

Hotelier's Confession: Second Voyage Confirms There is a Difference in Cruise Experiences - By David M. Brudney
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When I wrote an article following Karen and my first ever cruise to Alaska this summer, several readers admonished me not to judge the cruise experience based on a single voyage.

I agreed.

So did the strategic marketing director for Regent Seven Seas Cruises. After reading my article, Regent offered to host Karen and me on any seven day Regent cruise if I would write a follow up 'comparison' piece identifying Regent as the cruise line. And I was assured that I would have sole control of editorial content.

We selected the Seven Seas Voyager Caribbean cruise because we had lived in Puerto Rico when we were first married and have talked often about returning some day.

We sailed from Fort Lauderdale on December 7th with stops at Grand Turk, San Juan, St. Thomas and Princess Cays.

Luxury cruising v. mainstream cruising

Luxury v. premium comparison : little or no comparison. How best to describe the difference? I'm a hotel guy. I have enjoyed being a guest at Hampton Inn, Marriott Courtyard and Holiday Inn Express, but the guest experience is much different when I stay at a Four Seasons, Ritz-Carlton or Rosewood. Same situation with cruise ships.

To be sure, the Regent Seven Seas Cruise (luxury) was more expensive than the cruise line (premium) I booked to Alaska - - more than twice as much - - but the value for Karen and me was more than 10 times greater. As in the hotel business, you do get and expect what you pay for.

There really are some substantial differences between mainstream cruising - - our Alaskan cruise was on a premium cruise line - - and luxury cruising on Regent.

Smaller ship. More intimate

Fewer passengers. No crowds, no crowding and no lines. Our Alaskan cruise had 2,800 passengers whereas Regent had only 700 (1.56 passengers per crew member). Many more opportunities to 'connect' and make new friends

More interaction: passenger to passenger, passenger to crew and ship management

Management presence. Captain Knut Hanssen extremely visible throughout the entire cruise as was the ship's cruise director, hotel director, F&B manager, executive chef and guest relations manager. All appeared to be very 'hands on'

Higher quality of service. Much more attention to smallest details and passenger needs. Unexpected plus: entire crew English fluent

Tipping. All shipboard gratuities were included in the cruise fare

Smoking. A huge turnoff on our Alaskan cruise, we found very few passengers who smoked at all (non-issue the entire cruise) on Regent. And starting on December 21st, new, more stringent smoking restrictions will be in place.

More Good Show

More of what impressed me most on this Regent cruise:

First impressions. Boarding process was seamless, better staffed, immediate boarding. Once aboard, three waiters greeted passengers offering glasses of chilled champagne. We went directly to the buffet lunch and witnessed passengers embracing crew members - - relationships established from previous cruises.

Veteran cruise passengers. It seemed as though our Alaskan cruise consisted of mostly first time passengers. More than 50 percent of the passengers on this cruise had multiple Regent cruise experience, according to the assistant cruise director.

30- Minute ship wide 'Block Party' - - a marvelous 'ice breaker' idea for passenger bonding. At 6 p.m., second night at sea, a cocktail bell sounded in all guest suites, guests stepped out into their respective corridors to 'meet' their neighbors, 'come as you are', wine and champagne served by ship's staff. Most impressive: senior ship officers made the rounds on each floor to greet all the passengers.

All suite staterooms, all ocean views with private balconies. Features: a walk-in closet, flat screen TV, reading lights over the bed, two Anichini bathrobes with cotton slippers, stocked-daily refrigerator, small fresh flower arrangement and orchid plant with fresh fruit served daily. We were upgraded late to a larger penthouse suite (320 s.f. plus 50 s.f. balcony), but I checked out several staterooms on several floors during the cruise and found very little difference - - same fixtures, amenities, same Four Seasons/Ritz-Carlton quality, marble-appointed bathrooms, full tub & stall shower.

Bathroom amenities. Absolutely loved the size and labeling of the custom shampoos and conditioners - - no need to take reading glasses into the shower!

Service. Folded napkins on armchair every time guests returned to dining table. Bottled water, soft drinks, wine and alcoholic beverages of choice restocked daily by personal butler in our penthouse suite. Butler served hors d'oeuvres daily at 5 p.m. Additional nice touch: for a nominal extra charge I had the daily L.A. Times & USA Today delivered to our suite by the butler each morning of the cruise.

My Blue Tooth & BlackBerry charger cords. Room attendant wrapped both cords tightly each day. Never experienced that at any deluxe or luxury hotel or resort.

Entertainment. Constellation Theater seating best, most comfortable I've experienced. Singer Tony B was outstanding. Loved the Regent orchestra and the professional dance group. The late night lounge pianist/singer was very good, but we enjoyed the pianist/singer on the Alaskan cruise a little more, probably because of his extraordinary Broadway show tune portfolio.

Lecture program. A lecturer on Islam, Iraq and terrorism was extremely educational and informative. Best PowerPoint presenter I have experienced ever.

On shore activities. Despite that weather cancelled our 'beach barbeque', nonetheless our very best 'shore leave' was the four plus hours at Princess Cays, a two mile wide island retreat about 30 miles from Nassau, Bahamas. We swam in the ocean, stretched out on any one of the hundreds of beach lounge chairs, some passengers played volleyball, others sat on bar stools under thatched roofs sipping Margaritas and other exotic beverages. It was a grand day at the beach indeed.

Five hours was not enough time to really experience St. Thomas or St. John, V.I. We opted for a two hour tour up into the hills overlooking the harbor and village of Charlotte Amalie. Our tour stopped at several tourist attractions - - most memorable was the view of neighboring St. John. We made friends on the tour with a delightful couple, Ciba and Gail, from Arizona and Maine.

We decided not to experience El Yunque rain forest while ashore in San Juan, P.R. Nor did we choose to revisit neighborhoods and colleges where we lived and worked back in the mid-'60s. We did, however, share a rented car and driver with another passenger couple, Howard and Mona from Florida and enjoyed a tour and cocktails at the El Conquistador resort in Fajardo. On our return to the ship our driver made a special stop at El Hamburger, one of our favorite hangouts in Old San Juan.

Had to find a flaw or two

Given my four decade background of studying and evaluating hotels, resorts and conference centers worldwide, it would be near impossible for me professionally to spend seven full days on or at any lodging product such as a cruise ship without finding some flaws. My list for this Regent experience is a very short one.

Reassurance voice. We experienced two nights of serious rolling motion in rough seas and the walls of our suite began shaking as though an earthquake had hit us. Our accommodations were on the 10th floor aft which might have contributed to our situation. We learned from crew members and fellow passengers next day that accommodations midship are best during rough seas. Anyway, Karen slept like a baby through it all, but I needed a reassuring voice over the P.A. system telling me that everything was okay and we were not in any danger. I wanted the same type of assurance I experience on commercial airplanes when the captain comes on to apologize for the unexpected heavy turbulence on a late night flight with poor visibility. Interestingly, fellow passengers debated the next morning, half did not want to be disturbed while the other half - - like me - - wanted a voice of reassurance, no matter what the hour.

Wait person interruptions. Table conversations amongst fellow passengers are one of the very best features of any cruise - - far more important than stopping to answer servers' questions such as ground pepper on soup or salad, more coffee or wine. Given the 5-star presentation and luxurious surroundings, I was surprised the wait people were not better trained in their timing and sensitivity to table conversations.

Buffet breakfast. While the dinners and lunches were exceptional, I found the breakfast buffet lacking a bit. Variety, omelettes cooked to order daily very good, but surprisingly poor presentation of standard breakfast basics: scrambled eggs, bacon and sausages. On two separate occasions, my scrambled eggs were both cold and bland. I probably should have requested it, but I would have killed for a glass of freshly squeezed O.J. Yogurt flavor selection was very limited.

Men's shaving mirror absent in bathroom. Seemed like an obvious oversight.

Soiled wash cloth. Outside balcony of 1047, only visible to anyone standing at the balcony's railing - - surprisingly, unnoticed and not removed for length of the cruise.

Sunday NFL games on TV. Considering the ship's state-of-the-art satellite communication system (Internet access in Club.com was terrific) and the abundance of venues aboard, I was surprised there was no consideration for passengers wanting to watch football on Sunday (no CBS or Fox available). The Monday night game on ESPN was shown at the ship's Coffee Corner but was not publicized.

Final thoughts on overall cruise experience

We did find the Regent experience to be 'upscale but not uptight'.

We were treated just like every other passenger for the duration of the cruise except for the upgrade to a penthouse suite and being invited to dine at the hotel director's table one night and the cruise director's table on a second night.

We found very few small children or teenagers aboard, but lots of younger Boomers, some celebrating their 50th birthdays. I would guess the average age of our fellow passengers on this particular cruise was 55-60.

We sailed with passengers that were mostly veterans of previous cruises, passengers very comfortable with their accommodations, service, dining, activities and entertainment. And from conversations I had with several guests, all seemed like they received great value for what they paid.

Seven days, and four ports of call: no question, really not enough time ashore.

The weather is really a crap shoot. There are no guarantees while at sea, same as any tropical resort.

Loved not having to use my car or drive anywhere. What a relief!

Will definitely cruise again, but I can't see me sailing across the Atlantic or Pacific.

Cruising helps you discover destinations to where you would like to return, to spend more time. Cruising provides a 'window' for so many new destinations to explore. As a result of my taking this particular cruise, I am giving serious thought to returning to St. John, V.I to stay at one of the fine luxury resorts on the island.

Finally, though cruises do compete for market share with hotels and resorts, it's true that they also complement the hotel/resort experience probably because a cruise is very much a 'floating' hotel. The scenery keeps changing, but it's still a hotel and I am now much more comfortable as a cruise passenger - - smaller ships, more upscale preferred.

To access 'Did the Cruise Experience but Thanks, I'll Take My Luxury Resort Any Day,' June 2007, visit www.DavidBrudney.com and click on 'Published Articles'

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