

All quiet on the Virgo

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I'm just going to try and list down all the reasons the Superstar Virgo docking in Manila, the first ever international cruise liner to do so, should have you packing your bags and sailing away into the horizon.

What tops the list is, of course, because this puts us, our country, the Philippines, on the cruise map and Genting Cruise Lines, as well as Star Cruises, has been banging the drums for this brand new route—Manila-Laoag-Kaohsiung-Hong Kong or what it calls the “Jewels of the South China Sea”—in the cruise market all over the world. Even then, should accounts of the maiden voyage early in March pique the interest of cruise lovers from afar, they ain't seen nothing yet.

The Philippines, an archipelago of 7,641 islands, as of last count, has so many major ports connected to the numerous bodies of water that surround us: On the West Philippine Sea, from Abra de Ilog in Mindoro through the Verde Island Passage to Currimao in Laoag and Subic through Subic Bay; On the Pacific Ocean, from the Port of Allen in Samar through San Bernardino Strait to the Port of Basco on the island of Batan in Batanes through the Luzon Strait and the Verana and Lipata ports in Surigao through the Surigao Strait; On Celebes Sea, from the Port of Cotabato through the Moro Gulf to Zamboanga through the Basilan Strait and the Makar Wharf in General Santos through Sarangani Bay.



There are also many inland seas that would a great cruise destination make, such as Brooke's Point on Sulu Sea in Palawan, Macabalan Wharf on Macajalar Bay in Northern Mindanao, and Dumaguit Port on Sibuyan Sea in Panay. I'm not sure how worthy they are as a homeport or port of call for any cruise line, big or small, in terms of physical features, but I have no doubt it's all a matter of infrastructure. As they say, “If you build it, they will come.”

Nothing wrong dreaming up exotic harbors, shorelines, and intermediate stops, but hey, right now, at Pier 15 in Port Area, just behind Manila Hotel at the very end of Roxas Boulevard, you can arrive in style, luggage in tow, and sail away in the great tradition of dream ships, which the Superstar Virgo is nothing

short of, as it has since it was delivered to Star Cruises from Papenburg, Germany in 1999 cruised the great waters of Asia and Australia, sailing through the Bay of Bengal, the Straits of Malacca, the Andaman Sea, the Tasman Sea...

But all the reason there is to board the Superstar Virgo, other than the fact that you can just board it right here at the Manila South Harbor, at least through the summer months, until the end of May, is that it's fun. The 268-meter-long, 32-meter-wide, 13-story-high, 75,338-gt mega ship is chockfull of surprises, such as a wide array of culinary choices, from Chinese and Japanese to Italian cuisine, replete with themed restaurants, and an extensive selection of entertainment activities, from a writing room and library to a mahjong room, private karaoke rooms, concert halls, dance clubs, the Lido Theater alive with musicals and magic shows, and, of course, Resorts World at Sea. There are the outdoor pools, too, and a 100-meter waterslide that's a big come-on to the kids and the kids at heart, not to mention a gym, a spa, a salon, and a 24-hour dining outlet for when you spend the night trying to do everything and end up clamoring for a steaming bowl of noodles or a nightcap.

My favorite, apart from walking the length of the promenade deck, even as the ship heaved, swayed, and surged through the sometimes rough waters, was my Oceanview Stateroom with Balcony, the balcony hands down the very best part of the ship because it was all mine, from which to feast my eyes on the endless blue of sea and sky in the daytime and, after dusk, on the white-capped waves the ship left as it cut through the water as black as night. I would leave the glass doors of the balcony open when I slept at night to let the fresh air in, as well as the soothing sounds of wind and water and also, so when I opened my eyes in the morning, I would open them to the brightening skies outside. Sometimes, sea birds would break up the space, their chirping or squawking enriching the experience.

I might sound inaccurate when I say that on a cruise, all is quiet, especially on a mega ship like the Superstar Virgo, which is abuzz with all manner of activities, but I mean a different quiet, a quiet that comforts the heart, the quiet of distances, the quiet of being away from it all and at the same time being home because, after all, as John F. Kennedy once put it, "we all came from the sea."

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