

# CRUISE CALL

Adrift on the **Caribbean Sea**, *Charukesi Ramadurai* realises a luxury cruise is everything she imagined and much more.



The Norwegian Getaway sailing along the Nassau port.

## LATE ON MY THIRD EVENING

aboard the *Norwegian Getaway*, I'm ready to call it a day. But for many other passengers, the night is young and full of possibilities. On Deck 6, where I've been hiding in a corner of the library after dinner, I hear the buzz of cheers and catcalls. I am curious enough to leave my haven to find out what is going on. It turns out, it's the Mister Sexy Legs contest. Around two dozen male passengers strut about the stage as other passengers, of all ages and genders, watch. The atmosphere is boisterous and genial. Here, the party started the minute I boarded the ship, and, as I will find out, won't stop till I disembark at the end of the week.

Cruise ships have been described as floating hotels, but I have always thought that to be hyperbole. When I first catch sight of the ship at a distance, from the road in Miami one sunny Sunday morning, I know I am in for a fascinating introduction to the world of luxury cruises. After checking in, I spend my evening exploring nine out of the 15 decks open to passengers, admiring the ship, reading the menu cards of restaurants, gawking at the bling of the casino already filling up, window-shopping for exotic liquors and expensive diamonds at the shopping arcade, and planning my shore excursions and spa treatments for the next few days.

Every night, the steward who makes the bed in my sea-view balcony cabin, places a sheet of paper with information about the next day's activities. This includes time change notices—we are travelling through three time zones. I get to plan ahead for the excursions and activities that interest me. Planning is key, for there are contests, performances, classes, and talks through the day at various locations on the ship. One morning, I learn to samba. That is to say, I learn three steps of this sensuous Brazilian dance from a Russian pair, who are part of the official dance troupe. Another time, I sing along to

ABBA's greatest hits, belted out by an enthusiastic band from Eastern Europe. With a tall, cool drink in hand (the ship seems fuelled by alcohol), I watch people play bingo or learn to fold towels into arty shapes. And when the going gets too crowded for me, I escape to the hushed silence of the library, with its plump couches and unending supply of coffee and cookies.

The entertainment onboard is outstanding. Late one evening, I line up at the Illusionarium theatre for the *Cirque Dreams and Steam* show, a dramatic circus act combined with music and movement, described as being inspired by Victorian fashion and a steampunk theme. Through the 90 minutes, performers in elaborate and weird steampunk costumes juggle multiple objects, while riding unicycles, throw knives at each other blindfolded, and twist themselves into pretzels while hanging from ropes. Included is a three-course dinner. Another evening, I stamp my feet to the beats of rumba

and salsa, foxtrot and cha-cha-cha at the *Burn The Floor* show, a tribute to dance styles from around the world. During the performance I spot the nimble duo from Russia who had taught me samba earlier, and feel an endearing kinship with them.

I keep seeing the same faces at the various shows—I suppose the others have forged their own entertainment elsewhere. Sure enough, Deck 15 is a 24-hour party zone, with music blaring from hidden speakers and folks lining up for the gigantic water slide, the Jacuzzi tubs, and the swimming pool located conveniently next to a bar.

Did I say, a bar? The *Norwegian Getaway* has over a dozen bars and lounges, not to forget the alcohol served in most of the eateries and theatres. From specialists like the Sugarcane Mojito Bar and the Chill Bar popular for its margaritas, to we-serve-anything-alcoholish dining and drinking spaces, the management keeps everyone in a perpetually happy state.



From top: The aquapark on the cruise takes fun to another level; Ocean Place is the go-to hangout zone on the Norwegian Getaway.



COURTESY OF NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE

COURTESY OF NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE (2)



Clockwise from left: The Sugarcane Bar is one of many bars on the Norwegian Getaway; a trek through the Belize Jungle leads you to the mysterious Caves Branch stream; head to Wasabi for a hearty Japanese lunch.

I grid my loins and try out most of the bars (all in the name of duty!), but my freeze-frame moment comes at the Skyy Vodka Ice Bar. Inspired by the ice hotels of Scandinavia, everything inside is made from ice—the bar counter, seats, and glasses included. I am made to suit up, as if for a polar expedition, before stepping inside, where I promptly become one with the ice. No surprises, since this enclosure is constantly maintained at a chilly -8° Celsius. The bartender attempts to thaw me with his special cocktails created with Skyy vodka, but all the vodka in Russia cannot bring my fingers and toes back to life.

With nearly 20 cafes and restaurants to choose from, I can potentially eat every meal in a



different place. For breakfast, I stick to the Garden Café at one end of the top deck, with its bewildering buffet spread from all over the world, even *puri-bhaji* and pongal for homesick Indians. Other eateries included in the cruise cost are Savour and Taste, both on Deck 6, dishing up classy three-course Continental meals; Shanghai's Noodle Bar, serving authentic street flavours from China; and O'Sheehan's Irish pub. There are the speciality dining areas that come at extra cost, like Wasabi for sushi, La Cucina for Italian cuisine, Le Bistro for French, and Ocean Blue for seafood.

Before the *Norwegian Getaway*, I had a fairly stereotypical image of cruisers being for older folk, loaded with cash and sailing in search of new lands to explore. I could not have been

### SOAK UP THE CARIBBEAN SUN

*Cruise far and deep into the Caribbean Sea to experience its myriad hues and idyllic islands.*

A seven-night voyage on board **Crystal Cruises' Crystal Serenity** takes you from Miami to San Juan through the coral reefs of Turks and Caicos, the picturesque Basseterre on the island of Saint Kitts, the haute hideaway that Gustavia is, and colourful Tortola, the capital island of the British Virgin Islands. From the House of the most

awarded cruise line in the world, a range of suites and penthouses and many a premium offering ensure a lavish immersion in the Caribbean. *From ₹1,52,959 per person; crystalcruises.com.*

There's nothing like a cruise through the Southern Caribbean with **SeaDream**. An extravagant eight-day affair is scheduled

for April 19, 2020, which will embark from the historic port city of Bridgetown and eventually bring you back there. En route, you will be charmed by the adventure offerings of Rodney Bay, 18 square kilometres of quiet lagoons, reefs, and silvery stretches of beach at Port Elizabeth, an intimate cluster of five uninhabited islands that

are home to green turtles, coral reefs, colourful fish, and crystal clear waters as you anchor at Tobago Cays, the enticing aroma of nutmegs, cocoa, mace, cloves, vanilla, cinnamon, and ginger at St George's, and Mayreau where you indulge in the SeaDream signature Champagne and Caviar Splash. *From ₹4,73,997 per person; seadream.com*

CLOCKWISE: COURTESY OF NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE; SHUTTERSTOCK; COURTESY OF NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE



The Mahogany Bay at Roatan Island is an idyllic pit stop in the Caribbean.

more wrong. The passengers aboard this ship include young couples on honeymoon, families with kids, older couples throwing themselves retirement parties, and single men possibly in search of their soulmates; there were Americans and Europeans, Canadians and Caribbean folk.

Friendships are easy onboard, and given that I am that rare single woman traveller on a luxury cruise, people slip easily into conversation and confession mode. I meet 72-year-old Barbara from Miami, who will start dialysis as soon as she is back home. Rebecca from Toronto has found out her husband of 22 years has been cheating on her, and has gifted herself this cruise to think over her marriage. A gang of girls from Dublin teach me Irish slang: *gowl* for an annoying person and *feck off!* to (not so) politely ask that person to go away. Richard exchanges notes about his sudoku puzzle with me in the library, while his wife knits quietly next to him. Juanita from Venezuela is celebrating her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday at sea with her boyfriend.

While I am excited about the cruise itself and all the entertainment and relaxation options on board, I am also keen to explore all the ports of call. This is another way I differ from veteran cruisers—many of them are clearly here to unwind, with a routine of eat, swim, spa, and party. Rinse and repeat. But I want to see as much of the four ports (in three countries) on the schedule as I can.

I plan carefully to get a good mix of activities. At Roatan Bay in Honduras, our first stop, I head back into the sea on a glass-bottomed motorboat, and then get my hair braided with beads by the soft-spoken Laura. In Belize, I hike in the lush forest off Monkey River in search of, well, monkeys and endemic birds. When we fetch up at Mexico, my first excursion is to see the ancient Mayan ruins of Tulum.

One cannot be in Tulum and not visit the ruins of the ancient Mayan civilisation.



### GETAWAY WITH NORWEGIAN

The seven-day Western Caribbean cruise embarks and disembarks at Miami, making four ports of call—Roatan, Honduras; Harvest Caye, Belize; Costa Maya, Mexico; and Cozumel, Mexico.

#### REACH MIAMI

Fly to Miami from Mumbai or Delhi on Turkish Airlines or Virgin Atlantic, via Istanbul/London.

#### STAY ONBOARD

The *Getaway* offers accommodation options starting from inside rooms (₹44,873 per person) going up to the exclusive Haven suites (₹1,58,956 per person, including

meals at selected restaurants). Excursions and activities cost extra.

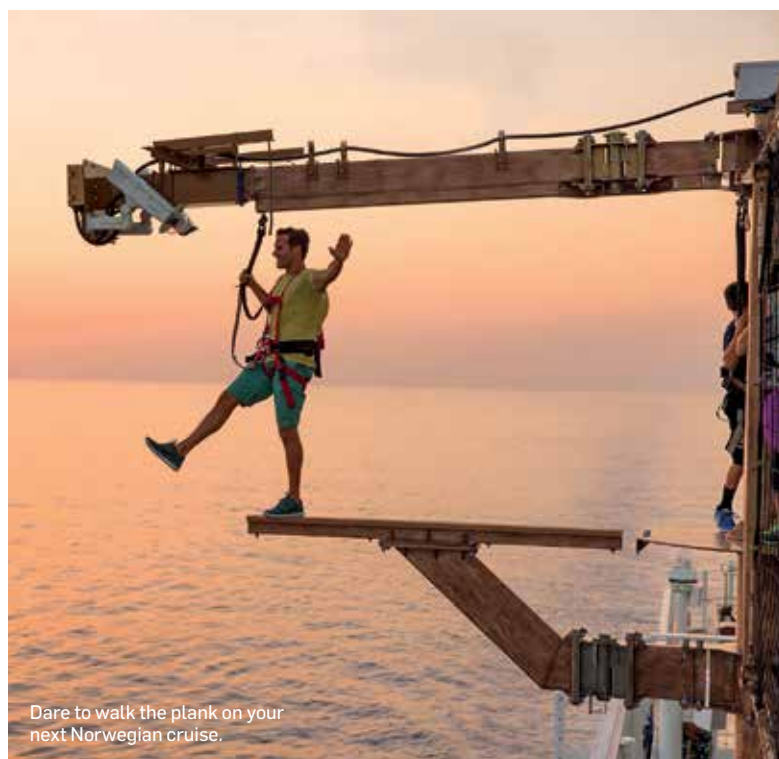
#### OTHER CRUISES

The Norwegian Cruise Line has over 15 luxury cruise ships sailing all over the world, from Hawaii and Alaska to Australia, New Zealand and Thailand. For more information, visit [ncl.com](http://ncl.com).

And finally, tired of the sightseeing, I party on shore at Costa Maya. 'Salsa and salsa' is the theme of this outing, as I learn to cook up a (Mexican) storm at a bar right on the shimmering beach, with salsa *borracha* (drunken salsa) and guacamole on the menu, and then get a very drunken dance lesson from the bartender.

My last day at sea is spent at the spa, a wind-down measure after all the debauchery. At Mandara Spa on Deck 15, an oasis of calm from the noise and gaiety, I have my aching muscles soothed by a Thai masseuse, who applies warm poultice on top of medicated oil. I follow this up with a few hours in the exclusive Thermal Suite, soaking in a relaxing Jacuzzi, sweating it out in the sauna, and ending the session with a snooze on heated deck chairs overlooking the ocean.

There is something liberating, exhilarating even, about a cruise, a feeling of being adrift, surrounded by the blue waters of the open sea. And although there is enough and more onboard to keep one fruitfully and pleasurably occupied through the day and half the night, it is the quiet moments staring at the endless ocean that I cherish most. ✕



Dare to walk the plank on your next Norwegian cruise.

FROM TOP: JAN WLODARCZYK/ALAMY; COURTESY OF NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE



Kids' favourite characters abound on Disney Cruise Line journeys, adding a fantastical dimension to the cruises.

## THE DISNEY DREAM

Disney Cruise Line operates some dreamy cruises for kids and kids-at-heart. A three-night sail to the Bahamas leaves Vishwaveer Singh considering a career at sea.

**YOUR FIRST CRUISE** will always be a special one. From the get-go, I was told that I was lucky to be losing my cruising-virginity to a Disney ship. "There isn't a better experience out there," proudly announced a fellow traveller and self-proclaimed cruise junkie who'd been aboard almost all the major cruise lines. "It's the experiences they pack in that make the difference," he added.

An hour's drive from Orlando, I reached Port Canaveral in Florida, where the behemoth that is the *Disney Dream* waited to take me and 4,000 others across the Bahamas and the Caribbean. Over 340 metres long and weighing in at 1,30,000 tonnes,

the ship from the House of Disney Cruise Line is a floating world of its own. A 1,400-strong crew caters to the needs of guests who inhabit the 1,250 staterooms inside, while the ship comfortably sails over choppy waters at a top speed of close to 24 knots. Imagine one of the popular Vegas hotels sailing on the Atlantic, and you'll get an idea of how I felt looking up at the *Disney Dream*.

#### HAKUNA MATATA!

Boarding the ship is fuss-free. There's a quick check-in process, where your luggage is loaded in advance, to be delivered straight to your stateroom. A hassle-free passport scan later, you

step into the ship's impressive lobby, which is reminiscent of Disney's grand palaces, flowing staircases and all. For those travelling with family, it can be quite a mesmerising experience, with ushers calling out your name as officers welcome you with applause, and a Disney character in full costume takes selfies with you.

It's easy to get lost on the big ship, each guest taking a few hours to find their bearings. Staterooms are larger than industry standards, with split bathrooms allowing families to use the facilities without tussle. Most sea-facing verandahs have a sitting area, ideal for whiling away time with great views of the infinite

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