FRED'S LEAVING GEORDIE SHORE

CRUISE NEWS

CRUISE fans in the north can sail away from closer to home as Fred Olsen's Black Watch, *above*, starts a series of itineraries from the Port of Tyne in Newcastle.

From now until October, the 804-guest boutique liner will sail a variety of voyages, including a seven-night Norwegian Fjords trip and a 15-night Canary Islands sailing.

And you can upgrade to an all-inclusive drinks package – including wines, spirits, beers and soft drinks – for £10 per person per night. Nathan Philpot, sales and marketing director for Fred Olsen Cruise Lines, said: "We are offering our loyal Newcastle guests the chance to take an even wider selection of cruises from right on their doorstep this year. Next year there will be more, with eight departures from the Port of Tyne."

Prices start at £885 per person. Go to fredolsencruises.com or call 0800 0355 242.

● ITALIAN cruise line MSC has set its sights on trebling the number of British passengers on its ships in the next three years. As it aims to attract 200,000 Brits a year it is launching dedicated weekly British Airways charter flights to Venice and Genoa in 2015, delivering passengers to six MSC Cruises ships operating out of those ports next summer.

The Med specialist has two new mega-ships due to be delivered in 2017, followed by two more in the following two years.

MSC Cruises' Giles Hawke said: "We intend to become a significant player in the UK cruise market. We are also increasing flights from the UK for our Dubai winter programme and adding flight capacity to the Caribbean for winter 2015-16."

● GRAB a bargain break from Southampton with a ten-night full-board Northern Europe cruise on the MSC Opera from £499 per person.

The cruise departs the UK on August 28 and calls at Ijmuiden (Holland) , St Peter Port (Guernsey), Vigo (Spain), Lisbon (Portugal), Bilbao (Spain) and Le Havre (France). See virginholidays cruises.co.uk or call 0844 488 3084.

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Begging for Murcia

HAIL MARY . . . Murcia's cathedral of Santa Maria, *top*; The Good, The Bad And The Ugly, *above*, and, *left*, a local beach

TAPAS, WINE . . AND MUD ON LADS' BREAK

LETTUCE diets, booze detox, zumba-yogalates and spiritual advice from a hippy called Starshine – that's the nightmare I had conjured up at the sound of the words "spa weekend".

So when me and three lads went to get pampered in Murcia, Spain, and did not meet a single stick of celery I was very relieved.

Instead, we gorged our way through a weekend of tapas siestas and red-wine comas.

But before the food and drink could flow, I did have one spa treatment I had promised to try out.

From Alicante airport, we drove south to the San Pedro del Pinatar nature reserve, far from the rowdy stag and hen parties heading north to the English seaside colonies.

It is not hard finding volunteers to wipe sulphurous mud over themselves, provided you tell them it will rejuvenate their skin.

So there I was, stripping off in front of some surprised-looking flamingos, ready to be restored by the magical mud.

I started out digging in the wrong part of the sea floor and ended up painfully exfoliating my chest with wet gravel. But eventually I found enough of the flamingo poo-infused goodness and smothered it all over.

You're supposed to lie in the sun and turn yourself into a crispy mud pie but as it was winter and we were the only lunatics in the water, we thought it was OK to skip that bit.

The waiters in a nearby restaurant, Miramar, were very polite and did not once mention the fact we stank of rotten eggs.

Barren land

Plate after plate of tapas rolled out while we watched a free airshow by Patrulla Águila or Eagle Patrol, Spain's version of the Red Arrows, who train over the sea opposite.

We enjoyed the small, friendly bars a little too much for a group who had a wine-tasting lesson in Murcia the next morning.

I had no idea what the Spanish man was saying but worked out my favourite was the most expensive wine.

We then wandered around Murcia's food fair, tasting every wine, cheese and ham we could get our hands on, before enjoying that great Spanish pastime of passing out in the middle of the day.

We awoke from our siesta for dinner at La Tapa and sampled Murcia's trademark tapas of tuna and potato on a U-shaped breadstick.

The next morning, beginning to look and smell like cowboys, we headed out on the trail into Murcia's Wild West.

In this barren land where classics including The Good, The Bad And The Ugly starring Clint Eastwood were filmed, one thing grows very well – grapes.

We took a tasting tour of the San Isidro winery, which provides Sainsbury's with some of its best-selling reds. The wine seemed to get better the more I tried.

Beyond the vines in the distant mountains is the Roman spa town of Archena, where the Termas Hotel is built on the source of an ancient hot spring. You can even steam off your eyelashes by having a peek down the boiling well beneath the hotel.

The basement spa's arched, tiled rooms looked like a medieval hospital, so we opted for the modern spa next door.

I wallowed in a pool full of lemons, like a sweaty strawberry in a fruit punch, then cooled off in the pool as the sun slipped behind the mountains.

On our final evening, El Carril's eccentric owner was ruthless with his hospitality.

Our glasses were never empty as he stuffed us with mushrooms and chicken wrapped in prosciutto ham.

He finally let us escape but only with a parting gift of a two-litre bottle of red. We could not fit the thing in our luggage so drank from the bottle by the river like rebellious teens.

On the flight home we looked worse for wear even than the mad hen parties in matching "I heart Benidorm" T-shirts.

I'm going to need a detox now – celery smoothies, no booze and maybe some sort of spa weekend.

JACOB LEWIS

GO: MURCIA

MONARCH fly to Alicante from many UK airports from £22.99 one-way. See monarch.co.uk. A double room at the NH Cartagena is from £47 per night. See nh-hotels.com. A double room at the Hotel Termas in Balneario de Archena is from £61. See Balnearioarchenahoteltermas.com. A night at the Novotel in Murcia is from £37. See novotel.com. On what to do and where to stay go to murciaturistica.es.

AIR NEWS

BRITISH Airways is testing a hi-tech *(sky tech?)* blanket, woven with fibre optic strands which change colour according to a passenger's mood.

You put on a headband to transmit your "meditative state" and the blanket reacts to your brainwaves, showing how relaxed you are *(or not)*.

BA hopes feedback will help it to improve in-flight service by looking at what food is served and when, and even what type of film is shown.

If it helps the cabin crew predict when we'd like a drink, it's fine by us *(it's 15 minutes ago, by the way)*.

● ONCE upon a time the jokes would have been easy. An EasyJet course to overcome the fear of flying?

The first module would have covered the anxiety of getting to Luton, the second, how to beat the scrum to find a decent seat. Now things are more civilised and we fly from all over the UK on low-cost carriers – in allocated seats.

So Easyjet's Fearless Flyer course – running in Gatwick, Belfast, Luton, Edinburgh, Manchester, Bristol and Stansted – is a welcome idea.

The two-day course is £189.

It comprises a three-hour ground session and a one-hour flight the next day.

See fearlessflyer.easyjet.com for more information.