



ALL AT SEA ON THE BAY OF BISCAY

Roger Wheeler cruises the high seas on the good ship Pont-Aven from Portsmouth to Santander

Cruising is becoming so popular; there are hundreds of offers from Rhine river cruises to round the world trips on huge liners. It's a new year, so always happy to try something new, we took the ferry from **Portsmouth** to **Santander**, they actually call it a cruise! Brittany Ferries have been operating from Portsmouth and Plymouth for years and they now have a new ship, **The Pont-Aven**, on the Santander run. We love Spain but have never been to the north; at the end of our trip we were totally amazed at the beauty of the country and the terrific cities. It is almost a different country to the one that we know so well down in the south.

The drive to Portsmouth from Brighton is only 50 miles but can take a couple of hours during rush hour; catching the 11am cruise meant leaving Brighton at 7.30am. We got to the terminal in just over two hours, so in plenty of time. I can never understand why British ferry ports are so naff and Portsmouth is no exception. It's the usual collection of tatty single storey buildings, looking as though it had been abandoned years ago.

The ship is large, 40,700 tonnes, making it the biggest of the Brittany Ferries fleet with a capacity of 2,415 passengers, 185 crew and 600 vehicles. By no means is it the biggest ferry in Europe but it is certainly one of the newest and probably one of the nicest. It's also fast with a top speed of 52+ knots, which is about 50kph. You can't just be a foot passenger but are required to have a cabin or



at least a sleeper seat as the crossing takes 24 hours. The facilities onboard are quite extraordinary for what is, after all, a car ferry. There are 652 cabins, ranging from the very luxurious Commodore Class (the only cabins on the Channel with balconies) through Deluxe, Club to Standard two and four berth either inside or outside. We had a club class cabin for just two of us on the outward trip and a standard outside on the way back. They were fine; very clean and comfortable. The bathrooms were a wonder of design, fitting a shower, wash basin and toilet into a very compact space, but it all worked.

There are a selection of bars and restaurants, but as we were on a strict budget we only looked at the very classy La Flora restaurant, with prices of around £30 per head being not too bad when you saw the menu. We decided

to join the majority of the passengers in the self service restaurant where for about £10 you could get a very respectable meal.

This ship has delusions of being a cruise liner as they actually have a swimming pool; well I suppose you could swim about three or four strokes! It's quite small, but nonetheless there it is. They also have entertainment, singers, bingo, magicians, all the usual fun that families expect on a ship of this size. We went in late September when there were very few families and most of the passengers were, shall we say, mature. On our return trip there were 1,500 on board and it was surprising that there was so much space.

The ship and everything on board is French, all the crew are French, but of course they all speak perfect English and the currency is either sterling or euro. A small tip, onboard pay in sterling as it's cheaper than paying in euro, strange but true. Most of the crew we came into contact with were excellent; one in particular deserves mention, Sandrine who couldn't have been more helpful. She made a point of telling us about all the facilities and then showed us the dolphins, which are not an uncommon sight in the Bay of Biscay. Staff who go just that little bit further can make a huge difference. She failed to ensure good weather on the return; the Bay of Biscay can be rough to put it mildly and it was.

This trip is never going to be cheap. We travelled as guests of Brittany Ferries and the cost would have been £440 but that included the car and the accommodation. If you add meals and drinks you'd probably end up spending in excess of £500, and yet it's always busy. There are always deals to be had, the *Daily Telegraph* is a good place to look but there is nothing wrong with simply ringing the ferry company and asking for the best price, then ask them to improve on it. It does work! This is cruising without the bruising.



Brittany Ferries is a pretty slick operation; they have no competition on this route and in the spring are taking over the Portsmouth to Bilbao route from P&O who couldn't make it pay. Santander and Bilbao are just 70 miles apart whether they can sustain two large ships on parallel routes is another matter. Nevertheless, we will be going back to what they call Green Spain.

OUR CABIN

