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<http://news.nationalpost.com/life/travel/holland-america-bound-for-cuba>

**Holland America bound for Cuba**

It’s been an exciting couple of weeks for Holland America Line (cruise.center/holland) — so much so that this is the third time I’m updating this week’s column. Before the Seattle-based line announces anything else that’s new and noteworthy, let me tell you about what you can look forward to in the next year or so.

First, the big news: Holland America is going to be starting its first cruises to Cuba this December, with seven-, 11- and 12-day itineraries that include Cuba as part of a broader Caribbean sailing program that will also include stops in a variety of ports in the Western and Eastern Caribbean.

While most itineraries will include an extended call on Havana, Holland America Line is also featuring stops in the pretty seaside city of Cienfuegos on select sailings. These Cuban sailings will operate until April 2018, and the line expects demand for these voyages to be extremely high.

“For many, travel is about seeking new places to explore and discovering meaningful new cultural opportunities, and Cuba is one of the most sought-after new destinations for many of our guests,” said Orlando Ashford, president of Holland America Line. “We are excited to finally be able to include Cuba in our itineraries, and our guests and travel partners have been anxiously awaiting a premium cruise experience to this relatively undiscovered Caribbean treasure.”

Bookings literally just opened for these cruises, which will sail round-trip from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., aboard the fabulous 1,350-guest Veendam. Built in 1996, she has been heavily refitted over the years but is still one of my favourite Holland America Line ships thanks to her spacious public rooms, wide-open decks, and uncrowded nature. With most new ships carrying 3,000 or more passengers, a sailing aboard a ship that carries just over a thousand people is a decidedly more relaxing experience.

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Speaking of new ships, bookings are now open for Holland America’s newest ship, Nieuw Statendam, which will make her debut in late 2018, with her maiden voyage — a 14-day transatlantic crossing from Rome to Fort Lauderdale. Departing on Dec. 5, 2018, this Premiere Voyage will probably sell out quickly, so I wouldn’t wait to snag a stateroom or suite on Nieuw Statendam’s first crossing.

Once she arrives in the United States, Nieuw Statendam will sail a program of Caribbean cruises for the winter 2018-19 season. Most of these will be a week in duration, but Holland America tells me there will also be a handful of three-, four- and 10-day voyages.

While Nieuw Statendam will be similar to her direct sister ship, Koningsdam, she will have her own distinctive decor (as all Holland America Line ships do) that will differentiate her. Heading up the design team are Adam D. Tihany and longtime cruise ship designer and architect, Bjørn Storbraaten.

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Finally, Holland America has announced more West Coast sailing options this winter, as it positions both Oosterdam (pronounced oh-sterdam) and her sister, Westerdam, out of San Diego for an increased program of Mexican Riviera voyages.

These two Vista-class ships will offer week-long cruises that call on Cabo San Lucas, Mazatlán, and Puerto Vallarta, coupled with a total of three days at sea. This is the “classic” Mexican Riviera run — one that offers plenty for folks who are interested in history, culture, or who just want to kick back in the sand and surf.

In addition to Westerdam’s regularly published schedule, Oosterdam will offer an additional 11 week-long voyages to the Mexican Riviera. These start this coming Sept. 30, with two back-to-back sailings. You can even sail from Vancouver down to the Mexican Riviera on Sept. 25 by pairing the Oosterdam’s Pacific Coast repositioning cruise with her first week-long sailing from San Diego. Voyages operate on a handful of dates between September and February 2018.

I sailed to the Mexican Riviera last year aboard Westerdam and was impressed at the evolution of Holland America’s product in Mexico. On-board cultural events such as dance classes, authentic cuisines and language lessons really enhanced what was already a great product. The line plans to introduce even more of these features with its new Explorations Central concept, which was just refitted onto Westerdam this spring.

Happy cruising.

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