



Breathe in, breathe out. I found myself synchronising my breath with the ocean as we sailed, nothing in view but a blue haze softening into the horizon and a turquoise surface laced with undulating sea foam. Then came the exhale. Relaxation in its truest form. No stress, no distractions, just fresh air and open water, held steady by the rhythm of waves lapping against the ship. Buoyant, calm and fully present, this is wellness at sea.

As health tourism reshapes modern lifestyle habits, cruise lines have quietly redefined what it means to travel by sea. Gone are the days when cruising was synonymous with excess, of pile them high buffets, endless poolside lounging and a spa schedule buried in the small print of the daily planner. Today, cruising has evolved into a series of wellness choices. Decks of them. Spaces to stretch, breathe and reset, to enjoy pleasure and freedom without guilt, with the ocean itself providing a constant backdrop for renewal and longevity.

I have experienced this evolution first hand, from fully immersive wellness retreats to more flexible, dip in, dip out

wellbeing programmes. From Crystal Cruises' structured, retreat style sailings, to Cunard's choose your own approach, each offers a distinct and compelling path to wellness at sea.

I joined Crystal Cruises' first dedicated wellness retreat at the end of 2024, sailing 3,971 nautical miles from Barcelona to Accra aboard the elegant Crystal Symphony. The retreat embraced fourteen days of classes, workshops, lectures, and port excursions steeped in wellness, all buoyed by fresh sea air and long doses of sunshine. Tailored experiences including a three-day detox, not without its challenges when surrounded by buttery pastries and decadent desserts winking from nearby counters, while yoga poses tested balance on a gently moving ship, a reminder that wellness at sea demands presence rather than perfection. Evenings were quietly powerful. Stargazing meditations on the top deck, wrapped in cosy blankets beneath open skies, encouraged stillness, while gratitude walks around the deck became rituals of reflection, an opportunity to let go of long held, negative thought patterns and throw them overboard to leave space to reconnect with the moment.





A fitness expert unpacked dumbbells and resistance bands for strength, stability and balance work, while a meditation specialist led sessions designed to boost energy and mobility alongside trigger therapy, (ouch), painful in places. I discovered more stretching techniques than I thought possible, from dynamic and ballistic, to static and isometric, many of which have since crept into my daily routine. Posture correction and injury prevention completed the physical programme, grounding it firmly in longevity rather than aesthetics.

On shore, wellness flowed naturally into the destinations themselves. E biking in Gibraltar raised heart rates against a dramatic backdrop, a Hammam ritual in Tangiers delivered deep, sensory restoration, while a medicinal plant walk in Las Palmas connected local knowledge with ancient healing traditions.

Interwoven throughout the retreat were enrichment lectures designed to stimulate the mind as much as the body. Nutritionist Dr Christine Houghton tackled questions many of us silently carry. What is really in our food? Why am I always tired? She urged us to read labels more critically, identify harmful additives and recognise the marketing tricks that shape modern eating habits. Introducing the principles of nutrigenomics, she reframed how personal nutrition should be approached, shifting the focus to when, what and why we eat. I left informed, slightly confused and quietly amused, momentarily wondering whether I should eat at all. A feeling, thankfully, that quickly passed somewhere between dinner and dessert.

The three-day Body Detox was no small feat on an all-inclusive cruise. Dedicated menus delivered surprisingly thoughtful dishes, from baked mango and tamarind cauliflower with cilantro mint chutney to an unexpectedly good Pimm's jelly

cup. Dinners leaned into comfort without excess, with root vegetable bisque, butternut squash risotto and baked coconut rice pudding finished with blueberry compote.

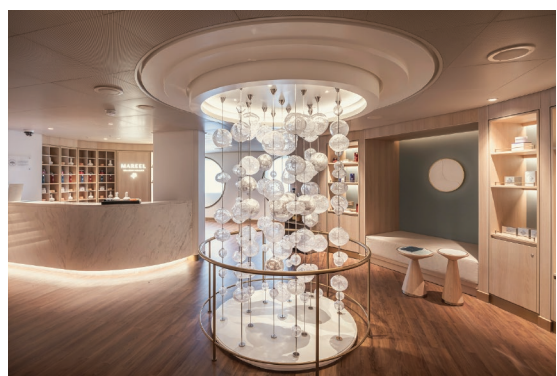
Guests were also guided through a workshop designed to build a strategic, personal wellbeing plan, translating what was learned onboard into habits that could realistically continue at home.

Naturally, the ship's Aurōra Spa played its part, with sauna, steam room and relaxation spaces encouraging deep release. Odyssey Art at Sea added a quieter, creative dimension to the retreat, offering a space for mindfulness and self-expression. Through gentle engagement of the parasympathetic nervous system, it supported rest, repair and the kind of calm that lingers long after the ship returns to port.

More recently, I sailed on Cunard's Queen Anne to experience wellness à la carte, designed to integrate seamlessly into a classic ocean voyage without demanding full immersion. Centred around The Mareel Spa, wellbeing here felt quietly purposeful rather than prescriptive.

My journey began with a Body Composition Analysis, a data driven assessment breaking down muscle mass, fat distribution and hydration levels. A personal consultation based on the results highlighted imbalances and identified areas for improvement. It was practical, offering insight without judgement. From there, a tailored exercise programme focused on building muscle and correcting weaknesses, supported by a nutritional consultation that recommended increased protein intake alongside smaller, more frequent meals to boost metabolism. By scheduling these assessments early in the voyage, I was able to weave the recommendations into my days on board, turning the cruise itself into adopting better long-term habits rather than a temporary wellness fix.





Treatments ranged from acupuncture, enhanced with infra-red technology to release long held tension, to a bamboo massage adapted to suit my frame, combined with hot stones to roll stress away. A technology driven facial promised visible results and, I am fairly sure, smoothed a wrinkle or two. Cunard's approach reflects a broader shift among travellers, particularly more mature guests, towards non-invasive therapies and holistic solutions that support long term wellbeing.

The Pavilion, an open-air sanctuary on the top deck, beneath a retractable glass dome, hosted Tai Chi, Pilates and yoga classes with enviable views over an ocean stretching endlessly ahead. At quieter moments, the space became one of stillness, amplified by fresh sea air and a gentle breeze. Elsewhere, the spa offered experiences such as cryo-body treatments and a Himalayan salt sauna, emphasising Cunard's commitment to innovation without sacrificing tradition.

Onshore, wellness continued to shape the journey. In Fuerteventura, I joined a visit to a family-run aloe vera farm, an experience that blended education, sustainability and hands on learning. It culminated in creating a personalised face mask using freshly harvested aloe vera combined with natural ingredients. Aloe vera is rich in bioactive compounds, including vitamins, minerals, enzymes and polysaccharides such as acemannan, which has well documented anti-

inflammatory and wound healing properties. Understanding how it works elevated the experience, grounding it in science as well as sensory pleasure.

Cunard also offers holistic wellness journeys in partnership with Harper's Bazaar, blending health, beauty and inner peace across selected sailings. The Relax Journey centres on meditation, acupuncture and restorative treatments. Energise focuses on boosting vitality through massage, personal training and bamboo therapy, while Recover supports the body with reflexology, anti-inflammatory leg treatments and nourishing smoothies.

Wellness cruising is where luxury meets longevity and where the journey itself becomes part of the cure. The sea teaches balance, patience and adaptability. You may wobble in a yoga pose, but wellness at sea is not about control; it is about responsiveness. As land recedes, a subtle psychological shift takes place. Familiar routines dissolve, time stretches, and the mental noise of to-do lists and constant digital connection begins to fade. It is here that the nervous system softens, and wellness practices feel less like effort and more like instinct. Wellness cruising has not only found its sea legs, it is flourishing. What once felt like a contradiction has become a defining progression in modern wellness travel, as cruise lines continue to invest in wellbeing, allowing the ocean itself to set the rhythm.

Step aboard. Breathe in, breathe out. Let the horizon do the rest. ■

