



“IMAGINE A BUBBLE,” SAYS SARA, OUR YOGA teacher, her voice soft, her accent French. “A champagne bubble, if you prefer, in the colours of your favourite sunset. Inhale, and as you exhale imagine that bubble dancing over the ocean, into ze sky, taking away your cares.”

It’s not much of an ask. If I raise my head from my mat and gaze along Le Ponant’s top deck, past the barely fluttering tricolour flag and the outdoor bar with its cocktail shaker and chilling bottles of Veuve Clicquot, inspiration is there on the horizon. Vivid reds, yellows and oranges strafe the sky around a glowing golden orb, from which a column of light ripples down the water towards us.

I send my imaginary bubble dancing towards a silhouette of an island, one of many in the Cyclades group here in the Aegean Sea, south-east of mainland Greece. Is it Milos, home of ancient sculptures, tiny fishing ports and creamy volcanic cliffs? Or Serifos, with its cobbled alleyways, sugar-cube houses and boughs of flaming bougainvillea? No matter; each island we visit has a unique set of charms. Our itinerary is flexible, informed by the wind, and confirmed on A4 print-outs, *journaux de bord*, placed outside our cabins each evening.

Le Ponant, our 88-metre, three-masted sailing yacht, rocks gently on its anchor. Any cares I might have brought with me dissolved into the ether days ago at the start of our seven-day cruise (Athens return) when Captain Pascal Goger and key members of his 34-strong team welcomed us aboard. Bonjour,” they’d chorused, proffering hot towels and flutes of quality fizz. “Bienvenue.”

A French luxury cruise operator whose destinations range from Antarctica, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean to Australia’s Kimberley coast, Compagnie du Ponant is proud of the reputation it has garnered over three decades, across 13 distinct but equally impressive vessels. Le Ponant is its most emblematic: the boat with which Ponant pushed off in 1991. It was the first-ever French-owned cruise ship and it’s been treated to a major revamp. In late 2019 and early 2020, as Le Ponant rested in dry dock, more than 200 people set about rebeautifying the vessel. Decking and flooring were replaced. More sunbathing space was created, along with a gym and a wellness centre. The interior was reimagined by French architecture and design studio Jean-Philippe Nuel. Crucially, capacity was reduced from 32 to 16 cabins.



FULL SAIL AHEAD

The first of Ponant's cruising fleet has relaunched with just 16 cabins and a stylish refurbishment.

STORY BY JANE CORNWELL





NEED TO KNOW

Sail at home Eleven days, seven nights on board, sailing from Broome to Kuri Bay, June 14-24, 2023. From \$18,820 per cabin. (Ph) 1 888 400 1082, au.ponant.com.

Sail overseas Ten days exploring the islands of the Seychelles under the trade winds starting and finishing at Victoria, Mahe. February 2-11, 2023. From \$16,280.

Champagne flutes in hand on our welcome tour, we'd perused the ship's four decks, soothed by flowing tones of taupe, off-white and caviar grey. There, Le Diamant restaurant with its indoor and outdoor seating. Here, the padded swivel armchairs, curving window-seat sofas and plump blue and white cushions of the main lounge.

Both here and there, artworks including ceramic vases, sculptures shaped like pebbles, fossils, waves. A dot painting by Indigenous Australian artist Julie Nangala Robinson hangs near reception; framed pieces by Frenchwoman Caroline Besse, created with washes of mineral powder, line the lower deck walls. "Treat this as you would your own private yacht," says Benoit, our butler, visiting us in our cabin, with its soft LED lighting, push-button blinds and bottles of desalinated drinking water. Sustainability, we're told, is paramount. Single-use plastic is banned. Packaging is recycled or traced. A towel, a fluffy robe dropped on the floor will be collected and washed; our consciences, we infer, should be our guides. We vow that if we ever get our own private yacht we will do the same.

In the meantime, there are people to meet, and a safety demonstration to be had. On Le Ponant's marina deck, from where we'll be swimming, stand-up paddleboarding, zooming about in glass-bottomed kayaks or being helped into one of two motorised tenders for daily excursions and/or free exploring, we practise donning orange lifejackets with our fellow passengers. Most are couples, mostly European. There's an American husband and wife, and a ponytailed 30-something, Chris, who turns out to be a doctor from Dubbo.

We're all a bit shy with each other, oblivious to the fact that later in the week we'll be cosied up on the top deck, eating popcorn, drinking champagne and watching *Murder on the Nile* (the Kenneth Branagh version, in French with English subtitles) projected onto a vast white Le Ponant sail. Or dancing under a full moon to funk, salsa and disco during an impromptu "dancing evening" sorted by affable hotel manager Batiste. "You told us that you love to dance, so we organised a nightclub for you," says Batiste, a Bangkok-based Frenchman whose early career stint waiting tables at Sydney's revolving, harbour-viewing O Bar and Dining restaurant undoubtedly helped get him his sea legs.

Clockwise from above: Le Diamant restaurant; Paros in the Greek Cyclades; peace and privacy aboard Le Ponant.

Opposite page: Swim, sunbake or paddleboard from the aft marina deck.



"We are one crew member for one passenger, so we can always say yes," he continues. "We will provide small things even before you realise you wanted something. It might be a warm drink, a pair of binoculars" – Le Ponant's are by Swarovski – "or a suggestion for a photo."

Multilingual and multi-talented, each member of the crew has a backstory worthy of a sea shanty: Virginie, the ship's nurse and lifeguard, teaches free diving at home on Reunion Island, a French department in the Indian Ocean (Ponant goes there, too); Alison, our Paris-born excursions manager, when not organising our island outings (hiking through the dove-cote-dotted Tinos, olive-oil tasting in the hills of Monemvasia, ebiking around the jasmine-strewn ring road of Spetses) travels the world, whale watching (often with Ponant); chef Cedric Diebold has sleeve tattoos, a CV that spans stints in Quebec, French Polynesia and Switzerland and a way with a menu that leaves us swooning.

Each evening, seated with our new friends (among them two translators, an ex-ambassador and notably, Chris, who is so popular with everyone that he rotates from table to table), we are presented the likes of a crab-meat, avocado and caviar amuse-bouche, an entree of lobster with leek fondue and a main course of beef fillet, Darphin potatoes, onion confit and pepper sauce. There's a restyled Snickers for dessert one night; a kiwifruit tart with ice-cream on another. "I take small ideas

charts and compasses share space with a neon-lit flat-panel display that includes professional weather app Windy.

Goger checks Windy two or three times a day; towards the end of our trip he'll make an announcement advising the battening down of hatches (staff move glasses from the bar in the Emeraude Lounge, and push our heavy cabin furniture against a wall). But the swell, while rocking us as a giant might its baby, simply makes our dreams more psychedelic. "I am lucky to do this," Goger flashes a smile. "I have a great team, and Le Ponant is special. "This is not a cruise ship going from big port to big port. It is really a sailing yacht; mostly we never have to use the engine. We go with the wind at our back. We have freedom to travel to uncrowded places. To change our route. To discover."

Indeed, the day that we disembark at our starting point, Lavrio port in Athens, Goger will be catching an evening flight to Broome in north-western Australia. From there, aided by pearling boats, seaplanes and his own navigational savvy, he'll set off to ascertain the routes Le Ponant may take when in situ in the Kimberley for six months from April; the hidden coves and glittering bays. The best bit of coastline for hugging sheer rock faces, accessing fishing spots, finding the most beautiful reefs, waterfalls and swimming holes.

The word ponant, we discover, is an old French naval term meaning "west". Where the sun sets. Most evenings, as we

from all my travels," Diebold tells me, after entering the restaurant in his chef's whites and receiving a hearty round of applause. "The ceviche with fish, lemon juice and olive oil is a Greek specialty. The risotto with squid ink is a recipe from Croatia. I have all the flavours in my brain, my memory. When they match up it's like 'OK, let's go.'"

Then, of course, there is Captain Goger, the descendant of a long line of sailors from Saint-Malo, a medieval walled city and maritime hub on the English Channel in Brittany, France.

"My father and grandfather were captains, so I had no choice but to sail," he says good naturedly, having invited us to visit him on the bridge, where nautical



digest our late afternoon tea – *baclava*, *macaroons*, *flambéed crepe suzette* (a Brittany special, courtesy of David the pastry chef) – we get a beauty. There are those spectacular red, yellow and orange sunsets. And sunsets with softer hues of cream, blue and pastel pink, a blend of sea and sky.

We head into a sunset on our final evening, standing on the bow of the ship with the warm wind caressing our necks and our yacht’s great white sails billowing behind us. Dazzled, we watch the horizon, and the way *Le Ponant* glides effortlessly through the sea foam. Life doesn’t get more perfect than this, we say. Although ...“Some champagne?” asks a waiter. “*Mai oui*,” we say. “Of course.”

The writer travelled as a guest of Ponant.

ON BOARD LE PONANT

A luxury, three-masted sailing ship, the newly refurbished *Le Ponant* hosts 32 guests in 16 staterooms and has 34 crew members.

Restaurants and bars

The ship’s dining options include one restaurant, *Le Diamant*, with indoor and outdoor seating, a breakfast buffet and menu (try the soft-boiled egg with caviar) and an international lunch and dinner menu imaginatively prepared by executive chef Cedric Diebold; vegetarian and gluten-free options are available. There’s the *Emeraude Bar Lounge*, which also serves early morning coffee and pastries and afternoon tea, and a pop-up bar space on the top deck to accompany film nights, danceathons and sunsets.

Wellness

A small gym has Pelotons and a rowing machine, and morning and evening yoga, fitness and relaxation sessions happen on the top deck or undercover with Sara, a triathlete from Marseilles, who also led our island hikes. There are sun lounges and towels and supervised swimming and paddleboarding off the Marina back deck (and from assorted sandy island beaches), and massages and facials to be had courtesy of Marie, also French, in the ship’s beauty room.

Where the ship will sail

After visiting the Seychelles in November, *Le Ponant* heads to the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Between April and November 2023, it will conduct 26 sailings of three itineraries. ●