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STYLE SECTION: SUPERB BEDDING, EXTRAVAGANT CARS, FABULOUS ART

Cuisine CRUISING

THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF THINGS TO DO ABOARD HOLLAND AMERICA LINE'S CRUISE SHIP MS STATENDAM, AND THE FINE DINING IS A STANDOUT. STORY BY WINSOR DOBBIN



Choices, choices. A cruise on the Holland America Line's refurbished ms Statendam is like a microcosm of modern life. So many options, so little time. From excursions to dining, bars to activities, guests are spoilt for choice.

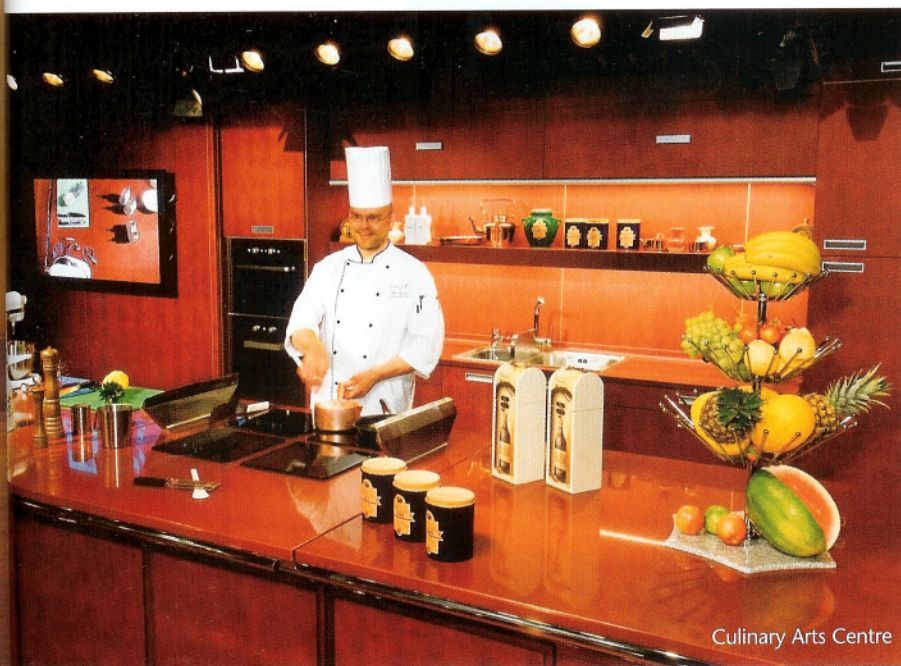
Take eating as an example. You can eat buffet-style in the Lido restaurant, or in the main dining room, the Rotterdam restaurant, which is on two levels – one for those who like to dine at a fixed time each night, the other open seating for those who prefer to be flexible. For a small supplement, and with an advance booking, diners can upgrade to the Pinnacle Grill, the Statendam's elegant fine dining room, which features Bvlgari china and Riedel wine glasses.

To work off any excesses (and the food and wine were among the highlights of my trip), there is a large, formidably well-equipped gym. You can participate in daily classes including yoga and pilates, work at your own pace on a range of equipment, or with a personal trainer. The staff are bright, perky and extremely enthusiastic, and the machines impressive but relatively easy to use – and there are plenty of them. Alternatively there are the

swimming pools, pond-smooth when we sailed out of Brisbane, wild and churning a few hours later when the weather turned ugly. The Statendam is very stable ship however, and seasickness is not a major issue.

For those who really want to wind down, the plush Greenhouse Spa and Salon offers even more choices; with a wide range of pampering options, from eye-hydration treatments and foot massages to facials, body therapies, hot tub sessions and a range of massage styles, including Swedish, Shiatsu, deep tissue, and reflexology. There are more options than there are days at sea but as is always the case when cruising it pays to make reservations as soon as you get on board, as many treatments quickly book out. (My attempt to have a seaweed massage and float followed by a hot stone massage was thwarted by my tardiness.)

There's an on-board casino, regular tutored wine tastings, an art gallery (there is over \$2 million worth of art on board), and regular nightly entertainment in the Van Gogh lounge, ranging from guest speakers to musicians, jugglers and comedians, to Las Vegas-style productions, bingo sessions and trivia competitions.



Culinary Arts Centre

Late night cognacs taking in the panorama from Crow's Nest bar

There's bridge, a large library and several bars and cafés in which the activities vary from internet access to dancing in the piano bar. The library, with its huge picture windows, is a particularly nice spot to wind down and take in the views.

The retro-chic decor throughout the ship is a subject of debate among passengers, but many of them love the 12-metre high Fountain Of The Sirens sculpture and the very colourful Van Gogh theatre.

By my count there are eight bars and cafés on the Statendam (as well as 24-hour room service), and I very much enjoyed a couple of late night cognacs taking in the panoramas from the Crow's Nest bar, before adjourning to bed far later than I should have. It's always worth getting up at dawn, however, to enjoy entering a great city – and few city's offer a more spectacular welcome than Sydney as you cruise in through the Heads.

A large proportion of guests made the effort, oohing and aahing as the beauty of Sydney Harbour struck home despite sleepy eyes.

For those who don't want to be up all night, a movie is shown twice each evening in staterooms and a range of satellite TV channels are available. If you want to stay in touch with what's happening in the world, a mini-version of the New York Times is delivered to your state-

room each morning and you can peruse it over an in-room breakfast if you so choose. The staterooms range in style and price. My bed was extremely comfortable and the stateroom well equipped (robes, spa products, hair dryers, fresh fruit basket etc), but it's worth splashing out on one of the 149 staterooms with private verandahs (nothing beats breathing in sea air), or deluxe verandah suites with whirlpool bath and shower, large sitting area, sofa, mini bar, floor to ceiling windows and balcony seating. Each ship also has just one penthouse verandah suite; suitable for rock stars or Hollywood actors.

For guests that have kids onboard, Club HAL and The Loft offer child-minding and a wide range of entertainment for toddlers to teens.

But back to the food. Favourites available every night in Rotterdam dining room include the likes of French onion soup, classic Caesar salad, wild Coho salmon with roasted vegetables and steamed rice, or New York steak with sautéed mushrooms, fresh green beans and garlic-spiked mash.

The menu changes daily with starters including the likes of jumbo shrimp and crab cocktail, and mains along the lines of gum-leaf braised leg of lamb with minted gravy (on antipodean legs), honey and hoisin glazed pork ribs, or seared tuna

steaks with mango and avocado relish.

There's an eclectic wine list featuring affordable French staples such as Domaine Laroche Chablis (\$55) and Georges Dubeouf Beaujolais Villages (\$40), as well as wines from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Chile, several of which are available by the glass. For those looking to splurge there's a Bonneau du Martray Corton Charlemagne (\$98), a Vega Sicilia Unico (\$622), or Roederer Cristal Brut (\$244), along with more familiar names including Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc and Penfolds 1999 Grange, a snip at \$380, although remember all on-board prices are in US dollars. As on the rest of the ship, the staff is largely Filipino or Indonesian, so misunderstandings can occur, but the service is so good natured that it's easy to forgive minor slip-ups.

The Pinnacle Grill, the Statendam's fine dining room, which features Bvlgari china and Riedel wine glasses and dishes like scallops crème brûlée with parmesan wafers, rib-eye steak with a choice of sauces, or halibut with Alaskan king crab and a hollandaise sauce. If you prefer a more relaxed snack, the poolside Terrace Grill serves a range of burgers, hot dogs and tacos daily and there's also a yoghurt and ice cream bar.

Anyone with an interest in food will also enjoy the well-attended culinary arts demonstrations conducted in the Wajang Theatre by chef Kumar. I'm pleased to say, I'm pretty sure I can now make chicken Provencale and a goat's cheese potato galette (but I've saved the recipe cards just in case).

The ms Statendam, which was in dry dock in Brisbane in December for an overhaul, recently completed a tour of duty in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific and will be replaced in our waters by Holland America sister ship the ms Volendam, which accommodates 1,440 guests in similar luxury and features an almost identical range of dining, accommodation and entertainment options. The Statendam will be cruising the Pacific Northwest, Alaska's Inside Passage and Glacier Bay in 2008, as well as Panama Canal and US cruises, while the Volendam has a number of varied South Pacific cruises scheduled. ■

LUXE LIST

Travel The World is the agent for Holland American Line in Australia.

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