Sea Cloud Wine Cruise Report - Part One

Italian & Croatian Coastlines - Wines of Veneto, Puglia, Istria & Susak

Featuring Croatian truffles, dolphin watch & a greeting from the Mayor of Monopoli!

Written by Cindy-Marie Harvey

Visiting far-flung vineyards, meeting influential wine makers and tasting sensational wines from panoply of grape varieties. It sounds a blissful existence, and indeed in the life of an A&C Tour Manager, this is a very lovely and regular occurrence. Having just returned from yet another of our wonderful annual Wine Cruises, I was reminded just how memorable our wine tours can be.

Magnificent Sea Cloud, our ship for the duration of the Wine Cruise
The beautiful historical 110 metre Windjammer, Sea Cloud was to be our home for our nine day wine cruise, starting in Venice. We sailed the coast of Croatia, across the Adriatic to Puglia, then across to Greece to the Peloponnese, ending in Athens. Although I have been fortunate enough to sail before on this truly wonderful ship, even I felt a tremble of excitement as I sighted her masts in Venice. This was shortly followed by a joyful recognition on the quayside, that the main crew members that were waiting to welcome us were the same crew that so ably looked after us on our Wine Cruise two years ago.

Although clients were not due to embark until late afternoon, Derek Smedley MW and myself had a vital job first thing, ensuring that all the wines that Tim Clarke had been musing over as to which ones should be shown on board had actually turned up! This is an essential but fun part of the pre cruise preparation as Tim and I discuss at length which wines we think will show best with the dishes on board- a task guaranteed to make one very hungry, and also eager to taste the wine.

Clear blue skies in Venice saw the embarkation of our faithful band of travellers that afternoon, welcomed on board by a glass of fizz before the excitement of being escorted to their cabins. Everyone was on deck for the spectacular sight as we sailed out of Venice, the perfect place to commence this voyage, following much of the historical Venetian trading route. Dinners were usually taken on the lido deck outside. After a typically Venetian aperitif, Aperol Spritz, we kicked
off in style with wines from the Veneto that we were leaving behind. These included a fabulous Calverino from Pieropan, and some truly stunning Casalvegri Valpolicella Classico Superiore from Ca la Bionda, which punched far above its classification in richness and elegance.

Our first port of call was the little known Croatian island of Susak, where Domus Susak joined us. Not only was it interesting to taste wines from this new project, but also the presentation by Ernesto about the island and its history was fascinating. Lunchtimes brought a splendid varied buffet on deck, matched with a selection of wines from the Ships Cellars. Our on board Chef, Thomas, had worked hard with me on choosing menus which reflected the countries we were sailing by so such as the specialities of each region were shown. His creativity and interpretation of local dishes was simply outstanding, and made resistance at mealtimes quite futile! Especially at the Captains dinner that evening, where following a warm welcome from Captain Sergey Komakin and his crew, we dined in the wooden panelled dining room. The menu featured tempting Croatian truffles, which were paired with some fabulous wines. For me the star of the show was the Malvasija from Kozolovic from Istria, which was almost the perfect wine. Although the desert wine from Edi Simcic of Slovenia was heaven in a glass and would be the perfect pairing for Christmas pudding, but went equally well with the chocolate and strawberry cake!

We continued down the Croatian Coast, with an opportunity to take to the zodiacs to appreciate the splendid sight of the Sea Cloud under full sail from the water, some 32,000 square feet of sails! Korcula was our next destination, and moored alongside this very attractive walled town, was the ideal time to explore the (alleged) birthplace of Marco Polo. Some strong cross winds which appeared when we were due to cast off, made for an interesting manoeuvre, even causing a small frown to appear on the always smiling face of Martin, our Chief Bosun. Thankfully the discovery of Grk as a grape variety was a welcome distraction. It was a fabulous first encounter for many clients and a highly localised white grape variety. I hope that this variety is planted more in Croatia as it produces a wonderful white wine.

Overnight we crossed the Adriatic to arrive into Monopoli, in Puglia, Southern Italy. Roberta joined us on board from leading Puglian wine estate, Rivera. She showed us a stunning range of wines, but as always the one wine that won fans throughout the group was Il Falcone, which showed precisely why it is one of their flagship wines. Some free time in Monopoli was enjoyed, despite the afternoon heat. Especially as the Mayor welcomed us in the historical centre and we were guided through the cool interior of the local churches. There were a fair few ice creams devoured too!

As we set sail, it seemed like the whole of Monopoli had gathered to wave us farewell, indeed a few sharp blasts from the bridge were required to warn a small boat that was getting rather too enthusiastically close! It was a wonderful feeling as we left the shores of Italy, as the next day would be a full day at Sea, with time to relax and enjoy life on board this rather splendid ship. But first, yet more wines from Leone di Castris, a historical producer from Puglia. We enjoyed their Negroamaro based reds over dinner, wonderfully illustrating the complexity of the wines from this region
of Southern Italy.

A leisurely breakfast, suitably manned by Romel with omelette pan at the ready, preceded tours of the Bridge and tours of the Engine room for those interested. Those who preferred to relax in the sun still managed to gather themselves for the late morning tasting hosted by Tim Clarke and Derek Smedley MW. The tasting included a very individual yet fascinating selection of wines from the various regions that we had sailed from, past and to so far – including an elegant Friulano from Livio Felluga. For many one of the highlights of the tasting was Orto, which is produced on a small island in the middle of the Venetian lagoon – so rather special, especially given the team of experts who consulted on it!

One of the great institutions of the Sea Cloud is their head barman Beebo, whose skill with a cocktail shaker tempted a fair few clients into the daily special cocktail to revive their palates after so much wine. After lunch, First Officer, Alex did an excellent explanation of the sails being set as the crew scurried across at awe-inspiring heights! The rest of the day slipped by in a range of relaxation, for some it was naming racehorses, for others it was being on dolphin alert.

As we were on the high seas (though beautifully calm!), we decided to show a range of wines for dinner from our friends in the South. Sadly what is usually a truly wonderful Fiano was badly corked. So a last minute replacement was made for that (always interesting when one is in the middle of the ocean with no friendly independent wine merchant on hand!). Fortunately the others showed superbly, including the white Incanto from Enza la Fauci (Sicily); Hiera from Hauner (Aeolian islands); Aglianico del Vulture Titolo (Basilicata) and the ever-tempting dessert wine Malvasia delle
Liparie from Barone di Villagrande.

...To be continued - Part Two, Sea Cloud Wine Cruise in Greece

By Cindy-Marie Harvey, Senior Programme Manager


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