

How was your cruise?

Cruise!? Y wud u wanna do dat? 3000 people that you don't know and don't want to know sardined into a small space with a semi-permanent earthquake. If you really must, there are two items of advice I have for you: 1. Bring your friends. 2. Avoid Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines.

Why did I even do this? Well it was the low cost time of year for a short weekend cruise to Ensenada, Mexico. Chris and Emily were both interested and so I decided to give it a try. What a fool am I. I should have known. We drove down to San Pedro to the terminal and found that parking was \$10 a day. We were not allowed to take the garment bag and a large- carry-on to the ship, but had to leave them as baggage, so we had to wait for the tickets. There was huge line to get into the terminal. On the escalator on the way up, I was commanded to "not walk", so I ran up the escalator. I was screamed at to stay still on the escalator and not walk on it. I said, "what is this, a prison ship?". I was so right, but I did not know it at the time.

Let me see now, before one can board the ship, there are so many lines for:

1. Baggage. 2. Enter the terminal. 3. Check your ticket 4. Mandatory shipboard account (phony, this was refused) 5. Take your picture. 6. Security check. 7. Slide your card into the monitor. 8. Walk the plank. Yea, I asked, am I finally free to go where I want? Well, only to those passenger areas on the ship! However, I am first insulted by drink carrying waiters asking me if I would like a \$5.95 drink. I had to decline this experience at least 30 times during the trip. Then there were the incessant announcements for profit-based activities such as Bingo, casino gambling, pictures, shore excursions, and (horrors!) tuxedo rentals.

I heard that the food was good on this cruise, so we went off to dinner. The three of us were seated at a table for 6 with a man, a woman, and another teen-age girl. The teenager said she never ate anything that swims. Emily said that she did not eat anything that walks on four legs. The man kept looking at me as if I was a criminal. I later found out that he was the lead detective for all murders in his county. The sushi and the ice cream were only available at a "nominal extra cost" (their words, not mine). A hook-wearing pirate and stuffed parrot patron then massacred the elegance of the dinner with their photographer flashing every diner. The staff then waved napkins and attempted to sing something in 20 conflicting languages.

I set out to find activities. The rock wall was closed most of the time. One pool was closed; the other was salt water containing salty-mouthed kids. The two Jacuzzis were infested with smoking drinkers. The basketball hoop was attached with springs. Anything but a swish had a long bounce away. The Ping-Pong table was far inferior to the one at home. The huge repair staff on board needed to fix the broken leg and drooping net. The air hockey table needed cleaning and cost \$1.50 a game. The only saving grace for this cruise was the non-smoking main show room where the entertainers made fun of the audience.

How much should you pay for this experience? Obviously, they should pay you. However, the starting price people paid varied from only port taxes if you had a friend in the cruise business, to \$150/person with two-week instant notice, to \$225 from a travel agent, to \$250 from the computer, to \$330 with a small window in advance. Brochure price is irrelevant. You were then expected to shop at the stores onboard, and purchase lots of drinks, sushi, ice cream, pictures, shore excursions, spa treatments, bingo cards, casino chips, and tip all staff excessively.

Other cruise lines may not have all of these "features". Royal Caribbean (the "of the Seas" ships) has the philosophy of getting the type of passengers that are willing to spend a lot of money, a little at a time. Their staterooms are the smallest at 118 square feet. They think you should be out spending instead of staying in your really cramped quarters. Apparently, other cruise companies do not loudspeaker solicit activities, constantly badger you for drinks, and insist on grinding pepper on all food. The ship layout was horrible. The staterooms are mostly forward with tiny windows or amidships with a lifeboat-obstructed view. The dining rooms are in the back. The Viking Crown lounge around the smokestack should have been in it. The food was unexceptional standard American with few interesting dishes. I am tempted to compare with Hometown Buffet, but that would be unfair.

I am a prejudiced fool. While attempting to book this 3-day weekend cruise on the computer, I found out that Carnival Cruises is abandoning their whole ship non-smoking policy on the Paradise. The last non-smoking cruise will be from Miami to Los Angeles from September 5, 2004 to September 20, 2004. Chris and Louis signed up along with friends Dennis and Tricia. We plan to play games between visits to ports and going through the Panama Canal. I always wanted to take a cruise ship through the Panama Canal. That will be my LAST CRUISE. Yea! ---Epilogue: It was the last ocean cruise, but riverboats in Europe were better since I had my bicycle.