

Travel and Adventure: Norwegian Pearls of thought

by Molly Arost Staub

"I know we booked this cruise aboard the Norwegian Pearl a long time ago," wailed my husband Bob. "But that was before I knew my Patriots would be in the playoffs."

BIG-TIME BIG SCREEN - The Crystal Atrium aboard the Norwegian Pearl can broadcast major sporting events on a massive TV screen - 17 feet by 22 feet. CNS Photo courtesy of Michel Verdure for Norwegian Cruise Line. **RUSSIAN ROYALTY** - Ten different venues for eating are offered, with varying levels of sophistication on the Norwegian Pearl. Those who prefer elegant service can be spotted at the Summer Palace Restaurant, with decor reminiscent of St. Petersburg. CNS Photo courtesy of Michel Verdure for Norwegian Cruise Line. **PRIVATE PARADISE** - Aboard the Norwegian Pearl, 10 luxurious villas share a dreamy courtyard with private pools and sundecks. CNS Photo courtesy of Michel Verdure for Norwegian Cruise Line. His beloved New England football team would be playing to win a step toward the Super Bowl. And we would be sailing off into the Caribbean. Did he expect me to cancel the cruise on this gorgeous new ship departing for Mexico? No way.

But the ship's planners had thought of everything. Not only was the game broadcast at sea, but on a humungous TV screen - 17 feet by 22 feet - in the Crystal Atrium. Every gem-toned, shiny velour seat was taken, along with those on the balcony eateries above. Talk about having your cake and eating it too.

The creators of Freestyle Cruising have considered almost everything to make their passengers comfortable. Not content with eliminating the old standard of set dining times with reservations at the same table nightly, they offer 10 different venues for eating, with varying levels of sophistication. Passengers may dress up if they wish, or remain casually clothed.

We spotted some who preferred the elegant service in the Summer Palace, the decor reminiscent of St. Petersburg, with paintings of royalty, crystal chandeliers and faux Faberge eggs. (You don't have to eat like a czar with the menu's Cooking Light items.) Or the chic Indigo, sporting paintings on glass of American icons. Here, some women dressed up, with men wearing suits, while others chose jeans. Even on the evening of the captain's cocktail party, some ladies wore glittering gowns, some gentlemen wore suits - but not one tux was in evidence.

For various surcharges, certain restaurants offer more sophisticated fare. Le Bistro, for instance, features French-carved chairs and reproductions of French artwork. The service was excellent, and dishes such as moules mariniere and the lamb rack Dijonaise were outstanding. The highly popular Cagney's Steakhouse, a dark, woody clubhouse atmosphere featuring leather upholstery and Western artwork, offered a choice of several sizes and cuts of prime Gold Angus beef. I reveled in a delectable large veal chop. The Lotus Garden Asian Restaurant complex proffers a sushi bar, a teppanyaki room and an area for Asian fusion cuisine.

But, in fact, some passengers on the Pearl chose never to be served, but opted for all their meals buffet style at the Garden Cafe or other snack stops. This is the option in Freestyle Cruising.

Although we were told reservations weren't necessary, we suggest that you make them if your heart is set on a particular spot for one evening. Throughout the deck, electronic boards list the dining rooms, showing availability of tables, and hostesses dish out beepers.

OK, so what can you do on those days at sea besides eat? Cruisers already know about shuffleboard and gambling, art auctions and fitness centers, bingo and Internet cafes. Would you believe you'll hear "That's a strike"? The Norwegian Pearl boasts the first bowling alleys afloat. Yes, four lanes await in the Victorian-styled Bliss Ultra sports bar/nightclub area, with shiny upholstered double beds for lounging. The other innovation for an NCL ship is the line's first rock-climbing wall, up where the basketball and volleyball courts are located.

The Spinnaker Lounge, forward, makes a lovely spot for daytime reading or sailing into port, with its surround-sight windows. However, they put the space to use with bingo games and such, so it's not always quiet. In the evening dancing and cocktail parties take place here.

Curious was the lack of pearls in the decor, though there were some faux diamonds in the atrium.

As on the Jewel, we loved the stadium seating in the Stardust Theater, where seats swoop down to the stage

with no columns interfering with sightlines. Jean Ann Ryan's production numbers were stunning, and the gymnast couple performed breathlessly. Another night a troop from Chicago's Second City had the audience in stitches.

Again, like on the Norwegian Jewel, the 10 luxurious, spacious courtyard villas are repeated, sharing a dreamy courtyard with private pool, sun deck and numerous amenities. New on this ship are two owner's suites perched at the peak of the ship, with all the perks.

The five-day itinerary provided lovely sea days, with two ports. The first was Cozumel. I was anxious to revisit this Mexican island since its battering by Category 4 Hurricane Wilma in October 2005. Chankanaab Park, south of town, has been restored to its lovely self. The beach is beautiful once again, a swimming pool is in place, and snorkeling and swimming with dolphins are available.

In the town of San Miguel, skip all the flashy jewelry shops and head to my favorite spot, the last shop on the malecon - Los Cinco Soles. Here, in sparkling cleanliness, you wander from one room to another, where the handicrafts of each section of Mexico are artfully displayed. You'll find silver items from Taxco, black pottery from Oaxaca, blown glassware from Guadalajara, story-telling pottery from Guerrero, papier-mache fruits and gauzy clothes.

Non-shoppers can find plenty of natural activities. Passenger Rochelle Kirkpatrick of Eagle, Idaho, tried kayaking in a clear, acrylic kayak. "I saw swarms of really colorful fish and green coral," she said.

The other port was Belize. Belize City provides an interesting combination of 19th and early 20th century large wooden buildings, and nondescript later 20th century concrete structures on narrow streets. St. John's Cathedral, built in 1812 of stone ballast, is the oldest Anglican cathedral in Central America. The democracy boasts a crime rate of under 1 percent; the prime minister's house has no security guards or high fences, despite the poverty.

But that's not why tourists come to Belize, formerly British Honduras - the only English-speaking country in

Central America. The first cruise ships didn't arrive until 1998, and now three to five drop anchor a day, three times a week. But they anchor far off, because of the shallow water and the coral reef.

And that's precisely why many of the ships come to this UNESCO World Heritage site. Some of the reef's dive sites are considered among the world's top 40. Besides the vibrant-colored coral, visitors describe the descent into the Blue Hole as an amazing journey through a cave of stalagmites and stalactites, meeting huge sharks and tuna. Reports of Ambergris Caye, the largest island of Belize, describe its unique water clarity and variety of sites; underwater life includes large manta rays and parrotfish, plus friendly groupers.

The other major attraction is the Mayan ruins. We motorcoached to Altun Ha, the remains of the Classic Period (about 250 A.D. to 900 A.D.) when Belize became the heart of Mayan civilization and functioned as a major trade center. The two plazas boast several pyramids, some excavated and restored, others not. Excavations began only in the 1960s.

The most significant find was a 9 1/2-pound jade head - the largest carved jade object in the whole Mayan area - representing the Sun God. Jade was imported from Guatemala and Mexico, and was the most precious treasure to the Mayans. It is a national symbol of Belize. Unfortunately, it can't be seen; it's kept locked in a bank vault, but is reproduced on Belizean bank notes.

Although it's interesting, for first-timers I'd recommend the ruins at Tulum, accessible from Cozumel, since they're much more insightful.

The Pearl also offers nine-day southern Caribbean cruises, then departs in late April via the Panama Canal to spend the summer cruising Alaska from Seattle.

IF YOU GO

Norwegian Cruise Line: 866-234-0292 or visit www.ncl.com.

Chankanaab Park: visit www.cozumelparks.org.

Belize: visit www.travelbelize.org.

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