



OASIS MAKES A BRITISH DEBUT

THERE she blows! Whether you fancy cruising or not, you can't deny the scale is impressive.

Oasis Of The Seas, the world's largest cruise ship, pictured above, is only slightly smaller than the average aircraft carrier.

Four football pitches long and six buses wide, she sets sail from Florida for Southampton in September next year.

It will be the first time the 2009-launched supership has visited our shores, as she combines her five-year check-up in a Dutch dry dock with a limited season in the Med.

If you want to marvel at her on-board park, 82ft zip wire, open-air theatre and impressive cabins, it's the perfect opportunity.

Fares for her first European season, and two Trans-Atlantic trips, go on sale next month (royalcaribbean.co.uk, 0844 493 2061).

● **AUTHOR** Margaret Atwood, broadcaster Sir David Frost and cricketer Mike Cowan are some of the famous faces appearing on Cunard ships this year.

Mike will entertain passengers on Queen Victoria's April 26 short-break cruise from Southampton to Hamburg and Le Havre. Five-night fares start from £449.

Margaret Atwood will preview her book MaddAddam on Queen Mary 2's New York to Southampton cruise from August 15 to 22. Fares start from £1,449 for seven nights, with outward flight.

Sir David will sail on Queen Mary 2 from Southampton to New York from October 8 to 15. Fares start from £1,449 including return flight. See cunard.co.uk.

● **SAIL** in the wake of heroes to mark the 70th anniversary of D-Day. The MS Marco Polo will cruise off Normandy on June 6, 2014, during a seven-day Leger Holidays' package that includes visits to Pegasus Bridge and the Utah and Omaha beaches.

The tour, starting from £739, includes six nights full-board and entertainment.

For more details, call 0844 692 2654 or visit battlefieldhistorytours.info.

Peak performer



TOP GEAR... Mark in action and, top, serenaded at a feeding station



GET ON YER BIKE... AND PEDAL AROUND ALPINE PARADISE

AFTER more than 20 years of road cycling, I thought I knew how to ride a bike.

So my first mountain biking trip didn't seem that much of a challenge. Just thicker tyres and more mud, surely?

I was in the Portes du Soleil, a major ski area on the French-Swiss border that becomes Europe's biggest off-road biking area in summer. The lifts even have hooks you hang your machine on. This saves you the bother of going uphill at all if you don't fancy it. What a doddle!

But I soon discovered it is like learning to ski. The first thing you do is fall off.

Hurting down steep, rutted paths was trickier than I'd thought. Recent rain made wooded trails particularly slippery.

After a few minutes I hit the dirt, grazing my leg. Later, going up a sharp slope, the front wheel lifted and I fell on to the rear wheel.

One of my mistakes was to have pedal clips fitted, so I headed to the bike shop for some flat pedals. That and some guidance from local bike gurus Luc Thiebaut and Jeremy Ancey helped.

One of their tips is to **TRUST** the bike. Then you won't fall off. Unless you go over a cliff. Once mountain bikes were heavy things with big, knobby tyres. Now they do everything except pedal.

Mine was a borrowed £2,000 Lapierre Zesty and I was learning to love the difference.

You get suspension on both wheels to cushion you against the rockiest paths and disc brakes work with the slightest pressure from one finger, rather than the white-knuckle squeezing of old. All this saves much pain. I learned to keep the pedals parallel to avoid coming to grief in deep ruts.

Going up, you shift your weight

to the front to avoid bouncing backwards. And on super-steep downhill, I was told to hang my bum off the back of the saddle. This is some skill. One hair-raising descent nearly left me with a permanent falsetto voice.

On the first day I palled up with a fellow mud-caked beginner and we tried all the downhill routes we dared. These follow the ski runs and are graded in the same way. The next day we tried the 50-mile route that links all 12 resorts in the Portes du Soleil.

Crossing from France to Switzerland and back again, with Alpine views on every side, this is as scenic as cycling gets.

There are routes according to your ability/stupidity so you can tackle rocky precipices kamikaze-style or potter along idyllic lakeside paths while admiring the distant snow-topped peaks.

We chose the easy ways – though they didn't always seem so. More like cycling on a rockery after heavy rain at times.

The weekend of our visit was the annual three-day shindig to kick off the mountain biking season, which runs from June to September.

Called the Pass Portes du Soleil MTB, it gets bigger every year – this year's will be in Châtel on June 28, 29 and 30.

There are seven feeding stations en route, and with specialities from the Haute-Savoie region such as tartiflette and diot sausage, it seemed rude not to stop at them all.

That and the hot weather made us too slow and tired to make the last lift home at 6pm without cutting off a ten-mile loop. Later, comparing bruises over beers, I reflected that going down a mountain on two wheels is as fun as skiing – the same thrills, stunning scenery, Alpine food and drink.

Plus the, er, sophisticated continental rock music blaring out.

But the weather is more reliable and being on a bike puts you in control because you're not at the mercy of lifts or bogged down on the flat.

The only downside is you don't land in snow when you fall off.

MARK WILLEY

GO: ALPINE BIKING

GETTING THERE: Easyjet and BA fly to Geneva from several UK airports. The Portes du Soleil region is just over an hour away by car, longer in bad traffic.
STAYING THERE: Self-catering apartments start at £45 per person for a week. I stayed at the 2* Chalet Hotel Regina in Les Gets, which had doubles from £47 for two.
MORE INFO: See portesdusoleil.com for mountain biking and accommodation options. The Pass Portes du Soleil MTB is in Châtel on June 28, 29 and 30, see passportesdusoleil.com.

WEEKEND

McDermid and Ian Rankin and returns for its second year. Find out more at bloodyscotland.com.

English Riviera Agatha Christie Festival, Devon (Sep 15-22): The Sleuths' event is taking a year off but the Agatha Christie Festival returns for its ninth year, giving fans of the author, right, the chance to dress up for a busy programme of cream teas and murder. See englishriviera.co.uk/agathachristie.

Guildford Book Festival, Surrey (October 17-26): The programme is still being finalised but there's evidence that the criminal element of the festival will feature some of the usual suspects. See guildfordbookfestival.co.uk.



HOLIDAY FAIR RIDES AGAIN

ROLL up, roll up – the traditional fairground at Butlins Bognor Regis is back in action after refurbishment.

Among the old-style fun favourites are the carousel, dodgems, helter skelter and chair-o-planes.

Vanessa Toulmin, a professor of fairgrounds at the University of Sheffield, said: "This is a fair you can visit with your grandparents."

"Parents can take their children, teenagers can go on the rides and young families can go on the helter skelter and play on the sideshows. It's perfect."

A four-night break at the Wave Hotel at Butlins Bognor Regis resort starts from £49 per person. See butlins.com or call 0845 070 4734.



NOVEL WAYS TO KILL OFF THAT LONG

CRIME fiction is booming and so are crime festivals, where readers can have a break and meet the authors.

Here, crime writer **BILL TODD** puts a few forthcoming festivals under the magnifying glass.

Scarborough Literature Festival, (April 11-14): Mark Billingham (creator of DI Tom Thorne) joins pathologist Stuart Hamilton on the opening day for the Fact And Fiction Crime Pathology event. Peter Gutteridge, author of the Brighton Trilogy, will join a panel on crime films on April 13. Find out more at scarboroughliteraturefestival.co.uk.

Crimefest, Bristol (May 30-June 2): Writers attending include

Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat (TV's Sherlock, left), race-against-time thriller writer Simon Kernick, plot twist king Robert Goddard and Peter James (the Roy Grace books).

Author panel topics include: Are Crime Writers Sadists At Heart?; Serial Killers: Why Do We Love Them?; Police Detective, Amateur, PI Or Bad Guy – Who Makes The Best Protagonist? and The Tourist Board Never Said Anything About This! See crimefest.com.

Theakstons Old Peculiar Crime Writing Festival, Harrogate (July 18-21): Europe's largest celebration of crime writing will feature more than 80 of the world's most celebrated authors

"in conversation, in action and in the bar". They include Lee Child (Jack Reacher), Ian Rankin (Rebus) and Ruth Rendell (Wexford), Kate Atkinson (Jackson Brodie), Charlaine Harris (Southern Vampire Mysteries), and writing duo Nicci French and Mark Billingham.

The festival is hosted at The Old Swan Hotel where Agatha Christie was found after her 1926 mystery disappearance. See harrogateinternationalfestivals.com/crime.

Bloody Scotland, Stirling (September 13-15): The first international crime-writing festival north of the border last autumn attracted stars including Val

GET COVER ON HOLIDAY

HOT SPOT DUBAI is 23°C ... four nights in 5* Habtoor Grand Resort is from £799. Leaving Heathrow on April 19. See hayesandjarvis.co.uk or call 0844 415 1918.

HOT SPOT CAMBODIA is 36°C – eight days' sightseeing including temple Angkor Wat is from £1,395 departing May 3. Call 0161 491 7616 or see jod.uk.com.

DON'T take risks when booking your holiday – make sure it is bonded by Air Traffic Organisers' Licensing (ATOL).

According to a Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) survey, 46 per cent of people are more concerned with finding the cheapest deal than they are with protecting their holiday.

The CAA runs the ATOL scheme to make sure holidaymakers don't lose their money and are not left stranded abroad if their holiday company goes bust.

David Clover, from ATOL, said: "Whilst it is understandable that nearly half of UK adults are more concerned with getting the cheapest deal than making sure they

are financially protected, there's a real risk people could leave themselves open to losing their money if something goes wrong with their booking."

Holidaymakers booking trips this Easter can check for ATOL protection by following three simple steps:

Looking for the ATOL logo on a travel company's promotional material.

Checking the name of the company at packpeaceofmind.co.uk. Making sure you receive an ATOL certificate with your booking. For more information on the type of holidays covered by ATOL, visit packpeaceofmind.co.uk



£39



Skylanders Giants Starter Pack PS3 £39

Homework first



in store online mobile | tesco.com
Selected UK stores. Subject to availability. Skylanders Giants Starter Pack PS3 £39. Offer ends 04/04/2013.