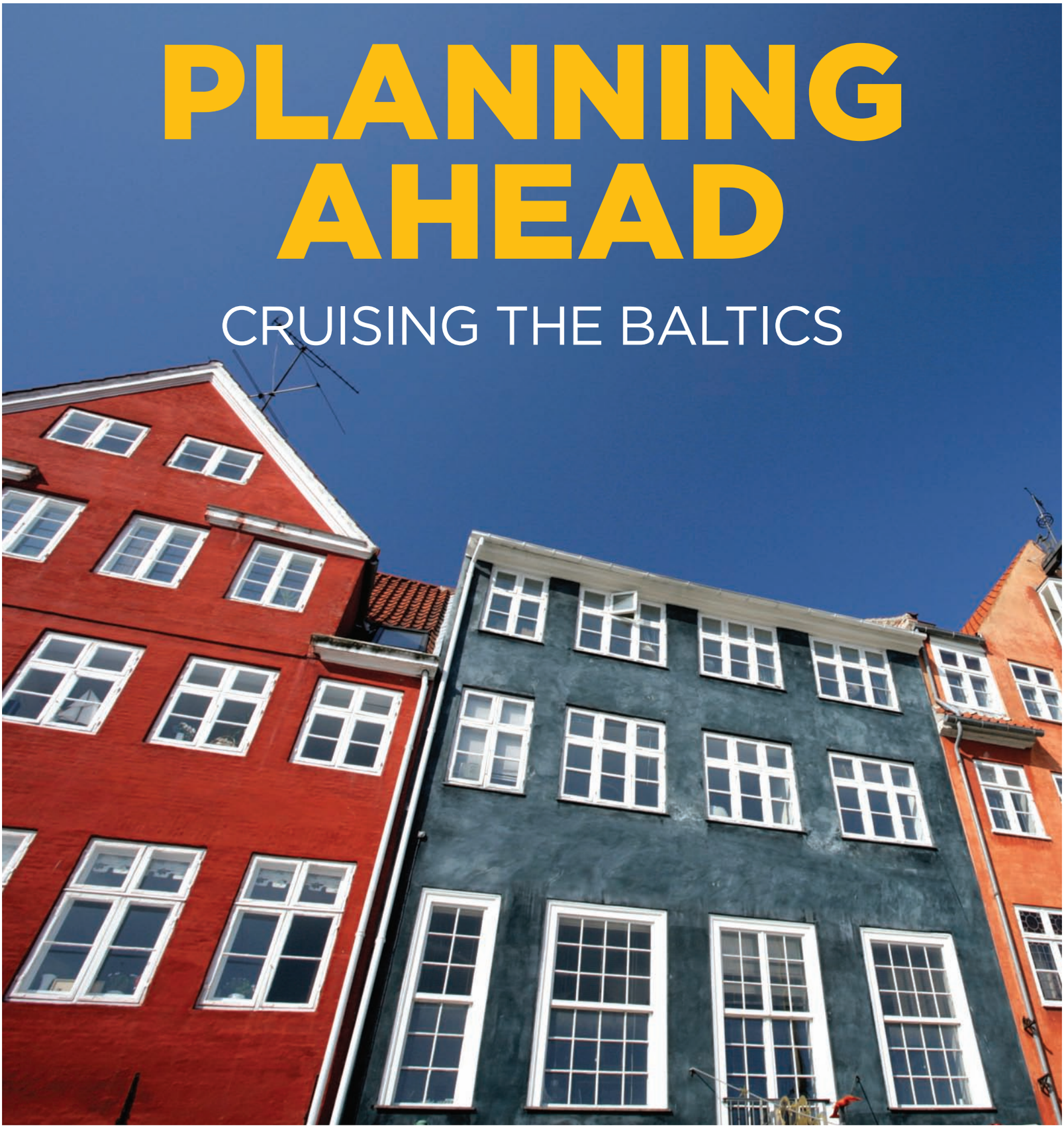
PLANNING AHEAD

CRUISING THE BALTICS



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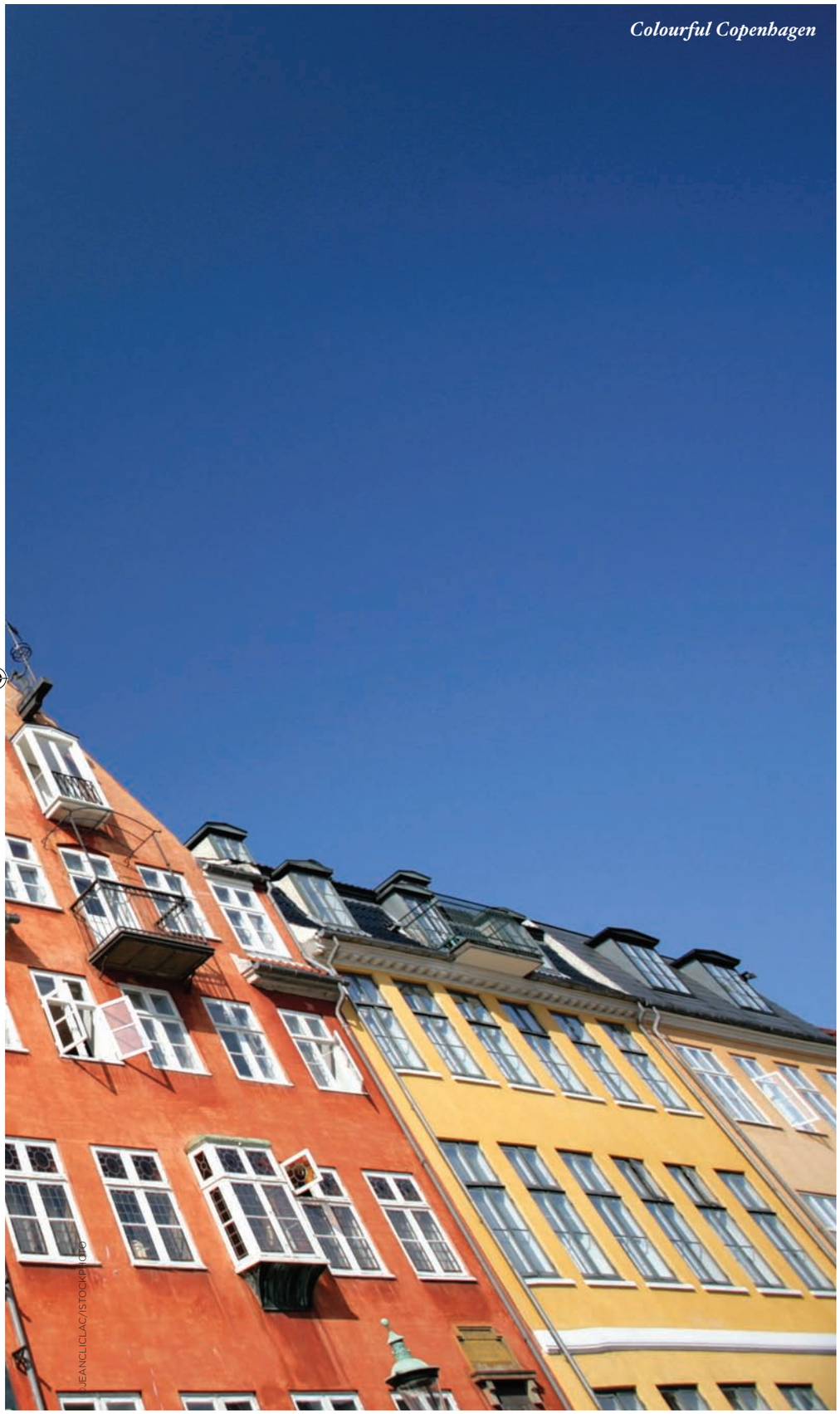

Colourful Copenhagen

Saint Petersburg has been on our bucket list ever since we discovered its incredible history, its return to the grandeur it once had as the capital of the Russian tsars and the influence of Catherine the Great. It is no secret that Baltic cruises have soared in popularity.

My husband and I learned this the hard way when we tried to make a reservation six weeks before a Crystal cruise that would take us to Saint Petersburg and five other ports of call in early June.

"Sorry," we were told, "the ship is fully booked."

So, we treated the booking process as a learning opportunity. Lesson # 1: Book early. Lesson # 2: Go anyway. We opted for a 10-day sailing on the Crystal Serenity in July, during the peak tourist season.

When we did finally get on board, the first thing we discovered was that they didn't call Catherine "the Great" for nothing. A minor Prussian princess, she was summoned to Russia at the age of 14 by Empress Elizabeth to marry her son and produce an heir. She came to power after her husband was assassinated, determined to modernize Russia under Western European lines.

Building her city along the classic lines she favoured, she ruled as an enlightened despot for 34 years until 1796, and was one of the richest and most powerful women of her time.

From Stockholm, Crystal's 10-day itinerary included six ports of call in six countries, offering a glimpse of some of Europe's most vibrant cities. With three days (a minimum we were told) in Saint Petersburg, we toured the Hermitage Museum and other extravagant palaces built before and during Catherine's reign. On port-intensive cruises such as this one, a comprehensive shore excursion program is one of the most

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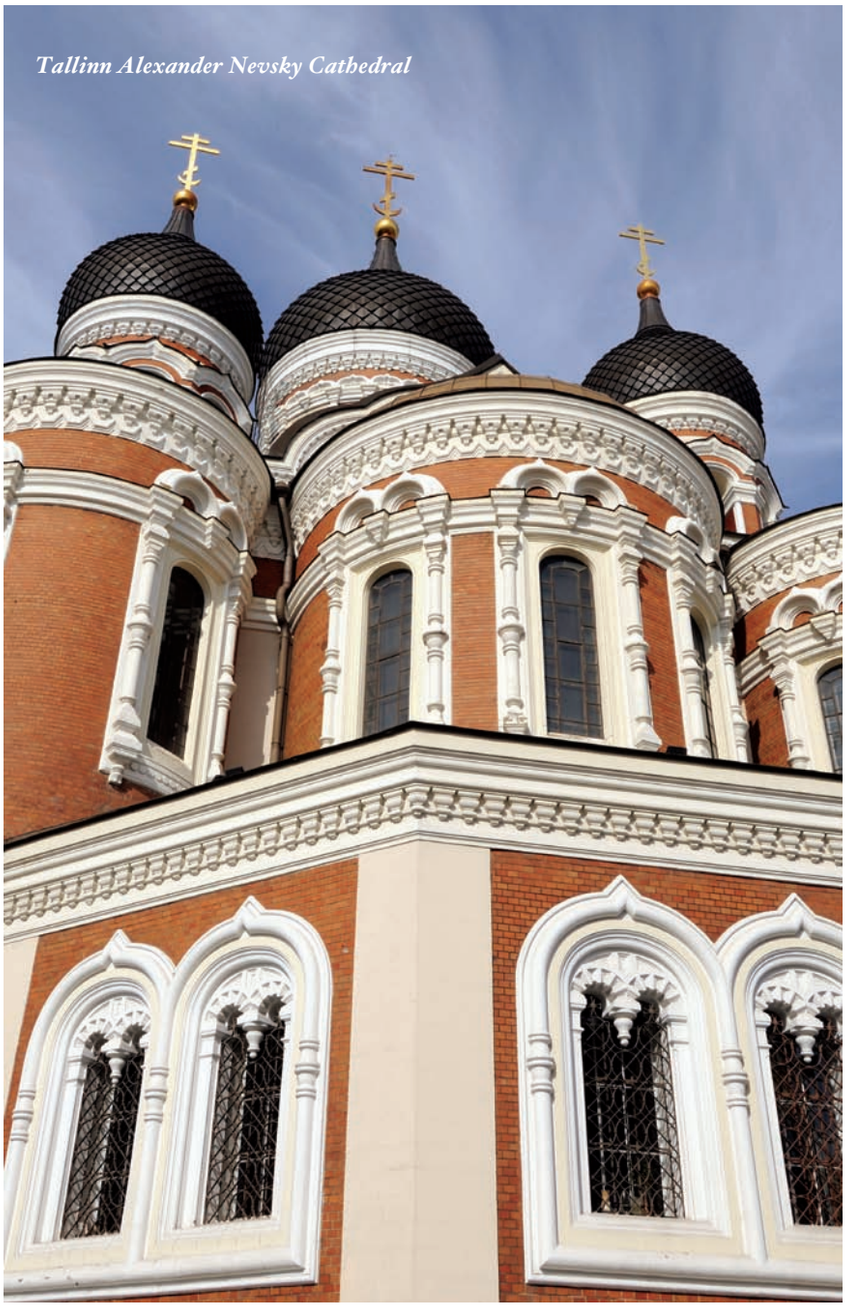

Tallinn Alexander Nevsky Cathedral

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important things to consider, especially when the ports include Europe's most exotic and historic cities. We were not disappointed with the diversity of Crystal's shore offerings, including the calibre of the tour guides.

Also not to be overlooked was the luxuriousness of six-star *Crystal Serenity*.

The Lap of Luxury

That rating, lap of luxury, was what the legendary *Fielding's Guide to Cruises*, now out-of-print, gave to Crystal in 1998. For the past 18 years, the cruise line has been voted the "World's Best" by readers of *Condé Nast Traveler* and *Travel + Leisure* magazines. Price does not factor into these ratings. It is, the editors note, all about quality of the experience.

On the *Serenity*, we were pampered by a friendly, attentive staff that anticipated our every need. We were served gourmet meals paired with first-rate, complimentary wines. We hit the dance floor each evening before taking in the evening's entertainment, or watching the midnight sun set. These, we told each other, are some of life's pure joys. And then there was Jaison, our tall, handsome butler who told us he was at our beck and call.

Each afternoon Jaison would announce Happy Hour with a plate of hors d'oeuvres and a glass of bubbly, welcome refreshment after a day of touring and sightseeing. A man of many talents, he whisked away our ironing for same-day service, made a rumpled tuxedo look like new, provided hot tips for sights to see or ship activities not to miss, and never missed giving a nod of approval when we gussied up for the captain's reception or a special dinner.

Our penthouse stateroom on Deck 10 was superb, both understated and luxurious. It had a king-sized bed, a sofa and comfy chair, a refrigerator and stocked bar, a flat-screen TV with a DVD/CD player, personalized stationary and bathroom stocked with fluffy towels and bathrobes and Aveda toiletries. It was everything you would expect in a six-star floating resort.

Another plus is the ship's favorable passenger/space ratio. With less than a thousand passengers onboard, the public rooms were never crowded. Nor did we line up at the buffet tables. As for dining options, we liked the elegant Crystal Dining Room that, unlike many ship eateries, allows passengers to dine at a different time each evening. We also enjoyed the more intimate, Italian-flavoured *Prego* and the *Silk Road,* with a sushi bar that could hold its own in Tokyo.

On the finance side, the all-inclusive pricing offered by Crystal made it possible to relax and enjoy the amenities instead of worrying how big a bar tab we'd created or how much to tip the staff who make pampering us look effortless.

Ports of Call

Each port we visited had a special charm all its own and in each port, Crystal provided exceptional tour guides.

STUNNING STOCKHOLM

The two days we scheduled in Stockholm were not enough to see as much as we would have liked, but enough to know that we would return. A comfortably sized city with the advantages of an international metropolis, it sparkled under the summer sun. Enjoying lunch at a sidewalk café, we were gobsmacked by the young, handsome blondes that sauntered by, not a homely one in sight. Also not to be missed were the Vasa and Nobel Prize Museums. For '60s music fans there is the Abba Museum where you "walk in and dance out."

Leaving Stockholm, we sipped champagne on our private balcony while being treated to some of the most superb scenery of the trip as the ship glided past the thousands of islands that make up the Swedish Archipelago.

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TALLIN

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The Old Town of Estonia's capital, with its cobbled streets, dotted with Gothic spires and lined with ancient gabled houses, is a must see. Some 900 years old, it is easy to navigate on foot. Our tour guide painted a vivid picture of life in Estonia under communist rule and their current nationalistic pride.

HELSINKI

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We docked in Helsinki on a gray day, drizzle and overcast skies casting a sombre hue over everything. Nevertheless, we took in the remarkable architecture of the Rock Church, imposing civic buildings and the pink granite Art Nouveau central railway station.

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MAJESTIC ST. PETERSBURG

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Our time in this magical city was precious. We packed every available moment touring its castles, including its crown jewel, the Hermitage Museum, strolling the opulent Peterhof Palace gardens that Peter the Great created to emulate Versailles. We poked through the unbelievably ornate Catherine Palace, amazed at the artefacts she amassed during her reign. We took in an endless parade of architectural gems, notably the pastel baroque and rococo palaces along the embankment of the Neva River. Each evening we returned to the ship with sensory overload. The city, once famed for its palaces and artworks, has been restored to its original glory.

BERLIN

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"Berlin is a city of open spaces, green spaces and water," Thomas Knuth, our engaging guide told us at the start of our afternoon walk-about. We discovered an outstanding city whose history is illustrated in the form of open-air, street museums. "We are aware of the atrocious things that have been done," Knuth said. "We must not hide our history."

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COPENHAGEN

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A full-swing jazz festival greeted us in Copenhagen with music drawing crowds on every city centre square. We took in traditional tourist sites such as the sculpture of the Little Mermaid who turned 100 this year, the Tivoli Amusement Park and the Amalienborg Palace on a hop-on, hop-off bus and the harbour boat tour, the best way to see the city`s glossy architectural showpieces, including a stunning new opera house that floats on its own island.

Memorable doesn't begin to describe the experience. However, next time we will book early to avoid high season.

Narva Triumphal Gate

Street view in Stockholm, Sweden

Brandenburg Gate and Tourists

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