



LIVING THE DREAM?

***Villa Vie Odyssey* sets out to rescue the rep of residential cruising.
Is this ship up to the challenge, or are they dreaming?**

by Judi Cuervo



Odyssey in Chilean fjords

Sometimes the fondest dreams begin in cold, hard reality. That was the case for the more than 100 risk-takers who decided to abandon life ashore for months, years, even a lifetime at sea, many selling their homes and possessions to chart their new course.

It was 2023, and the start-up company Life at Sea had promised a 3-year cruise that would circle the globe. With would-be guests' deposits and payments lining the company's pockets, Life at Sea cancelled the voyage less than two weeks prior to its scheduled departure because — oops! — they were unable to purchase a ship. Many guests found themselves homeless, stranded, and struggling to secure legal representation in an effort to secure refunds — refunds that many are still waiting for.

Enter Mikael Petterson. Previously Life at Sea's managing director, Petterson's new company, Villa Vie Residences, would expand upon the 3-year-cruise concept

with a continuous series of 3½-year world cruises at staggeringly affordable prices (15-year ownership begins at \$129,999, plus a monthly payment of \$4,000 for two or \$3,000 for solo occupancy). Ownership, the purchase of individual itinerary segments, and "Endless Horizons," a plan that continues for the buyer's lifetime, were the options available aboard Petterson's newly-acquired ship, *Villa Vie Odyssey*, which had most recently sailed as Fred. Olsen's *Braemar*.

Each plan would include all meals, wine or beer with lunch and dinner, housekeeping twice per week, one bag of laundry twice per week, activities, fitness options, gratuities, Starlink Internet, and medical consultations. Your cat could sail the world with you (not your dog, sadly) and, thanks to the Family & Friends program, loved ones could join in the fun (in their own villa during specific segments of the itinerary) at reasonable rates that varied depending upon your level of ownership.



Captain Val



Odyssey near Belfast

At last! The dream was realized! Almost...

Villa Vie residents headed to Belfast to ready themselves for *Odyssey's* May 30, 2024, inaugural voyage, only to discover that renovations, technical repairs, and inspections had delayed the launch ... and delayed it ... and delayed it...until the ship finally set sail on September 30.

Was *Odyssey* worth waiting for? I had the opportunity to sail her for nine days and discovered that many residents seem to believe she was. I learned a lot about Villa Vie Residences during my sailing; in particular, the dramatic difference between a residential cruise and the more traditional ones I've enjoyed for nearly 50 years.

Is *Odyssey* a dream ship or a wake-up call? I found it somewhere in between.



Observatory Lounge

heavy enough to be dangerous (I was knocked to the deck while attempting to open one with one hand while holding my phone in the other). The aging infrastructure still requires ongoing upgrades, which Villa Vie is addressing in phases.

On a positive note, the renovated pool deck is lovely with two swimming pools and a stunning pool bar backed by a dazzling tile mosaic and adorned with six flat-screen TVs (which will be nice once they get the TV system working). Furnished outdoor spaces provide a comfortable setting to view a dazzling sunset or the ship's arrival at an exotic port while vivid art and glistening staircases could hold their own against any new ship. Lounges, however, are lackluster, the Palms Café entirely devoid of atmosphere and even the highly-touted business center is, in reality, two long tables topped with gooseneck lamps and desk chairs — no computers are provided.

Villas range from 130-square-foot insides to 225-square-foot deluxe balconies. Curiously, many residents love their small inside digs, explaining that their villa is simply their bedroom and that the rest of the ship is their home.

A BIT OF BOTH

Odyssey launched in 1993 as *Crown Odyssey* and sailed under various names until 2001, when she was acquired by U.K.-based Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines. In 2008, the ship was stretched, increasing tonnage to 25,000 grt and passenger capacity to 977. Many of the cabins added during that stretch Villa Vie Residences converted to crew quarters, reducing guest capacity to a comfortable 500. (There were 324 residents on my sailing, more than 60 percent of them solo travelers.) The renovation spruced up certain areas of the ship while passing over others, creating a clash of modern and dated.

Most concerning, however, are the issues stemming from the ship's age: Residents report faulty air conditioning and heating, seriously-stressed plumbing, largely inoperable TVs in villas, and many manual doors that are





Odyssey's pool deck



Main dining room



Deluxe balcony room



Business center



Palms Café

FIERCELY PROTECTIVE COMMUNITY

“It’s really no different from communities ashore — you develop a strong bond with those you like and studiously avoid those you don’t,” one *Odyssey* resident told me.

For some residents, “the cheerleaders” are who’s avoided. These fiercely devoted members of the *Odyssey* community do not tolerate even the mildest criticism of the ship and its operation on any of the WhatsApp channels where residents communicate. “I’ve left all of the WhatsApp chats,” one Segmenter told me. “One ‘unacceptable’ comment and you’re bullied by the cheerleaders.”

One highly publicized example of this took place shortly before *Odyssey* departed Belfast when an owner had her contract cancelled after complaining about renovation delays in a WhatsApp chat.

SHORE-EX D.I.Y.

Odyssey will carry you to some of the most remarkable places on earth. Once you arrive, you’re on your own. While *Odyssey* does operate a “destinations” desk which can point out high points of the next call, no shore excursion services are provided beyond a recommendation that residents review the offerings of partner companies Shore Excursion Group and Viator.

The tricky part comes with last-minute port cancellations. (*Odyssey* has had many, mostly due to lack of appropriate certifications, including Antarctica, the Amazon, five Alaskan towns, and all scheduled calls in China.) With no shore-ex desk, these require residents to secure their own refunds.

A TASTE OF ODYSSEY

Many *Odyssey* residents seem content with the ship’s comfortable — though not luxurious — atmosphere. Dining reflects this with a “no frills” approach that places little emphasis on presentation or lavishness. This is not the ship for those seeking cute tins of caviar and extravagant beef Wellington.

All images courtesy of Villa Vie Residences

LIVING ABOARD

Residents choose between the buffet-style Palms Café or the more formal Thistle Restaurant. Both venues are serviced by the same galley and offer many of the same dishes, so it's up to you to decide whether you'd prefer your shepherd's pie be served formally at Thistle or you'd rather dish it up yourself at Palms Café.

SIPS AHOY!

While wine and beer are included with lunch and dinner, imbibing at other times surely won't break the bank. A glass of wine (Spanish Don Simon red, white, and rosé) is an astonishingly priced \$5 per glass — that's less than the tip for a similar glass in New York! Cocktails range between \$6 and \$7 and some high-end whiskies and Scotches run between \$10 to \$15.

ENTERTAINMENT: FOR RESIDENTS, BY RESIDENTS

With the exception of daily fitness classes and trivia, entertainment aboard is limited to a resident pianist who provides a melodic backdrop at cocktail hour, an occasional guest performer (on my sailing, country singer Jonathan Scott Roth popped into *Odyssey* en route to his 10-week gig aboard Holland America's *Koningsdam*), or a show created by and starring *Odyssey* residents.

Speaker's Corner, a program that allows *Odyssey* residents who have a story to tell to do so in a theater setting, is an excellent example of the ship's "for residents, by residents" philosophy. A resident's talk on her survival during the Alaska Earthquake of 1964 was outstanding!

Villa Vie *Odyssey* may not be the ideal choice for those who expect luxury in their cruise experience but if you seek escape into a world of travel and an all-inclusive way of life, *Odyssey* just might be the realization of your fondest dreams.

Curious? Villa Vie Residences offers a week-long "Try Before You Buy" option aboard *Odyssey* (\$2,100 for an inside villa or \$4,500 for a suite) to see if it's right for you. ●

The residential-cruise concept is not a new one, having been introduced in 2001 with *The World of Residencea* (now *The World*), a luxurious 43,188-grt purpose-built residential ship that is still sailing today. Alas, with residences priced in the millions of dollars and annual ownership fees of an additional 10 percent, *The World* certainly isn't for everyone. Fortunately, there are other options for those looking to chuck land living (all prices subject to change):



Villa Vie Community

CRESCENT SEAS: The soon-to-debut *Crescent Seas* is converting the luxe *Oceania Insignia* and *Regent Navigator* into high-end residential ships (and retaining those ships' existing crews) as well as constructing an entirely new ship. The company is a division of Crescent Heights, one of the country's most prestigious real-estate developers and, in its new venture, an affiliate of Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings. crescentseas.com

BLUE WORLD VOYAGES: Looking for fitness and wellness along with your new life at sea? Check out Blue World Voyages, a ship that will offer one-week cruises (\$3,500 per person plus port taxes) along with residential cruising in one of 40 penthouse, one- and two-bedroom residences. The company is currently in negotiation with a five-star cruise line for its first ship. blueworldvoyages.com

VICTORIA CRUISES LINE: An affordable residential line aimed at adults 18 and older only. The fleet consists of 1,300-passenger *Victoria Majestic* (previously Holland America Line's *Veendam*) and 1,512-passenger *Victoria Amazing* (previously *Ryndam*). Cabins may be rented for 6 to 27 months. The estimated cost per month for two residents in a standard interior stateroom on a 6-11 month lease is \$6,399. The cost per month is less the longer the lease is, but higher for other stateroom categories. victoria.cruises/home

OCEAN RESIDENCES: On paper, this line has impressive financial, real-estate, and design leadership, including the previous captain of *The World*. They are offering permanent berths on *MY Njord*, a 4-star, ultra-luxury "residential superyacht" with 134 cabins and 311 crew ... once the ship is completed at Meyer Werft sometime in 2026. oceanresidences.com

SOMNIO SUPERYACHTS: *Somnio*, a 730-foot yacht with 39 apartments, a 10,000-bottle wine cellar, and an onboard beach, is being built in Norway at VARD, a subsidiary of Fincantieri. Cabins start at 20 million euro for nearly 2,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor space; the largest is over 10,300 square feet. (Note that the name is Latin for "dream.") somniausuperyachts.com

CLYDEBUILT: Announced in 2021 and named for an island in the Hebrides, MS *Dark Island* was originally due to launch in 2025, but is currently aiming at a 2028 christening. The ship will be 39,980 grt, with 263 suites ranging from 420 feet to 2,690 square feet. *Dark Island* residents can live on board or rent their units out. clydebuilt.com

UTOPIA RESIDENCES: Built in South Korea by Samsung Heavy Industries, this 108,000 grt ship was ordered in 2009 and is currently due in 2027. Cabins will be divided between 199 full-time residences and 218 "hotel room" suites, with the smallest being 1,400 square feet and the largest, 6,600. Six private lifts will serve the residential decks only. Sixteen smaller-sized cabins are set aside to house tutors and nannies. utopiaresidences.com

STORYLINES: Due sometime in 2027, *MV Narrative* suites are priced from \$300,000 to \$8 million. The company allows residents to buy shares, co-owning a unit, and onboard amenities include a helipad, a recording studio, a pet zone with doggy daycare, and a vertical garden for growing produce. storylines.com