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TRAVEL is a business that sticks with the tried and tested. From globe-spanning airlines to tiny seaside boarding houses, the guiding principle seems to be a matter of finding something that works and then sticking with it come hell or high water.

It's not hard to understand why this rigid inflexibility has arisen. Travel is an industry that takes more than its fair share of hard knocks. From bird flu to earthquakes, holiday plans have a habit of being derailed by events - so why shouldn't travel companies seek to keep things predictable and safe? Except that when things stay the same, they seldom get better. The secret to improvement lies in reinvention.

Ever since cruising effectively began as a distinct business about 80 years ago, the basic style of the floating holiday has barely altered. Most cruise lines aspire to a hyper-luxury style that harks back to a mythical 1930s grand hotel where butlers ironed your newspaper and staff knew every customer.

While cruise companies are fond of saying that they are keen to attract a younger clientele, the on-board arrangements look as if they have been set up to make golf club habitués seem at home; heaven for many cruising types seems to be getting into their dinner jacket.

While luxury hotels these days increasingly opt for a stripped back, designer cool - a trail blazed by the likes of Nick Jones' Soho House group - cruise ships generally remain rooted in a chintz-heavy Downton Abbey look summoning up the image of Mr Carson and his flunkies handing out glasses of sour sherry.

Last year, however, a new ocean-going cruise ship joined the fray: Viking Star. The world of cruising has been stood on its ear - things will never be the same again.

Viking will be familiar to many travellers as the successful river cruise business which, over the past decade, has swept all before it.

By offering customers a seductive blend of attractive new ships, wonderful on-board service, cleverly arranged programmes of excursions and outstanding value for money, Viking has attracted a growing band of devoted followers.

GIVEN this river-going success, Viking probably thought that an ocean-going operator would quickly step in and copy its winning formula. Incredibly, nobody has, so Viking decided to launch it itself.

If you thought Viking on the river was good, deep-sea Viking will blow your socks off: its cruises vastly exceeded my expectations.

The Viking Star falls into the 'smaller ship' category (it has a capacity of 940 passengers) but such is its clever design that the vessel seems huge. There are so many on-board eating places that nowhere ever seems crowded. This spaciousness is accentuated by the cool, clean Scandinavian style of the ship which matches smart modern design with subtle sophistication.

This was the first cruise ship on which I felt utterly comfortable with the interior design and ambience. If I had the money, this was how I would like my house to be.

The clever design is coupled with outstanding on-board service. Every member of staff displays an unflagging enthusiasm for their job, nothing is ever too much trouble.

Also outstanding is the food. There is the buffet-style World Cafe - intelligently divided into two matching halves at the back of the ship - the full-service restaurant, Manfredi's (by a clear margin the best Italian

Want to conquer the world? Join the Vikings

Frank Barrett delights in a new ship that will revolutionise ocean cruising



GETTING THERE

Viking Cruises (vikingcruises.co.uk/; oceans, 0800 319 66 60) offers a 10-day Empires Of The Mediterranean cruise from Venice to Istanbul for £2,649. This includes full board, wine, beer and soft drinks with lunch and dinner, seven guided tours and return flights.

restaurant I've come across on any cruise ship) and the Chef's Table. Even better, Manfredi's and the Chef's Table do not carry a surcharge - unlike the high-end restaurants on so many cruise ships these days.

Most people agree, however, that the Viking piece de resistance is its excursions - intelligently and imaginatively organised, with a free trip on offer at each port. On my Viking Star cruise, we started with the free excursion in Istanbul: this was mostly a walking tour covering the

main sights such as the Blue Mosque, Tokapi Palace and the Grand Bazaar.

At our next stop, Kusadasi, we paid for the tour to Ephesus. Here we discovered the advantages of cruising outside the peak season. It was late November, but you wouldn't have guessed this from the blazing hot weather. The tour offered a fascinating insight into this extraordinary outpost of the Roman Empire. Curiosities here include a tunnel which connected the city's famous library to its infamous house of ill

30 years - and 38,000 beds

In recent years hotels such as the Dorchester, Savoy and Lanesborough shut shop and re-invented themselves at vast expense. (The effect of The Lanesborough refurbishment was to turn a Very Posh hotel into a Very, Very Posh hotel.)

But it isn't just five-star hotels that embark on lavish programmes of refurbishment. All hotels worth their salt realise that they have to keep up with the times. Britain's first budget hotel chain, Travelodge - which has clocked up 30 years of operation - has recently undergone the biggest makeover in its history: a £100million modernisation programme which has included replacing 38,000 beds with Travelodge Dreamers - 'bespoke luxurious king-size beds' produced by Royal warrant holders Sleepzee.

The new mattress boasts 952 individual pocket springs, each designed to follow the natural contour of the body in order to provide the correct amount of support and comfort. For families travelling with children, and for

repute (men could tell their wives they were off to look at the books - and then sneak off to indulge in quite a different pleasure).

Torsten Hagen, chairman of

adults sharing for a quick overnight trip, new pull-out family beds will accommodate two extra people in family rooms.

To help create a warm and cosy ambience, Travelodge has introduced a 'feature wall' in its rooms. The wall is a tranquil blue, as research shows the body clock is programmed to relate the colour blue to the hours of darkness. Other additions include a contemporary en-suite bathroom with shower, a larger desk area, new reading lights and a phone charging socket built into the bed frame.

The first Travelodge on the northbound carriageway of the A38 opened in June 1985. In the summer of Live Aid, Britain had a new low-cost hotel chain which charged £19.50 a night and quickly proved there was a market for the US motel concept of affordable accommodation.

Travelodge has never looked back - it now has a grand total of 521 hotels. ● [Travelodge \(travelodge.co.uk\)](http://Travelodge.co.uk) offers rooms from £35 a night.

Viking Cruises reports that the company has been 'encouraged' by the 'overwhelmingly positive response' Viking Star has generated among guests. 'We made a commitment to



GRAND TOUR: Santorini, left, and Istanbul's Blue Mosque are included in Viking cruises



WATER WORLD: A gondola in front of the Santa Maria della Salute in Venice

Be a real New Yorker - escape to New England

Frank Barrett joins the stars in Cape Cod, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard

BARRY Manilow sang: 'Time in New England took me away to long rocky beaches... and you by the bay', but his 1976 song Weekend In New England is a lot less romantic than it seems, as it's the story of an adulterous seaside affair. The lyrics don't actually include the words 'weekend in New England' but they didn't need to; for New Yorkers, New England was a weekend break sort of place, an easy drive north-east from Manhattan for a couple of days in leafy Massachusetts and beyond.

Nantucket island, along with another island - nearby Martha's Vineyard - is the classic suave New Yorker's bolthole, but it has a very earthy, downtown downbeat connection. In searching for claims to fame, Nantucket's Wikipedia entry bizarrely nominates the fact that this small Massachusetts island is used as a 'rhyming device' in a 'noted limerick'.

Potential visitors might justifiably wonder whether an island which needs to flaunt its bawdy limerick connections might be the ideal place for a restful summer holiday. Surely there must be more?

Indeed there is. Famous 19th Century American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson revealed himself an early devotee: 'The air comes into your face and eyes as if it was glad to see you. The moon comes here as if it was at home.'

Nantucket, 30 miles off the mainland, has always made a living from the sea; when author Herman Melville wrote about Nantucket in his 1851 novel *Moby Dick*, it was a major whaling port.

In more recent times it has become a popular holiday place - a millionaire's retreat where homes change hands at extraordinary prices. The wealthy arrive by private plane, but the not so wealthy take

advantage of the regular flights that serve the island from nearby cities including Boston. Flying from Boston, for example, with Cape Air takes 45 minutes, compared with the ferry service from Hyannis (a 70-mile drive from Boston) at just under two hours alone for the sea crossing.

There are 80 miles of unspoilt beaches where you can enjoy the island's famously bracing fresh salt air; inland Nantucket delights with its cobbled roads and picture-perfect seaside cottages complete with roses around their doors.

Handily placed for Nantucket town centre and a short walk from Children's Beach, yet in a tranquil spot, the White Elephant Village rates as one of the best places to stay. There is an excellent heated swimming pool and bikes if you want to explore under your own steam.

After de-stressing on Nantucket, it's time to head across to the mainland. Cape Cod is technically an island - it is described as an 'independent land mass' because a canal separates it from the continent, but this is nit-picking. When the Pilgrim Fathers arrived at



LIGHT FANTASTIC: Nantucket's Brant Point lighthouse

Plymouth Rock (although historians dispute the exact spot) on the Mayflower, Cape Cod became a key part of American history. For an authentic Cape Cod experience, stay at the Chatham Bars Inn, an imposing hotel which has strong echoes of *The Great Gatsby* about it.

For the final stop, take the ferry to Massachusetts' other great little island: Martha's Vineyard, the setting for another famous marine monster. Amity Island in Peter Benchley's novel *Jaws* was based on Martha's Vineyard.

The Menemsha Inn And Cottages is the perfect base. The hotel is in the 300-year-old fishing village of Menemsha, one of six towns on the 87 sq mile island. Hotel guests enjoy access to two private beaches - Squibnocket and Lucy Vincent. The latter even has a famous 'bathing suit-optional' stretch if you're feeling brave.

And there are lots of celebrities. 'You should have been here yesterday,' said the lady at the coffee shop in Edgartown: 'Reese Witherspoon was sitting right where you are now.' We had almost been in the presence of Hollywood royalty...



PRETTY IN PINK: A rose-covered Nantucket cottage and Martha's Vineyard fan Reese Witherspoon

GETTING THERE

Cleveland Collection (clevelandcollection.co.uk, 0203 111 0798) offers a seven-night New England Explorer from £1,659 per adult and £1,519 per child under 12. This includes return flights, domestic flights with Cape Air, ferries, car rental, three nights at White Elephant Village, two nights at Chatham Bars Inn and two nights at Menemsha Inn on a room-only basis. For information about holidays in New England and the rest of the US go to visittheusa.com.