

TRAVEL NEWS

BY ROGER WHEELER

HAPPY CRUNCHIE CHRISTMAS!

It is Christmas, in case you hadn't noticed – time to enjoy ourselves! Except it's all a bit depressing if you pay any attention to the current harbingers of doom that dominate our daily news bulletins. Well, I've had enough of credit crunching and recession, so sit down in your most comfortable chair, fasten your seatbelt, close your eyes and dream – you are joining the long-lost company of armchair travellers and it's free! You do believe in Father Christmas, don't you? Let's see where we could go – to places that you've probably always wanted to visit but never seem to have the time (or money) to.

SEA CLOUD II



I've never fancied cruising (on a boat that is), but friends tell me that I am missing a treat (thank you James) so the first stop on our fantastic voyage is on **Sea Cloud II**. I saw this lovely ship some years ago and was blown away by the sheer luxury. A four-master barque, she mainly sails the **Caribbean** but occasionally **trans-Atlantic** and the **Mediterranean**. She's a floating

country-house hotel with a maximum of 96 guests and 60 – mainly young and good-looking – crew. Let's not spoil this trip with boring details such as the cost, but if you must know, prices start from **£4,500** for a **15-day cruise**. If you want real luxury staterooms then it can be a lot more. www.seacloud.com will take you there.

Let's come back to (virtual) reality and a bit closer to home. Why not wear a glass or two of champagne in **Champagne**, of course. Jump on **Eurostar**, the cheap option, and from **Gare du Nord** hire a limo for the three-hour drive to **Reims**, which will cost only **£300** for the return trip. Check into **Château les Crayeres** with suites starting at **€575** per night. This luxurious château will also arrange a complete champagne package; the two-night **Discover Veuve Clicquot** deal is a mere **€2,370** for two. Bargain! www.lescraieres.com



CHATEAU LES CRAIERES



For the ultimate in boys' toys travel, how about driving **£170,000** worth of **Ferrari F430 Spider** around the

beautiful towns of **Lake Como**. No problem – www.travelimpact.co.uk can arrange a three-day trip for **£2,100** per person. That includes two nights' accommodation and the services of a private tour director.



LAKE COMO

So if all that is not enough, let's blow the entire lottery win on two weeks at **Qualia Resort** on **Hamilton Island**, which is on the **Great Barrier Reef**. Obviously it's five star, with double rooms from **£600** per night at full board including transfers (but not the flight from the UK). Take a look at www.qualia.com.au.



QUALIA RESORT

Back in the real world, we aren't going to win the lottery but there really are loads of places to see and things to do here at home that are free. Take the capital, for instance. As we all know, just **£10** for a **Southern DaySave** ticket will take you up to town.

Now all the **national museums** are **free**, as are some of the greatest art galleries in the whole world. Not into galleries? OK, take a wander round the **British Library** on Euston Road – quite an amazing place – or try the **Science** and **Natural History Museums**, which are also brilliant. Avoid school holidays of course.

Or stroll over Westminster Bridge, trying not to fall over all the tourists, walk along the South Bank, take the lift



up the **Oxo Tower** and then go on to **Tate Modern**, ride the escalators up to the top, have a coffee and take in one of the best views in London. Apart from the coffee, it's all free. Then take a trip on the Docklands Light Railway past Canary Wharf to Greenwich and the **National Maritime Museum**.

Greenwich is a fascinating place: loads of history, cafes, bars and a great museum. And it's also free, of course. Have a great Christmas!



THE GREAT TRAIN LOTTERY THINGS THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO KNOW: 3

By now everyone must be aware of the availability of cheap train fares through the many specialist websites and those nice people in the **1 Stop Travel** shops. But there are some websites that can give some really amazing value fares; www.nationalexpresseastcoast.co.uk is well known. The name might suggest otherwise but the **National Express East Coast** system covers the whole UK, has no booking fees and sometimes gives extra discounts if your journey uses its network. One advantage of this is it includes a low-fare finder, which will also find alternative routes that may be cheaper.

But www.megatrains.com beats them all. We all know about the cheap bus fares offered by **Megabus**, owned by **Stagecoach**. When they started buying train franchises they slipped the Megatrains website online without any fanfare, the reason being that the site undercuts prices being offered by its other companies. You can book train tickets up to 45 days in advance and fares start at **£1**, but it's very unlikely you will actually get a ticket at that price. As you would expect you can't use railcards, you must use the services you have specified and you can't break your journey. As with Megabus they do add a 50p booking fee but it is about the best value around at the moment.

ScotRail's extraordinary **£19** each way **sleeper fare** to **Edinburgh** is another incredible fare. Take a look at www.firstgroup.com/scotrail, click on fares and tickets and then on sleepers.



Some basic things to remember when looking for cheap train fares:

- Two singles are often cheaper than a return
- E-tickets or text tickets are always cheaper (Virgin and Chiltern offer these)
- Railcards give a third off most fares.

Beware of **The TrainLine** and **Raileasy**, both of which charge booking fees and extra for using credit or debit cards. How else are you going to pay? I have tried pushing cash into the computer but it doesn't seem to work, so you're always going to pay 2.5 per cent extra for using a card. Don't forget that from September 2008 all tickets bought on the day of travel will be either Anytime or Offpeak but you can buy Advance tickets up to 45 days ahead. The new system was designed to make life easier. Nothing on Britain's complicated privately run railway network will ever really be simple, but this is progress of sorts.