



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The indoor spa pool; mural in the Veuve Clicquot Bar by Barry Rowe depicting the launching of *Queen Mary*; Todd English restaurant; swimming towels at the ready OPPOSITE *Queen Victoria* moored in Fiji



CRUISE CONTROL

Finally, ballroom dancing makes sense. Sally Feldman discovers the easy way to see the world (and spend the kids' inheritance) on board Cunard's *Queen Victoria*

PHOTOGRAPHY Amanda Prior



ABOVE, FROM LEFT *Queen Victoria's* is the first ship's library to be built over two storeys; preparing special desserts for lunch on Valentine's Day

I'm having my first fencing lesson – and I'm not talking a paddock, a roll of barbed wire and a couple of mad-eyed kelpies. No, I'm trussed up in a dazzling white jacket – designed, it would seem, for bedlam, but without the arm ties – and squeezed into a metal-mesh helmet that makes my head feel like a cold cut in an antique meat safe. I am learning to thrust and parry – not without some trepidation, as swift and ruthless lunging is not something that comes easily to me, unless I'm at a mid-year clearance sale.

As I apply myself to the task of swashbuckling, watched by the occasional bemused passer-by and waiter, I consider how travel leads to so much more than scrapbook mementos, woven textiles and beaded corn rows. For it seems that it's only when you're on a journey that you can tear up the rule book, throw the usual caution (and, frequently, good taste) to the wind and take up pursuits and fashion statements that you'd never dream of when you're at home. Coincidentally, this fleeting thought is reinforced by a couple

strolling by – she dressed in a flamboyant red floral-print dress, he in a shirt of the same fabric. On a second sighting, though, I'm not so sure they don't dress like that at home, too.

We – my lurid fellow passengers and I – are aboard Cunard's latest ocean liner, the *Queen Victoria*, as she makes her maiden world cruise. This grand and luxuriously furnished vessel is manned by a veritable United Nations of staff and brims with self-improvements, activities and entertainment that would keep the most jaded traveller busy for the rest of his or her life (which, gentle reader, judging by some of my fellow shipmates, might not be quite long enough).

Fencing is but a drop in the, um, ocean of possibilities on offer, so why not? What better way to work off the cumulative effects of buffet breakfasts, morning coffees, all-you-can-eat lunches, afternoon teas, pre-dinner cocktails, three-course dinners and 24-hour complimentary room service? In a darkened corner of this same ballroom is a small group of up-ended people, counting their breaths as they labour

through their morning stretch regimen. Playing shuffleboard is just so 1959...

Adding to the surreal experience of seeing the world through dense wire mesh, I am getting in touch with my inner Zorro in the Queens Room, a grandly proportioned balustraded ballroom that's been decorated with heart-shaped pink balloons and red paper roses the size of a small car. For it is Valentine's Day and tonight, this Cinderella *shall* go to the ball.

It may also explain why the dress code today seems to be pink or red, and many passengers have taken up the challenge with tooth-aching glee. It will also, according to our daily program, be a 'formal' night from 6pm, which means that Cinders will be frocked-up in a full-length gown.

Life on board a liner is disarmingly simple for a traveller who is used to packing and unpacking several times on any trip, schlepping luggage and trying to hail taxis using only sign language and a pleading expression. And it is surely one of the reasons that so many return again and again – there



ABOVE, FROM LEFT Lounge beds await their occupants beside one of the ship's two outdoor pools; a morning fencing class in the Queen's Room

are plenty of Cunard's 'Platinum Card' holders on this historic voyage. Naturally, that means the median age of passengers is... let's say in the *On Golden Pond* range, although there is a surprising number of thirty-, forty- and fifty-somethings – even the occasional small child. But of course 80 is so the new 60.

There is also a discreet – and oh so discretely British – class system still applied. The level of cabin you book will dictate where you can (or cannot) dine. For those making the biggest splash in the opulent and spacious Queens Grill Suites, dining is at the Queens Grill, where the caviar flows like, well, caviar. From there, it's all downhill at the Princess Grill (though hardly downhill, those suites still look pretty sweet to me, as does the accompanying dining room). Both restaurants open on to a pretty Tuscan-style courtyard, complete with tinkling lion's head wall fountain and wrought-iron flourishes. And thence to cattle class (more well-tended Kobe than your common-or-garden Jersey, mind you), where the two-storey Britannia Restaurant (and much-coveted Captain's

table) awaits for breakfast, lunch and dinner for those staying in the more compact Britannia Staterooms.

But the real foodie highlight on the *Queen Victoria* (and her big sister, the *Queen Mary 2*) is the Todd English restaurant, where, for a small additional

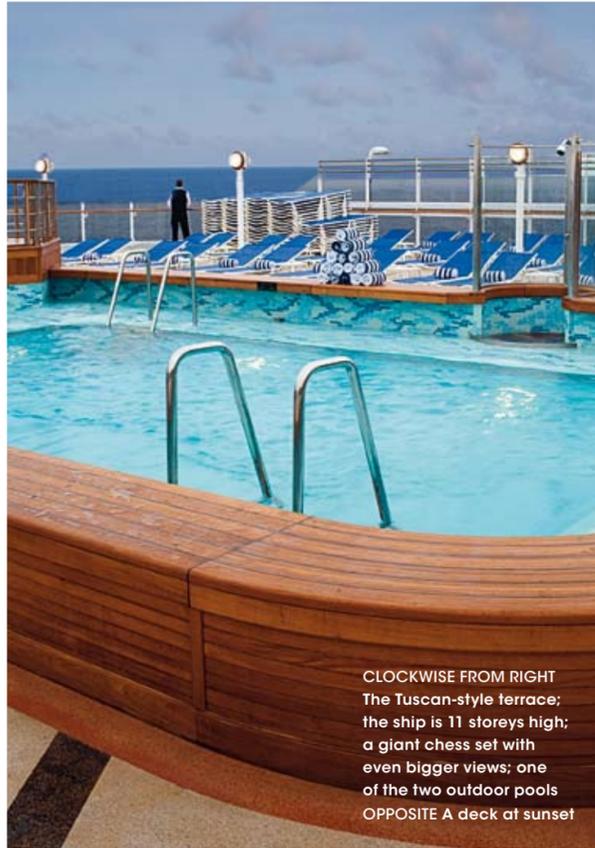
For those making the biggest splash in the opulent and spacious Queens Grill suites, dining is at the Queens Grill, where the caviar flows like, well, caviar

fee (and with some quick thinking – it books out fast for dinner) you can sample some of this multi-awarded Boston chef's signature dishes. The whole sensual package – gauzy drapes, fabulous glass sculptures and artworks, smooth service and luscious flavours – transports you

to a more intimate fine-dining experience than elsewhere on board.

From the sublime to the cor blimey, you can always slum it with fish and chips at the cosy Golden Lion Pub (complete with pressed metal ceilings, served by one of the ship's numerous Eastern European stewards (of varying levels of dourness – yes, they really do make it feel just like good old England), accompanied by a trivia quiz and a pint of beer.

Back in the ballroom, afternoon tea brings out the punters in a lemming-like frenzy from all corners of the ship (if a ship does have such things). At 3.30pm on the dot, lines of white-jacketed waitstaff stand to attention along each side of a long table, awaiting the signal from the maitre d' to go forth among their flock with trays of scones, cucumber sandwiches and cakes. Passengers mill about impatiently taking photographs – starving, obviously, after their: a) post-lunch doze by the pool or on their balcony; b) spell in the library with a good Agatha Christie; c) play-reading with graduates from London's RADA; d) 80-minute fine-art tour around the ship



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT
The Tuscan-style terrace;
the ship is 11 storeys high;
a giant chess set with
even bigger views; one
of the two outdoor pools
OPPOSITE A deck at sunset



with personal iPod; e) film, lecture or show at the Royal Court theatre (perhaps seated in the Royal Box, whose velvety chairs once cradled the regal behinds of Prince Charles and Camilla – yes, she of the now-legendary lack of Champagne-bottle-smashing skill, trumpeted so vociferously by the British tabloids.

As one would expect on a voyage that affords such Bacchanalian pleasures, the Cunard Royal Spa & Fitness Centre gets a thorough workout. This fragrant domain seems to be tended exclusively by English girls, including one with a Liverpudlian accent so thick I'm sure it's used to remove old nail polish. I get chatting to a fellow spa-ee while awaiting my 'Lushly' manicure (how apt, after all that Veuve Clicquot in the eponymous bar last night). Her husband's treated her to an extended 'ionic detox programme', for their 40th wedding anniversary, which seems to involve thrusting her feet in mud to 'ease out the toxins' among other delights.

Suffice to say she's not convinced: "I've been doing it because I thought I'd get rid of my stomach," she sighs. "I can't understand why after three weeks nothing has changed."

I nod compassionately, noting that my shorts seem a little tighter than when I boarded two days ago.

Despite being somewhat spa-phobic, I become deeply enamoured of the Thermal Suite, where a semi-circle of heated, moulded glass-tiled lounges are arranged to take full advantage of the ocean views through floor-to-ceiling windows. I can understand why people book the whole room exclusively for days at a time. What I'm not too clear about, though, is the sign on one of the smaller rooms that opens onto this, which announces the 'Laconium'. At first I think it must be a treatment area for travelling Americans to acclimatise to the Australian sense of humour, but it turns out to be 'a favourite with Romans who

gave it its name... a warm, not hot, room and a good place to start your thermal adventure'. I feel vaguely disappointed.

My travel-guard is well and truly down by the time I'm buffed, bejewelled and be-gowned for the ball in the Queens Room. Sitting in my plush little booth, it dawns on me that there's a whole world of people out there who actually know how to do the quickstep, and they're all on this ship. So who am I to resist being swept off my feet by the dashing George Kirk, one of the ship's 10 resident 'gentleman dance hosts', who gamely manoeuvres me around the dance floor in a nifty foxtrot? In vain I inform him that the last time I attempted ballroom dancing was when I took lessons as a gawky adolescent, and, because I was so tall, I always had to lead. "We're here to make you look and feel good," he whispers gallantly. "Just apply pressure and let me do the rest."

So I do. And he does.

Details, 132 469, cunardline.com.au. VE+T

