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Sea Cloud under full sail

Becalmed on a Sea Cloud

Sue Curtis sets sail across the Mediterranean on the magnificent 110 metre windjammer, Sea Cloud.

photography Michael Marsh

Not a breath of breeze ripples the glass-like sea. We are totally becalmed in the Mediterranean. We ponder how many more sails it must take to move a 110 metre windjammer, as we lounge about in deck chairs sipping from Champagne flutes.

We are sailing with 25 sails aloft, aboard *Sea Cloud*, the gracious 80-year-old four-masted barque, built in Kiel in 1931 for Marjorie Merriweather Post and her millionaire husband Edward Hutton. Think Birdseye and General Foods and you realise that as heiress to these fortunes, expense was not a consideration for Marjorie when planning and decorating her beloved yacht. Originally named *Hussar*, this was the most magnificent and largest private sailing yacht of her era.

All of Marjorie's extravagant touches remain to this day – from the Carrara marble bathrooms with gold swan taps and fireplaces and antique furnishings in all original cabins, to the oak and mahogany lined library and dining room. In the engine room and the bridge, the 1930s brass instruments and fittings still gleam alongside the modern navigational aids of the 21st century.

Today *Sea Cloud* accommodates a maximum of 64 guests and sails the waters of the Caribbean and the Mediterranean with style and glamour.

Ours was to be an eight-day odyssey from Nice along the Cote d'Azur to Portofino, then to Livorno on the Ligurian Sea at the western edge of Tuscany. We were to immerse ourselves in Napoleonic history with visits to Elba and Corsica. Dotted at anchor all along the coast, were the glamour boats of the rich and famous who had attended the recent royal wedding in Monaco.

Sea Cloud is a seriously beautiful sailing yacht. Lovingly polished and varnished, she is a genuine working windjammer. Captain Todd Burgmann, from that well-known seafaring state of Nebraska, navigates her 110 metres in and out of tiny harbours, without the use of modern aids such as bow thrusters. Her intimidating bowsprit causes some anxious moments for many an owner of sleek modern mega yachts and cruisers along the marinas.

Our first anchorage is Portofino. After a brief foreshore walk, we take a local ferry excursion

along the Ligurian coast to the remote hamlet of San Fruttuoso. This tiny 11th century settlement is only accessible by boat. The cloistered abbey is nestled beside a pebble beach and much of what you see today was built under the auspices of the noble Doria family in the 13th century.

Next stop down the coast was the quaint fishing village of Camogli. With its cobbled streets and stone archways, it provided a welcome break for a pleasant Campari Soda in a local harbourside bar.

On our return to *Sea Cloud*, we motored out into the sunset as Captain Burgmann's welcome cocktails were served on the Lido Deck before an elegant silver service dinner in the mahogany panelled restaurant. Chef Mathias Leisching, from Germany, manages to create culinary miracles from a tiny galley the size of a small apartment kitchen.

The special dessert was rich, creamy chocolate and decidedly fattening. But who cares. We could sleep it off, as we were rocked to sleep by the gentle motion of the ship quietly heading through the night towards Livorno in Italy.

We were welcomed into Livorno by a rather motley naval band, which was not actually there for us, but to greet an Italian Admiral boarding the naval training ship *Amerigo Vespucci* moored alongside us. Built in Naples, the Italian ship went into service at exactly the same time as *Sea Cloud*, July 1931. Opinion on *Sea Cloud* was distinctly biased, but general consensus was that our ship won the glamour award with her sparkling white hull, teak decks, immaculate varnish and golden eagle at the bowsprit ... plus we had one extra mast and we were 14 metres longer.

From Livorno we took a 45-minute drive through the Tuscan countryside to Lucca – catching a faint glimpse of the distant leaning Tower of Pisa. Lucca lies within a circle of 16th century stone walls, which were transformed in the 19th century into a tree lined avenue and park, thus maintaining its characteristic medieval structure. Famous for its silks and fine writing papers, Lucca was once a very wealthy city and still remains beautiful with its narrow cobbled streets of elegant boutiques, restaurants and gelato bars. >>





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The carefully preserved Piazza Anfiteatro dates back, in part, to the second century and a stop at the memorial to Puccini, in a square outside his birthplace, provides us with an update on his sometimes scandalous life. Late afternoon we sail for Elba in search of Napoleonic memories.

Italy's Portoferraio is a charming natural harbour guarded by the 16th century Forte Falcone and Forte Stella. Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled to Elbe in May 1814, where he lorded over his court for nearly a year. Eventually he escaped Elba, returning triumphantly to Paris, to lead his troops to his last battle, Waterloo.

After a lavish buffet lunch on the Lido Deck, we set sail for Corsica. The crew clambered around the rigging and with a minimum of fuss, unfurled the sails ready for a gentle afternoon of sailing. With 30 sails across her four masts, the highest of which towers almost 50 metres above the deck, we had expectations of an immediate increase in speed, but alas the breeze at best was fluky Mediterranean.

We lounged in deck chairs, sipping Caiparinhas, willing the ship to move faster. After an hour or so of going nowhere, the Captain announced he would lower the zodiacs for interested camera enthusiasts to venture onto the mirror-like sea to take their own digital shots of *Sea Cloud* under sail. We slowly circled the ship, with shutters clicking from all angles, catching reflections off the glass-like water.

A slight flurry of breeze called us back to the ship. The next few hours we slowly slipped through the water, with a gentle motion and characteristic creaking of the timbers and ropes. No engines, just a faint murmur of a generator somewhere in the bowels of the ship, keeping the essentials of modern cruising operational.

Sea Cloud has 32, all outside cabins. Of those, ten cabins are original and that evening the guests in these main deck cabins declared an Open House, inviting their fellow sailors to see how life on board must have been in Lady Marjorie's day. Most guests took the opportunity to wander below decks to view the glamour and style of the 1930s.

Marjorie's spacious all white and gold 'Owner's Suite' amazed everyone with its light

and space and extravagant chandeliers and fittings. Interestingly, the doorway between her's and Edward's maple panelled and richly upholstered suite, can only be opened from Marjorie's side!

Next morning, while under full sail, the wind dropped again. We anchored at one of the rocky islets in Maddalena Strait between Corsica and Sardinia. The boarding ladder was lowered and guests enjoyed a lazy swim in the turquoise waters. We were due to moor at the pier in Bonifacio around 3.00pm so we motor-sailed along the spectacular limestone coastline of Corsica to reach our berth on time.

The entrance to Bonifacio must be one of the most dramatic harbour entrances in the Mediterranean. The sheer limestone cliffs and fortifications have been hollowed and blasted by the winds and sea for centuries, leaving a myriad of caves and rock formations that are a dream for photographers and a haven for yachters. Our bowsprit is positioned threateningly a few metres from a multi-million dollar mega yacht.

On the stroke of midnight, with the rigging lit with spotlights and a tense group of passengers sipping cocktails along the decks, the Captain began the daunting task of turning the 110 metre *Sea Cloud* away from her wharf into the narrow neck of the 120 metre wide harbour. We were then able to motor quietly out towards the Maddalena Strait and our last port of call, Ajaccio.

Next morning, over early risers' coffee and pastries we watch the entry into Ajaccio, the capital of Corsica, before taking a short walking tour of the city and its Napoleonic memorabilia, libraries and museums. Our final day and a half aboard are designed for relaxing at sea, as the winds are more favourable and we enjoy many hours of brisk sailing, ensconced with a book from the ship's library on the spanker deck at the stern. Our eight days sailing aboard one of the great sailing yachts of the last century, is unlike any other Mediterranean cruise experience.

Next time, and there will certainly be a next time, perhaps we will try her newer sister ship *Sea Cloud II* (built in 2001) in the Caribbean or one of the company's river boats *River Cloud II* along the rivers and waterways of Europe. ●

The Sea Cloud story

The story of *Sea Cloud* is one of total extravagance – and how far some people will go to own one of the most beautiful yachts ever built.

1931 Built in Kiel for millionaire businessman Edward D Hutton and his heiress wife Marjorie Merriweather Post. *Sea Cloud* was launched as *Hussar*, with a black hull. Maiden voyage to Galapagos July 1931.

1935 The Huttons divorced and Marjorie got the yacht. Re-named it *Sea Cloud*. Hull painted white.

1942-45 *Sea Cloud* served as a Coast Guard naval weather station in the Azores during WWII. Equipped with guns and anti-submarine weapons.

1946 Fully refurbished over next few years. Repainted from naval grey to white again. Masts and bowsprit reinstated.

1955 Another marriage collapse. At 78 Marjorie she sells her beloved *Sea Cloud* to Trujillo the brutal head of the Dominican Republic, who was assassinated in 1961. Ship renamed *Anjelita*.

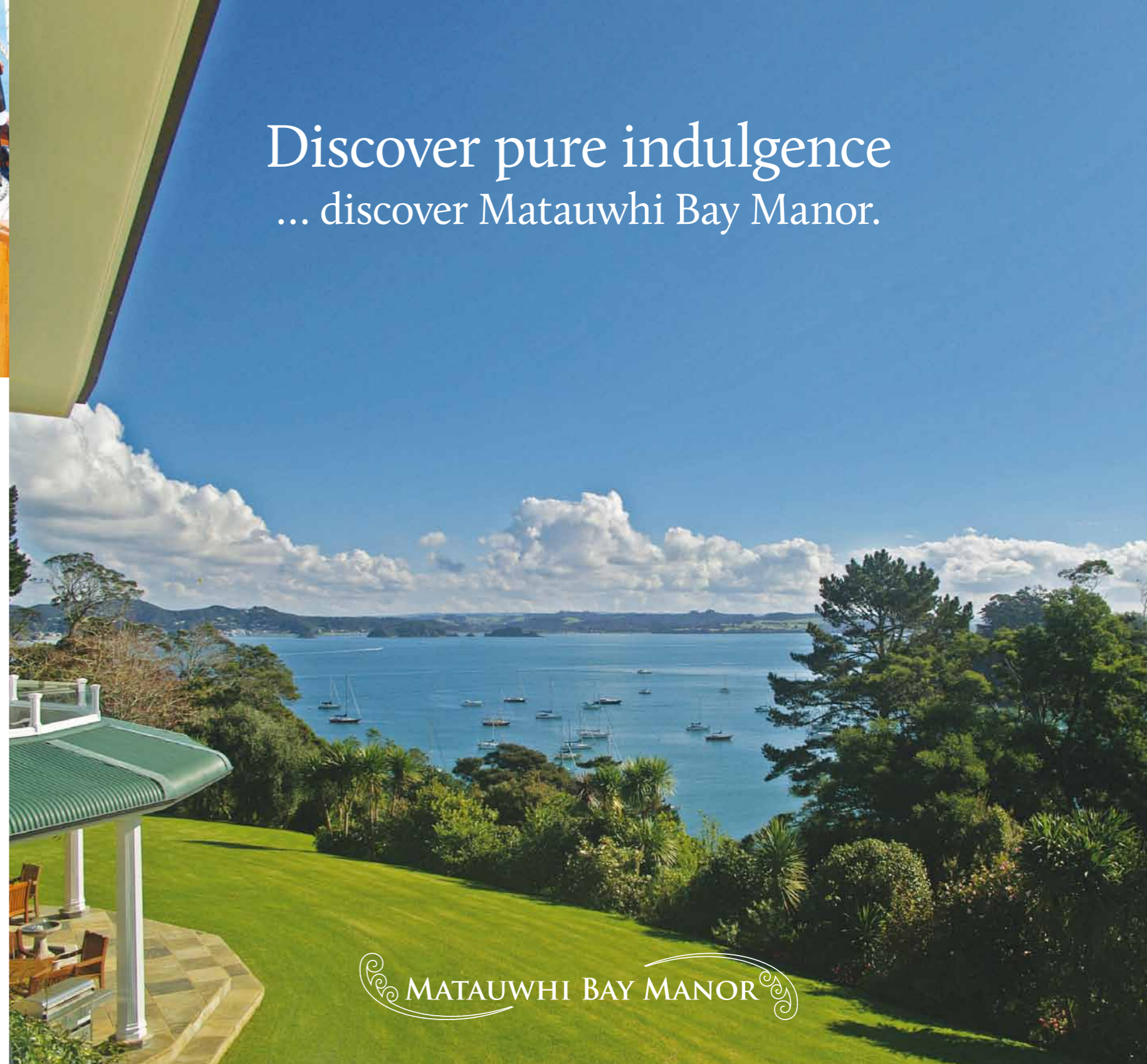
Then followed 15 years of name changes and legal disputes across several oceans of the world. Ship lay derelict in Colon Harbour for eight years before being purchased by a group of German businessmen and given a complete refit which was concluded in 1979.

1994 Purchased by another group of German businessmen. She is today fully restored to her former glory as *Sea Cloud* and sails the oceans of the world under a Maltese flag as the proud flagship of Sea Cloud Cruises.

SEA CLOUD CRUISES

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