

# **Cruising the Eastern Caribbean**

**San Juan, St. Thomas, Tortola, Private Island**

**Cruising the Easter Caribbean on the NCL Norwegian Dawn (April 19-26, 2003)**

**Excitement filled the air as passengers boarded the new Norwegian Cruise Lines ship, the Norwegian Dawn. This is the flagship of the Norwegian fleet, and for good reason, the Dawn is just remarkable. The ships interior is beautiful, with artwork, sculpture, veneer wood paneled walls and a decor which just flows wonderful throughout the ship. Better yet, this ship is the pinnacle of an evolution of efficient passenger ship design, with logical public spaces and passageways.**

**First impressions of the ship are overwhelming. You just want to explore the ship. And I must confess, even after a week, there were areas that I had yet to see.**

**The variety of dining areas was unique, and almost every palette could be satisfied. My favorites were Salsa, the Sushi Bar (Bamboo) and Cagney's Steakhouse. Each restaurant had it's own very personal feeling to it, from the artwork on the wall, to the lighting, which made every dining experience, making you want more. The heavy use of linens, glassware and festive decor is reminiscent of any fine dining establishment on shore.**

**Since this was an Easter cruise, it was near capacity at 2,600 passengers. This was my first holiday cruise, and will definitely be my last. When the ship is run near capacity, things tend to bog down. Making reservations was a hassle, and the 790 kids on board made me feel like I was on a Disney ship, instead of a Norwegian one. Of course this is not the norm. I was on the Norwegian Sun a month before, and I couldn't count more than 50 kids on a ship of over 2,000.**

**The staff and crew aboard the Norwegian Dawn are fantastic. Everyone greeted me with a smile, and were always helpful. The ships concierge, Amanda and the Hotel Director, James Deering, could not do enough to help me out with any of my requests for access in the ship, or meeting staff. It's quality staff like this that really makes Norwegian shine, and I cannot commend them enough. Clearly they love their jobs and it shows.**

**This week our cruise was the Eastern Caribbean route, originating in Miami, and after a day at sea, stopping in San Juan, St. Thomas, Tortola (BVI), day at sea and then Great Stirrup Key (Bahamas).**

**I've done the Eastern Caribbean a number of times, and was more looking forward to the ship than anything. In San Juan, it was quite hot in the morning, but the skies grew quickly overcast and it down poured in the afternoon and evening. Oddly enough, this is a great time to use the numerous hot tubs, and the one on the forward top deck has a fantastic view of the surroundings around the ship.**

I went into town (Old San Juan) to find an internet cafe and find some lunch. Latin American food is one of my favorites, and there's no short supply of local eateries to satisfy anybody's taste in spicy food. I ate at Papa Maria's and for \$6.00 had a great lunch. The only internet access I found was at Ben and Jerry's, but was much cheaper than the ship (\$.75/min on the ship vs. \$5.00 for 15 minutes on shore).

After a night of very slow cruising (St. Thomas is less than 100 miles away), we arrived at the cruise ship pier in St. Thomas around 8:30 a.m. It was very overcast, and soon there was a downpour, which did not let up. I departed the ship late morning for the Tramway up to Paradise Point (\$15 roundtrip). Within 5 minutes of departing the ship, I was completely drenched from the rain, and there were no umbrellas in sight. I envied the Radisson Seven Sea's passengers who were walking around with ship provided umbrellas. On the way up to Paradise Point, I soon realized that the top was cloud encrusted, and sure enough, visibility went to zero. To make matters worse, it was pouring rain there as well. Every time I've been to St. Thomas, it has been clear and sunny, so this was a first. After being denied a fantastic view of the island, I took the Tramway down, got a cab and went to the downtown area, only a few miles away. There are not many sidewalks in most of St. Thomas, and with the huge amounts of traffic, you have to be careful walking around, and avoiding cars.

After some shopping at the best place for sweets in the Caribbean, The Chocolate Shop, I returned to the ship. By late afternoon, the rain had stopped, and we were graced by a nice sunset and warm temperatures.

Our next destination was Tortola, where I did some snorkeling at Virgin Gorda (The Bathes) which had huge boulders, and a beautiful sugary beach. The reef had a variety of fish, and I saw one huge stingray slowly gliding over the sandy bottom.

The ships dock at a cruise ship pier which is only a few hundred yards from town, so you can walk just about everywhere. We shared our dock with a Costa Cruise lines ship and the two ships together dwarfed everything in sight. In these small ports, the top of the ship has fantastic vantage points to see everything within miles of the dock.

During our next sea day enroute to the Bahamas, the Hotel Director gave me a tour of the bridge and the galley area. It's fascinating to see how everything works on these ships like clockwork. The bridge is very high tech, and system redundancy is the standard. The galley was incredibly clean, with clearly managed food preparation areas that efficiently cook, produce, display and deliver the thousands of meals prepared daily. It always amazes me how they can produce so much food, and at a very good quality.

We arrived at Great Stirrup Key, but tendering ashore took some time. Offloading 2,000+ passengers took some time. They have a reservation system in place (colored tags) to help manage it, but it still falls very short of the Freestyle advertising. You can't go when you want, and yes, there are lines. Getting back on the ship towards the end of the afternoon resulted in long waits. While I've been to the Private Island a number of times (it isn't so private when you're sharing a small beach with 2,000 other passengers), most of the other passengers seemed to enjoy it a great deal, snorkeling, playing volleyball, or just soaking up the Sun on the beach.

**That night there was a passenger talent show which was surprisingly quite good, the theater was packed. Most of the other passengers attended the regular shows, and were quite pleased. I saw the comedian a few times, but wasn't all that impressed. I guess my idea of a nice evening is sipping on a martini and listening to the piano bar.**

**My two favorite bars (both in atmosphere, decor and location) were the Star Bar (located amidships) which had the most excellent pianist, and the Spinnaker Lounge, (located forward deck 12) which doubled as a stage and disco later in the evening. The Spinnaker is where most people ended up later in the evening. Dazzles had Karaoke and other live entertainment at various times, and Gatsby's had a regular piano-bar entertainer who was quite good.**

**To be fair, the ship had so many entertainment options, that I did not even come close to experiencing them all.**

**Navigation around the ship always takes a while to get used to, however to the credit of NCL, there are well placed directories and ship deck legends throughout the ship, and primarily at elevator and stair landings.**

**I was in cabin 8636 on the port side with a window. The cabin was compact and efficient, with 110/220V service and a built-in hairdryer. There was adequate closet space, but for more than two people, it would be cramped. They actually had a trundle bed underneath one of the two single beds, and then a fold-down bunk bed for the forth. There was a built-in refrigerator and safe. The bathroom had sliding glass door enclosed water closet and shower. I simply can't imagine more than one person in that small bathroom at a time, so the water closet door is an unnecessary waste of space, and it does confine the area a bit. The use of lotion dispensers in the shower and above the sink is a great idea (I use them at my condo) which saves cleaning time and is better for the passenger. The cabin also had a small color TV along with a phone that had a voice mail system (it even allowed you to personalize your own message). The neatest thing about the cabin was the dial-selector gizmo outside the door. You can dial the following: Do Not Disturb, Welcome, Please Turn Down Cabin, and Make Up Cabin. The only problem was that the selector was outside, so the bored kids onboard would turn them to -Please Make Up Room- at 3:30 a.m. I would have put them built into the door, and include a peephole (there were none) so to see who was at the door, you had to open it.**

**A Word About Freestyle Cruising: Norwegian coined the term Freestyle Cruising to try to differentiate it's ships and cruises from the rest of the industry. It claims to make cruising more tailored to what the passenger wants, and without rigid structure, touting no waiting, no lines, and doing what you want, when you want. This will have been my second Freestyle cruise, and while the concept may have some merit, it doesn't work well. Freestyle cruising is what the luxury cruise lines already do, but it works well there because they have some well needed structure.**

**Dining Options: This is where the concept could really shine. The variety of restaurants is fantastic, and the food in the pay (cover) dining areas is great. However, making reservations is a hassle, and even in the free ones, you have to wait in line at times. If you're single or want to meet people at dinner, good luck.**

**Meeting People: If your a single or if your a couple wanting to meet people, good luck with Freestyle cruising. It's a challenge to eat with other people, not as advertised.**

**Holiday Travel: I highly recommend avoiding cruises during Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's and Easter. These are when the ships are full of family cruisers, and when the ship is at capacity, which means lines.**

**Dress Code:** The huge discrepancy of what people wore was quite dramatic. Some people felt that Freestyle meant that wearing shorts in a fine restaurant was their option. It provided a uncomfortable mix of dress. And what could be a very classy ship, becomes diluted into very casual dress.

**At or Near Capacity:** Freestyle cruising doesn't work when the ship is full or near capacity. On this cruise, there were 2,600 passengers. I was informed that the ship could hold a total of 2,900 passengers. There were 790 kids on this cruise (normally there are 42). The non-cover restaurants had lines, as did the tender ashore on the private island. The disembarkation had huge lines, with lots of waiting. Bottom line-when the ship is full, Freestyle cruising doesn't work well.

**Event Times Overlap Freestyle:** Trying to eat dinner and get to a show were incredibly difficult. A number of times people would be seen rushing to eat (because of reservation hassles) to catch a show, it was anything but doing what you want, when you want as it describes in the brochure.

**Tipping:** Tips are automatically added to your onboard account. The amount is \$10 per day, per person, which gets divided between your cabin stewards and wait staff. Drinks carry an auto gratuity of 15% (including soda). The service is quite good in the restaurants, even though you don't have a regular waiter. I miss not getting to know the staff, as is in traditional cruising. And I imagine that that wait staff would prefer personalized service, so that they're working for the tip.

**Art:** The art aboard the ship was fantastic. The decor and lighting were well thought out to only enhance the experience, I can't say enough about this. It was quite clear that a great deal of thought, design and planning went into this ship and the public rooms.

I'm a firm believer that you shouldn't criticize without offering some solutions to what doesn't work, and with Freestyle the concept could easily be molded into a fine working, well oiled machine. First, don't take reservations. Let the restaurants take capacity as a function of space available. Use beepers if there is a waiting line, so that passengers could spend the time having cocktails at a bar. Second, have a set seating time for main restaurants, with shows scheduled around those times. Third, if charging a cover, make it work by charging more during peak times, and less during slow times. This would more fully utilize the capacity of the staff and facilities. Eliminate the a-la-carte pricing, and offer a all-inclusive price if passengers wish to have a carte-blanc for the restaurants. Also have a soda card that works. You have the option to purchase a all-you-can-drink soda stamp on your room card, but it doesn't work everywhere, and even the staff weren't sure where exactly it did work.

In all, the Norwegian Dawn is a beautiful ship, and well worth cruising on. After the week I was aboard, it was to be repositioned to cruise out of her new home port of New York. Personally, I love to travel out of Miami, and would never take a cruise ship out of New York. What really make the cruise excellent were the friendly staff and crew. Nice job NCL, the Dawn really does shine.

Good seas and fair winds

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Madison, WI 4/27/2003  
Photo Tour of Ship and Cruise at:  
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