

What it's REALLY like cruising with billionaires on the world's most exclusive ship, where apartments cost up to £12 million

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Money talks – we all know that. But even if you have £12 million or so in the kitty and want to buy a three bedroom apartment (please don't call it a cabin) at the stern of the ship, there's no guarantee you'll be successful. None whatsoever.

'We're not dazzled by wealth and our residents cherish privacy,' says Fernando Arroyo, general manager of The World, the only fully residential cruise ship on the high seas. 'If someone like the Beckhams came along and wanted to buy we would politely say no. They just wouldn't be the right fit. It would become a circus.'

Well, there's a relief. And the truth is that Sir David and Lady Posh might feel like financial minnows on board this extraordinary vessel laden with international billionaires.

The maintenance fees alone can be as much as £1 million a year, depending on how big your apartment is.

Some are very big indeed. I've joined The World in Cagliari, Sardinia and the apartment I'm staying in for three nights on Deck 11 (the top deck) is more than 3,000 sq ft and comprises three bedrooms, three bathrooms, drawing room and dining room (seating 12), kitchen and spectacular wrap-around balcony.

It's currently owned by a Scottish businessman and his wife, who do not wish to be named – anonymity being a recurring theme on The World.

They have just put the flat on the market for £9.2 million.

The somewhat blingy décor (white lampshades with glass tassels, a copulating couple made from plaster) might not be to everyone's taste – although you wouldn't turn your nose up at the Picasso and Chagall lithographs.



Residents (don't call them passengers) buy homes on board the fully residential cruise ship The World for up to £12m and can travel the globe year-round

But that's the whole point. You buy your apartment outright, just as you would a house or flat, and then decorate it as you please.

It's yours for as long as you want. You come and go depending on where the ship is in port, with itineraries planned three years in advance, including to Antarctica, Australia, Papua New Guinea and Alaska.

You can spend the whole year on board if that takes your fancy. What you can't do is rent your apartment out on the open market; this is not a time share scheme. Heavens, no.

This is a floating apartment building – a condominium, as Americans like to call it, owned entirely by the residents. It's a lifestyle choice, where your 'preferences' (as they are known) are noted, right down to whether you prefer your omelette runny or a little firmer. 'There is only one rule on board – and that's don't be rude,' says Tim Hockey, 62, the former CEO of the Canadian bank TD Canada Trust who is currently serving as chairman of the seven-person board (all elected by the residents and the bigger your square footage, the more voting power you have.).

'In particular, don't be rude to the crew because they are as much a part of the community as anyone else'.

There are 165 apartments, ranging from studios (starting at around £1.8 million) to three bedrooms and at any one time there are likely to be between 150-200 residents on board, looked after by 300 crew, some of whom have been working on the ship since its conception in 2002.

It was a tricky birth all those years ago when rentals were allowed. It didn't work and the bank had to take over ownership in 2003, which was when a group of residents stepped in and made it a not-for-profit enterprise.

Since then, it's become a secret society of sorts, where privacy is sacrosanct. Anyone wanting to buy an apartment is heavily vetted, first to make sure they have the money and, then to establish if they will fit in, a process that requires the endorsement of at least two existing residents.



Mark Palmer with former residents of The World, Richard and Heather Penn

Mr Hockey, who lives partly in Toronto, sometimes in South Carolina and six months on The World, may talk about one abiding rule, but there are many other dos and don'ts, described as 'on board etiquette'.

No one is allowed to take photos of other residents without their permission; no one talks on a mobile phone in any of the public spaces.

Taking a selfie is tantamount to breaking wind. And the dress code is extensive, with an 'Always Inappropriate' section, which includes 'bare midriffs', 'flip-flops' and 'the display of excessive or revealing décolletage'.

'It's essentially a floating village,' says London-born Stephen Lawrence, chairman and CEO of the Sadel Group property empire, who bought his onboard apartment two years ago.

'And similar to most villages you can see people as little or much as you like. If I were to buy my own yacht and invited people on it we'd be stuck with them for every meal and who wants that?'

But I don't know of any village with such an array of bars and restaurants, a fleet of boardrooms, tennis and pickleball court, poker room, golf simulator (with an onboard pro), lectures from renowned historians and scientists, a beauty salon, fully stocked library and so on. The onboard spa and fitness centre aren't too shabby either.

Treatments include 12 sessions of Lipo Laser Body Contouring for £2,255. Mr Lawrence and his partner, Claire James, spend some four months of the year onboard, but also have homes in Central London, Lausanne in Switzerland and Chamonix in France.

'We wanted to see the world but without having to pack up each time,' says Mr Lawrence.

'This suits us perfectly and I like the way most of the residents are self-made. No one feels they have to prove anything.'



The deck of The World, with its loungers and swimming pool, where Mark does a few lengths at 7pm and realises that no one else is around - making it the world's most peaceful ship



A luxury view on a balcony of one of the apartments on The World. Deck 12 (the top deck) is more than 3,000 sq ft and comprises three bedrooms, three bathrooms, drawing room and dining room (seating 12), kitchen and a spectacular wrap-around balcony

Thank goodness, the board has approved my presence and all residents have been informed (including a photo of me looking reasonably respectable) – presumably in case they want to give me a wide berth.

Several of them do, including a former American golfer who won four majors and now guards his privacy with all the precision of a match-winning putt on the 18th green.

I'm not entirely sure if I'm allowed to mention this but until recently Judith Sheindlin – as in Judge Judy, star of the American courtroom reality show – was a resident, and Dr John Demartini, the self-help guru, is currently part of the community, as is Ashley Faull, 58, the British shopping channel mogul, who lives in Sandbanks, Dorset.

So, too, are Troy and Sissy Templeton, from Miami, Florida. Mr Templeton was a senior partner at Trivest, the US private equity company, with assets under his management of nearly £6 billion.

The Templetons invite me for dinner, shortly before they fly to London where they'll be staying at Claridges and attending both the men's and women's semi-finals at Wimbledon. For the former, they've paid £10,000 for a pair of debenture seats.

'We wanted a holiday home but didn't want to go back to the same place every year,' says Mr Templeton. 'We weren't cruise people at all but then we came on board to try it out for a couple of weeks – and that was it.'

The outings for residents of The World are different from normal cruise ship excursions.

After leaving Cagliari, our next port of call is Palermo in Sicily, where I join residents (strictly not to be called 'passengers') for a private concert at the opera house, with a drinks and finger-food reception.

And whereas normal ship excursions are done and dusted on the same day, here they can last up to a week. For example, next October, when the ship is off the coast of South Korea, there's a five-night trip to Mongolia's Gobi Desert and then on to the capital, Ulaanbaatar, both by private charter. These trips can cost an additional £8,000 per person.

Two of my onboard buddies are Australians Richard and Heather Penn. Over the years, they've owned six different apartments and are classified as 'prospectives' in that they want to buy again after selling a few years ago.

Residents often trade up or down – or, in the Penns' case, leave for a few years and then return. I invite this friendly and unpretentious couple for drinks in my apartment, having asked Eddie Wong, the residential director, if he can rustle up a bottle of champagne and some appropriate canapes.

'It's the whole community thing that makes it unique,' says Mr Penn, 79. 'Honestly, the crew are like family – and are treated as such.' Mr Penn made his fortune by bringing

aerobics and then Weight Watchers to Australia and New Zealand – and his family own the Manly Warringah Sea Eagles rugby league club.

'Given the people on board, everything is remarkably understated and discreet,' says Mr Penn. 'You could always charter your own yacht but you would still have to arrange all the right permits and manage the crew. Here, everything is done for you. You just turn up where and when you want.'

One morning, I have breakfast with chairman of the board Mr Hockey. After leaving TD Canada Trust, he became president and chief executive of TD Ameritrade, which he sold to the Schwab Corporation for \$26 billion in 2020.

I'm looking forward to eggs and bacon, with perhaps some American waffles and maple syrup on the side – but notice that he's restricting himself to half a grapefruit. When the waiter comes I say, 'I'll have what he's having,' before learning Mr Hockey has already written up his financial newsletter for the day, done a session of weight training in the gym and hopped on an exercise bike for an hour.

This is the only cruise ship where by 10pm the bars are pretty much empty – and the only ship where at times you feel it's entirely yours. After being roundly defeated at pickleball by Mr Wong, I do a few lengths in the pool and realise that no one else is around. And it's only 7pm.

Before I leave, Mr Arroyo asks me how I've got on. I tell him I've got on famously and don't want to get off. I mention in passing what a joy it's been to be on a break in the Mediterranean where no one has taken a selfie, but my voice trails off, weak with embarrassment – because one person has taken a few selfies.

Yes, that will be me – a shocking breach of etiquette. I know only too well that The World is so much better without them.

For more about The World, visit aboardtheworld.com.