

GOLF AT SEA

Can you master a land-based sport on the ocean?

(*The Sunday Telegraph*, 2006)

‘Fore!’ I yelled, and the seagulls scattered. There may have been a stout net between me and them, but they weren’t taking any chances – and nor, as an absolute beginner, was I. I had read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and the last thing I wanted on my hands as I thrashed golf balls on the Bay of Naples was a dead seabird.

You can learn all sorts of things on cruise liners these days. The *Crystal Symphony*, whose sundeck I bestrode like Jack Nicklaus, includes bartending, mutual-funds analysis and Asian woodblock printing on its list of possible courses. My self-devised challenge was to master the basics of golf at sea, and on my return play – without any further practice – on one of the best courses in Britain. The advantages, I reckoned, were that I could learn far from the damning gaze of clubhouse regulars, and excuse my failures in years to come by remarking, ‘Of course, it’s a different game when you’re sailing the Mediterranean.’

I joined the opulent 500-cabin *Crystal Symphony* in Sicily, five days into a two-week voyage which had already taken it to Venice and Dubrovnik. The charming streets and squares of Taormina, with their elaborate balconies and jacaranda hazards nestling under the gaze of Mount Etna, seemed to offer plenty of scope for chipping practice, while the Greco-Roman amphitheatre – its arches framing a glorious expanse of ocean – had clearly been designed as an early driving range. As for the ship, it proved to offer (in addition to a pair of swimming pools, gym, spa, shopping arcade,

computer centre, library, cinema, theatre and casino) two twenty-foot practice nets and a small artificial putting green.

Over a very good dinner in the largest of the ship's six restaurants, I discussed my needs with the onboard professional, Bill Stutzer. An affable, no-nonsense American, he was evangelical about the joys of cruising the Mexican Riviera, playing a different course every day; but about my project he was frankly sceptical. No one, he declared, could hope to get the hang of the game without at least two weeks on a proper course. He could promise me an hour's introduction, but nothing more.

If I was on a fool's errand, there were at least compensations. Gliding through the Straits of Messina at dusk, with the purple silhouettes of Sicily's hills to port and the rugged green cliffs of the mainland to starboard, was one of them; the extreme comfort of my large penthouse cabin, with its balcony and personal butler, was another. Then, as night fell, we sailed past the volcanic island of Stromboli, its summit igniting every few minutes with a sudden puff of light. I could not help suspecting that a Titan had lopped the top off with a six iron and failed to replace his divot.

Morning found us moored beneath the cliffs of Sorrento, where coaches and boats stood ready to take passengers to explore the Amalfi Coast and Capri. I chose an outing to Pompeii, and was chiefly beguiled by the quiet outskirts of the ruined city, with Vesuvius rising innocently in the background. But the real business of the day still lay ahead.

With infinite patience, Bill Stutzer showed me how to hold a club, where to put my feet, and how to take a swing. He explained the difference between a wood and an iron, and the importance of shifting my weight from my back foot to my front. I hit a lot of bad shots, and a few good ones: as Bill observed, not altogether encouragingly, 'Even a blind squirrel finds a

nut occasionally.’ He suggested I practise on my own, and held out the vague possibility that we might meet again.

That evening, watching *King Kong* in the ship’s cinema, I empathised anew with the frustration of the giant ape as he hung from the Empire State Building swatting at biplanes. I had two more days on board, and my chances of fulfilling my mission seemed slimmer than Fay Wray.

The next morning, however, I woke with new resolve. Sorrento looked seductive, with its orange and lemon groves sheltered by ingenious tree houses, its piazza thronged with al fresco diners, and its deep, shadowy defiles dropping mysteriously to the waterfront; but I would not allow myself more than a brief visit. Instead, I would grab whichever net was vacant and thwack golf balls as if my life depended on it.

It was in this mode that Bill Stutzer found and took pity on me. He suggested that I adjust my grip, and stop turning my head like a paranoid turkey whenever I hit the ball. He even praised my eye-hand co-ordination, and twice exclaimed, ‘There ya go!’ His final thought for the day was another homely proverb, counselling patience: ‘We all put our pants on the same way – one leg at a time.’

At six o’clock the ship set sail, heading north. As we rounded Capri, and watched its sentinel outcrops of rock slip behind us in a sea illuminated by distant pools of sunlight, I reflected that there are some sights which can only properly be appreciated afloat. It was a ‘formal’ evening on the *Crystal Symphony*, meaning that black tie was de rigueur, and there was a touch of Hollywood about the proceedings as women weighed down with jewels descended the sweeping staircase in the central lobby, backed by a waterfall bright with twinkling lights and serpentine frosted glass. On the deck where

I had sweated beneath the sun, a high-spirited party came skipping improbably out of the darkness in Venetian carnival masks.

The next port of call was Civitavecchia, a moderately attractive town an hour and a half from Rome. The ship would go on to Livorno and Monte Carlo, but it was my last morning on board, and so I sought the practice net for one last session. I knew I would not be returning home with half the know-how I needed, but at least I no longer felt totally clueless.

Back in England, I presented myself at the Grove hotel in Hertfordshire, whose course is one of the venues for the 2006 Amex World Championships. There I asked instructor Stuart Morgan whether it would be possible to play a hole.

If Bill Stutzer had been sceptical of my proposal, Stuart Morgan looked completely horrified. Eventually, it was agreed that I could ‘jump off’ the first – a 350-yard dog leg bisected by a road and peppered with half a dozen bunkers. Stuart made it clear, however, that it was against his professional code to offer me any coaching along the way, beyond telling me which club to use and what direction to aim in. Par for the hole being four, it seemed to me that a score in the low teens would be respectable.

My first shot, with a mild slice, carried me 90 yards; my second – slightly better – 120 yards, hugging the outside edge of the fairway. When my third landed 50 yards from the hole, just short of the road, Stuart remarked with a note of incredulity in his voice that ‘You’re pretty much where you want to be’. A nifty chip (or so it looked to me) put me on the edge of the green. I putted once, putted twice – and sank the ball for six. ‘Awesome,’ said Stuart, and sounded as if he meant it.

I dare say there was an element of fluke, and a second hole might have proved very embarrassing. And I dare say there is a more sensible way of

learning golf than on the deck of a cruise ship. But I very much doubt that there is a more enjoyable one.

Crystal Cruises are offering a seven-night Mediterranean cruise from Rome to Athens departing 13 May 2007. Prices are from £1849 per person, which includes flights, transfers, seven nights in a deluxe stateroom with picture window, all meals and soft drinks and basic gratuities. For reservations contact Voyana on 020 8515 4761 or visit www.voyanacruise.com

The Grove, Chandler's Cross, Hertfordshire WD3 4TG has a non-membership golf course with fees from £75 per person. For reservations and details telephone 01923 294266 or visit www.thegrove.co.uk