civilization, "sailing through millennia of human history." It is, and we are. But in addition to the classic history-and-ruins tour, we have Turkey on one side (which has seen unprecedented economic growth in the last decade, but also the loss of its democratic institutions, with more religious restriction imposed on people) and Greece on the other (barely hanging on to the euro by a thread).

Given the region's current geopolitical climate, visiting its ancient ruins feels oddly reassuring. As Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk wrote of Istanbul, "The remains of a glorious past civilization are everywhere visible," but he may as well have been writing about all of Turkey or, for that matter, Greece. If the daily headlines in our shipboard news briefs are sobering, with Europe's economies contracting and plans for even tougher austerity budgets, going ashore to delve into the past at the Temple of Apollo or The Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology has a way of reminding everyone that all great civilizations are transitory. And, for that matter, so are we.



1. Acres of sails.
2. Istanbul's Hagia Sophia as seen from the Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet. 3. The Library of Celsus in Ephesus. 4. An onboard gauge. 5. Zipping through Bodrum. 6. Charting a course. 7. An afternoon cruise through the Cyclades.

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A WARM WHISPER OF A BREEZE HAD BEEN BLOWING TWO DAYS earlier when I'd stepped onto the deck, poured a cup of coffee, and settled into a teak lounge chair. The boat vibrated softly from the engine's low hum, and cottony cumuli floated against a blue morning sky. Our wake, sinuous as a ribbon, unspooled across the sea. I heard a rustle overhead and stared up at a spiderweb of ropes and standing rigging. Suddenly, 18 sailors began climbing aloft like spider-men (and women), then inching out along the yardarms. I held my breath.

"It's like choreography," a fellow passenger mused, equally mesmerized.

Unlike modern clipper ships, *Sea Cloud* is still sailed almost entirely by humans, which means the deck crew has to sidestep to the very end of the yardarms, supported only by thin wires dangling 50, 100, 150 feet over the sea. No matter how often we watched this aerial ballet, it never failed to amaze.

At 8 o'clock sharp the captain ordered the sails unfurled. They fell open, caught the wind, and billowed out like great white wings. It was time for breakfast in the oak-paneled dining room: made-to-order blueberry pancakes, Greek yogurt, an array of fresh fruits,

eggs, and pastries. Heaven! No wonder Marjorie loved life afloat.

As the days drift by, we ease into the rhythm of cruising, which includes lectures by our onboard historian and naturalist, daily excursions to archaeological sites, and de rigueur evening cocktails. When we return from day four's explorations (to the island of Santorini, where we bump up against too many tourists in too few alleys but also enjoy a taverna lunch with a parade of small plates: fresh tomato and feta salads drizzled in olive oil, minty meatballs with fava bean puree, fried green tomatoes, and, for dessert, orange cake and tiny cups of strong coffee), about 20 of us slip into the sea for a swim. The water is a refreshing 68 degrees and so salty we bob like corks, as buoyant as our spirits.

WITH JUST ONE DINNER SEATING, WE'RE SOON ON A first-name basis with half the boat. Our lunch and dinner companions include a pair of retired foreign correspondents from Montana, an Emmy Award-winning news producer from London, the owner of the largest privately held company in Australia and his bon-vivant companion, plus a sprinkling of professors and lawyers. It's a well-traveled bunch. Many have always dreamed of sailing on *Sea Cloud*; others came for the Mediterranean route. But whether we meet over dinner in the oak-paneled dining room (foie gras, grilled scallops, beef tenderloin in port wine jus, chocolate-passion fruit *délicie*, followed by coffee, tea, and pralines) or an outdoor buffet on the Lido Deck, the mood is easy and relaxed.

Several of *Sea Cloud*'s crew have sailed aboard the ship for decades, their warm personalities adding to the welcoming vibe. Request a gin and tonic once at the Lido Bar,





Clockwise from top left: Santorini scene, crew members at work, Sea Cloud fare, and dining room preparation. Opposite: Sea Cloud officers.



The island of Folégandros. Right: Marjorie's stateroom.



tip

"On a *Sea Cloud* sailing, don't miss the last night of entertainment, provided by the deck crew. They not only sing sea chanteys but also mix with guests to answer questions about life on board and up on the rigging."

— Michelle Bemis, travel advisor, McClean, Virginia



and Bebot the bartender remembers your drink. Feel like hanging out on the open bridge while the officers chart a course? Captain Vladimir Pushkarev greets you personally.

One night, Fred (a Californian who's booked E.F. Hutton's original stateroom) hosts a cocktail party and invites a bunch of us over.

"Good evening, Hutton!" my husband quips when Fred opens the door.

Everyone inspects the secret panel in the room's knotty pine vestibule (E.F. liked to entertain lady friends on the sly, rumor has it), the white marble fireplace, the generous marble bath with its big walk-in closet, while Fred, dressed in shorts and flip-flops, passes around a tray of canapés.

Another night, our expedition leaders give a talk on the origins of the Post fortune and Marjorie's role in the company. An only child (used to attending board meetings with her father by the time she was 11), Marjorie was "too much woman for most men to handle," they joke. Hutton (husband number two) and Post designed the *Sea Cloud* completely to her liking; when it was complete, the ship spent at least nine months of the year at sea, taking the couple anywhere they wanted to go until their divorce in 1935.

Sailing on as Marjorie's beloved yacht, *Sea Cloud* witnessed history from the serious (entertaining royalty and being used on foreign diplomatic missions) to the sordid: In 1955, Post sold the ship to Rafael Trujillo, head of the Dominican Republic, who used it as a houseboat and hub for various illicit activities until his assassination in 1961.

After the talk, everyone troops down the winding staircase to tour the Huttons' ten original cabins before dinner. A festive air

pervades, like an open house: We marvel over Marjorie's Louis XIV-inspired all-white bed, all-white paneling, palatial white marble bathroom with its golden swan fixtures, and original white dressing table. "We were afraid to eat the strawberries in our welcome basket," the couple from Chicago who are staying in the cabin joke amid the over-the-top whiteness.

BY THE FIFTH DAY, A FULL DAY AT SEA, PEOPLE SETTLE INTO different corners of the decks with their iPads and novels. Even with all sails up, there's plenty of room for 50 of us to spread out in either sun or shade. I'd worried we might grow bored not going ashore, but the day is delicious – like an interlude from another era. Robyn, the ship's historian, gives a lecture on Greek gods. Sharon, our naturalist, gives a talk on olive oil. The crew raises all the sails one last time for us – the flying jib, the royal staysail, the skysail, even the rarely used gaff-rigged spanker sail. It's stunning.

At one point I glance up from my book and see a 50-foot yacht off the starboard beam. Everyone aboard is astride the rail, snapping *Sea Cloud* photos.

We anchor later just off the Greek island of Delos and early the next morning are the first people ashore. One of the most important archaeological sites in the Mediterranean, Delos is an arid, almost uninhabited island blanketed with ruins. Founded as a place of worship in about 1000 BC, it was the sacred center of the Cycladic world, a pilgrimage point considered to be the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis. Now you have to be strategic to get there before all the day-trippers from neighboring Mykonos. Captain Pushkarev nails