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ADAM HELLIKER takes his maiden voyage aboard the elegant Brilliance of the Seas as she embarks on her inaugural Middle East cruise from Dubai

FOR MOST of us, besides Tony Blair and a handful of United Nations emissaries, the Middle East remains an enigmatic and rather intimidating collection of countries. Many would welcome the chance to sample the disparate cultures of Arabia but don't want the stress of countless flights and are nervous about travelling independently in the region. So how about a cruise?

There is a compelling logic about taking a ship around The Gulf, especially one as elegant as the modestly named Brilliance of the Seas, which I joined for its inaugural voyage in the region along with 2,400 fellow passengers eager for adventure (in a safe sort of way).

It appealed to me that, after unpacking just the once and settling in to a comfortable cabin, one could bravely take trips ashore to be jostled in a teeming souk yet know that, as dusk approached, a reviving cocktail awaited on the mothership.

After flying to Dubai and being driven to the port to board, it took a while to adjust. The ship felt just the right size to be interesting without being disorientating. This, the pride of Royal Caribbean's fleet, claims to have more open space, balconies and glass than any other cruiser and there's certainly a reassuring feeling of comfort and solidity.

At the helm was the dashing Captain Zinni whose Tannoy announcements sent some female hearts aflutter. The programme of

entertainment was impressive and relentless, ranging from the inevitable daily bingo to a seminar on "The secrets of a flatter stomach", a pointless exercise given that most passengers are reckoned to gain 8lbs in a week's cruise. For a bit of exercise there is the rock-climbing wall or you could shoot some hoops on the sports court before a round of mini-golf. Endless diversions.

Then, of incredulity to a cruise virgin like me, there is the food. Within half an hour of embarking I was in the Windjammer Café enjoying a buffet of international dishes, from Japanese salads to Thai green curry. In the evening there is fine dining at The Minstrel Dining Room, with a four-course menu; or there's the Portofino, a small Italian restaurant; and for those requiring a juicy steak, Chops Grille. Nobody on this ship goes hungry.

As the first day was spent in Dubai, everyone had a chance to have a good look around the place that was once a dusty, two-camel town and is now bling city. The relentlessly competitive architecture has produced amazing edifices, especially the mirrored skyscrapers which are a best seen at sunset. They provide a surreal contrast to the old wooden dhows that line the estuary and form the hub of frenetic trading.

The ship sailed smoothly through the night before arriving in Oman, a beautiful and verdant oasis where the people always seem to smile. Much has changed since the present, Sandhurst-



BUOYANT ECONOMY: Dubai's Marina Yacht Club and glittering skyline

trained Sultan came to power in 1970. Now visitors are warmly welcomed and for women the custom of shrouding the face is no longer obligatory.

I took the ship's tour bus to see the Grand Mosque in Muscat, the third largest in the world, built in honey-coloured stone. There was time to wander through the souk where, after the obligatory haggle, wonderful pashminas can be bought for £7.

Taking a breather at a little café, I sampled the local delicacy of cardamom coffee and halwa, a date and nut jelly eaten with a teaspoon in between sips of delicious aromatic coffee.

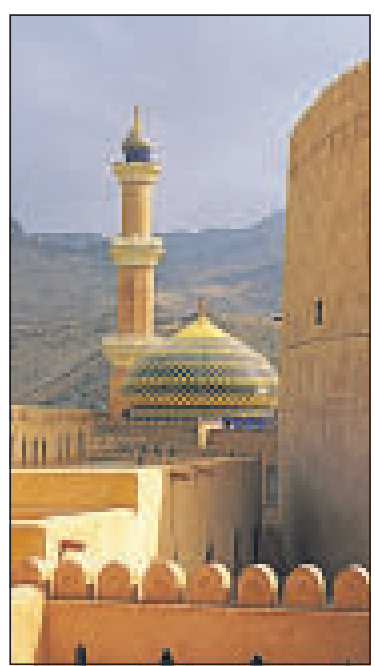
All aboard were eager to see Bahrain, known as "the island of a million date palm trees" (a proud boast given that dates are considered to be the original Viagra). Here, according to tradition, was the original Garden of Eden. The must-see on this day out from the ship was the Old Fort,

a fascinating archaeological site. Well-preserved Portuguese fortifications from the 16th century sit on top of remains from the Dilmun civilisation, which existed some 5,000 years ago. Like a Russian doll, each layer of stonework reveals more of the history of this country.

At more modest establishments, try a camelcino, a cappuccino of sorts made with camel's milk. It was both sweet and sour - much more the taste of the Middle East.

NEXT STOP was Abu Dhabi. If Dubai is the boisterous little brother, then Abu Dhabi, the capital of the seven Emirates, is the sensible elder sibling. The country now flirts with tourism but has bigger fish to fry in finance and industry. Even with the land reclamation projects put in place by Sheikh Khalifa, Abu Dhabi seems the least altered in appearance in the last decade.

It was fascinating to be taken to see another Grand Mosque,



IMPRESSIVE: The dome of Nizwa Mosque, one of Oman's treasures

STYLE TRAVELLER: Cruise essentials

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

- **YMC striped polo shirt, from £40, HUB** (020 7275 8160/www.hubshop.co.uk)
- **Espadrilles, £35, Dune** (020 7258 3605/www.dune.co.uk)
- **Sunglasses, £125, Tous** (020 7734 1064/www.tous.com)
- **Hat, £16, Marks & Spencer** (0845 302 1234/www.marksandspencer.com)
- **Compass cufflinks, £99.95, Tateossian at Harrods** (020 7730 1234/www.harrods.com)
- **Embellished sandals, Bourne, £143** (01482 334590/www.bournecollection.com)

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★ Star break: HAMBURG ★

TAKING a well-earned break in Germany's second-largest city last week, Leona Lewis had fun feeding the animals at Hagenbeck Zoo.

The singer was able to pet a capybara, the world's largest rodent as well as stroke and feed such animals as giraffes, baby orangutans and Asian elephants. The zoo and wider wildlife park is a listed site of historical interest and its panoramic views and open-air enclosures are world famous.

Hamburg offers a wealth of other attractions for the visitor, especially around the harbour. Landungsbrücken is the most popular tourist sector, with souvenir shops, bars, baroque-style cafés and a mouthwatering array of seafood restaurants. The Rickmer Rickmers, an elegant, three-master museum ship, is also moored



here. View the city's landmarks such as St Michaelis Church and the majestic copper-roofed Rathaus (town hall) on a cruise around the harbour and inland waterways. Also worth a visit is the Hafencity, a regenerated section of the harbour front boasting eye-catching contemporary architecture. The impressive Elbphilharmonie (philharmonic concert hall) currently under construction here is

tipped to rival Sydney Opera House as one of the world's best.

● **GETTING THERE:** Cities Direct (01242 536900/www.citiesdirect.co.uk) offers three nights at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Hamburg, from £274pp (two sharing), B&B. Price includes return flights from Gatwick. German National Tourist Board: 0207 317 0908/www.germany-tourism.co.uk

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16 Aug 10	469	519	3 Jan 11	619	669				
23 Aug 10	599	649	10, 17 Jan 11	619	669				
30 Aug 10	Sold Out	519	24 Jan 11	619	669				
6, 13 Sep 10	619	669	31 Jan 11	669	719				
20, 27 Sep 10	619	669	7 Feb 11	669	719				
4 Oct 10	649	699	14 Feb 11	719	769				
11, 18 Oct 10	619	669	21, 28 Feb 11	699	749				
25 Oct 10	689	739	7 Mar 11	699	749				
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