



SEA CHANGE

FROM ROMAN RUINS TO HISTORIC CORK FARMS, A CRUISE AROUND THE IBERIAN PENINSULA REVEALS SOME UNMINED GEMS



Under the gaze of a handful of curious visitors, a peacock wanders across the path leading to Concepción Castle on a hilltop in the historic Spanish port of Cartagena. After some procrastination, the exotic bird provides an impromptu display of shimmering emerald and blue tail feathers. It's an unexpected moment that captures the spirit of this stretch of the Iberian Peninsula, whose beauty is not always obvious but is very much in evidence if you are willing to scratch the surface.

Cartagena, one of Spain's lesser-known naval towns, forms part of a clutch of fascinating port stops comprising the Iberian leg of *Seven Seas Explorer's* Rome to Lisbon cruise, which takes in the more familiar destinations of Florence, Monte Carlo and Marseille, before heading southwest via Valencia and Gibraltar. The newest ship in Regent's fleet, *Explorer* offers an intimate, luxurious cruising experience, accommodating only 750 guests. A comprehensive programme of excursions allows visitors under the skin of each destination. For example, in Cartagena, we were granted access to Casa de la Fortuna, a restored Roman villa, and explored the perfectly preserved ruins of the city's ancient amphitheatre, uncovered by archaeologists just two decades ago.

Unlocking the treasures of Gibraltar presented more of a challenge, but a trip into Andalusia to visit a fourth-generation family-owned

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Regent Seven Seas Explorer. Colón market in Valencia. Amphitheatre in Cartagena

cork and cattle ranch provided a rare insight into contemporary Spanish farming. Much of the cork produced here is feeding the trend for rustic, provenance-led interiors. Guests wishing to dovetail on-board activities with experiences ashore can join a programme of cookery classes that pay homage to the itinerary, such as a paella masterclass, which com-

combines time in the kitchen with a visit to Valencia's restored Colón food market. The emphasis on signature dishes is fitting: three of the ship's five restaurants promise a fine-dining experience. As an antidote to a day's exploration, the ship's Canyon Ranch spa offers an extensive menu; a hot stone massage delivered relief to my aching muscles after a visit to Valencia.

By the time the *Explorer* reached her final stop, I was accustomed to its cocooning rhythms, where a roster of daily activities, from dance classes to outdoor golf, are tailored to a 50-plus, well-travelled crowd. Exploring the back streets and converted fish warehouses of vibrant Lisbon, a city currently benefitting from an economic upturn, I found it easy to understand why a cruise like this is so appealing – though, the less-charted the port, the better.

A seven-night cruise with Regent Seven Seas Cruises (023-8068 2280; rssc.com) from Barcelona to Lisbon costs from £4,089pp, full-board, flights, transfers, unlimited shore excursions, dining, beverages, gratuities and WiFi included. Departs May 15, 2018.



Making the most of port stops

- ◆ **Regent offers several daily excursions**, the majority of which are inclusive. Opting for a less obvious tour, such as visiting an artisan factory, cattle farm or a cave exploration, is a good way to get beneath the surface of a destination.
- ◆ **Make the most of the port shuttle buses** – these will transfer you from the port to the local city centre and back, ideal if you prefer to explore under your own steam.
- ◆ For a more tailored and fuss-free experience, **choose one of the walking or bike tours on offer**, many of which conveniently start at the port, negating the need for vehicle transport □