



What's It Take To Run The World's Largest Cruise Ship

SOMEWHERE IN THE CARIBBEAN - The World's Largest Cruise Ship doesn't run on automatic.

A Chicago Tribune writer and photographer spent a few days during a June cruise wandering the 15 decks of Royal Caribbean's Freedom of the Seas. It was the ship's third voyage and its first with a full complement of passengers and crew.

The purpose of our wanderings: To get a sense of what it takes to make a Caribbean cruise happen on a ship with more rooms (1,815) than the Palmer House (1,639), a grand hotel that doesn't float, rarely hosts bingo games, doesn't have family karaoke nights and never, ever offers unlimited desserts at lunchtime.

For the record: There were 4,043 passengers on the vessel and 1,438 crew on this seven-day cruise (we got off early) to the Western Caribbean. We did not interview them all. We tried.

DAY 1: THE CHECK-IN

The Terminal. The lines are many, orderly and reasonably short. Chipper attendants and happy recorded music keep the passengers bubbling. One uniformed young lady attendant poses a question to the folks in her line.

"Has anyone seen `Poseidon'?"

After a few moments' uncertainty, a man, in his 60s and professorial, tentatively raises a hand.

"Everybody," she says, "if the ship turns upside down, follow him."

She gets a laugh. The loudspeakers, as if eavesdropping, are cheerfully amplifying Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive."

The entire process, including waiting time, takes less than 20 minutes.

The Exploration. Passengers, having checked in, stroll the decks while being offered Welcome Cocktails (pina coladas, with or without rum) by a platoon of merry welcomers in uniform.

Free?

"For you, only \$5.95."

The passengers check out the pools and dining room and fitness center and the casino, the climbing wall and the boxing ring, and the ice rink and theater.

Main draw is the Royal Promenade, a walkway of shops and pubs and quick-bite opportunities that includes a Ben & Jerry's.

"Ben & Jerry's is not free," says the counterman whose name is, of course, Ben. "Never, never."

Does that surprise people?

"The first day, yes."

Also on the Royal Promenade: A Clean Shave. A man is already in the chair as two couples stroll by.

"Oh, my gosh," says one of the wives, peering in. "You boys will have to come down and get a shave."

How much? she asks the barber, a female. There are three levels, she says. "The shave of shaves, with an hour-long facial, it's \$94."

From her expression, the boys are out of luck ...

The Luggage. Delivery to the staterooms is promised by 8 p.m. It is an intense time. Bags of every persuasion are being wheeled about Deck 1 on large carts.

Biggest source of complaint in the world of cruises, according to Angela MacArthur, chief housekeeper on this ship: "Delivery of their luggage. 'My luggage isn't here yet.' That's pretty frequent every Sunday evening."

"It's quite an undertaking to deliver 10,000 pieces of luggage to meet you up at the room simultaneous to your arrival," hotel director Martin Rissley will say later. "It's not quite simultaneous."

On other cruises, I almost always overhear complaints of missing and late luggage. On this cruise, though there might have been some, I overhear none.

The Inventory. The difference between loading this ship and a smaller one? "The volume of stores we have to bring onboard," says David Adams, inventory manager. "But we manage it."

Most has been loaded on before the passengers get in line, all under Adams' direction, here on Deck 1.

How much is there?

"I have it all in my head," he says. "Milk? 720 gallons of regular milk. Then the half-pints of milk: 10,000 each - 10,000 skim, 10,000 regular. Total cheese: 1,500 pounds. We have 200 cases of pizza. (FYI: It's Connie's.) Steak, strip loin, is 4,000 pounds. Then we have tenderloin, which is 2,500 pounds. Ducks is 2,500 pounds of duck, for a week ..."

He knows where all of it is, where all of it goes, when any of it is missing.

In a side room, Randy Songcaya is already trimming heads of red cabbage.

"This," he says, "is for the menu tomorrow, for the roasted duck."

Songcaya was a cook in the Philippines before this. Adams worked at a bauxite plant in Ghana. MacArthur is from Scotland. Rissley, based in Canada, has worked in the UK, Switzerland and Australia - which introduces one more number: According to the ship's literature, 65 nationalities are represented on the crew.

Everyone on the crew, at every level, seems genuinely delighted to be here.

DAY 2: AT SEA

8:37 a.m. Deck 11. The ShipShape Center is already bustling. Judging from sweat levels on people working the treadmills, it's been bustling for a while. Near the boxing ring, which is empty, a guy grimly works the speedbag while his lady companion takes a photo. Steps away, in a separate area, lines of people are doing curious things.

"Tai-chi?"

"No. Yoga."

Next time.

9:08 a.m. Deck 1. MacArthur, the chief housekeeper, supervises the stateroom attendants and their assistants. This cruise, she says, is going smoothly.

"If you were here last Sunday ... lots of little issues," she says. "Something as simple as an elevator not working can have a huge impact on the operation here."

Each stateroom attendant maintains either 20 of the smaller cabins or 11 of the larger ones.

"They do them all twice a day, morning and evening," she says. "And then all the information for the guests goes in the room morning and evening."

9:38 a.m. Deck 10. Cherry Ann Adams is 26 years old, from Trinidad & Tobago. She is in charge of cleaning and straightening 11 of the larger rooms. Right now, she's in a junior suite, whose bathroom has an actual bathtub.

She has met the passengers staying in this room. She meets them all as soon as she can.

"Monday morning," she says. "This is so they know who they're dealing with." Her laugh is beyond hearty. She moves to the next stateroom and rings the bell three times.

"I know they're not there for sure, but our procedure is to ring the bell three times," she says. "Housekeeping. Hello?"

No response.

"See? Nothing."

Ever walk in on ... something?

"Yes. Yes." Big smile. "All the time."

10:42 a.m. Deck 3: Arcadia Theatre. The theater is closed, but a door is unlocked. We enter. From the loudspeakers, there is loud singing. The song is classic.

"Listen to ... the lullaby ... of old ... Broadwaaaayyy."

Onstage, the dancers and singers work in sweats or shorts or whatever's comfortable. This is a rehearsal - a "tech-run" - and though the dancers' kicks are token, a lot of the other moves would send most mortal vertebrae screaming for realignment.

When it's over, dancer Cassandra Porter, who throughout the rehearsal looks like she is having an absolutely wonderful time, takes a moment to chat with strangers - and says she was having an absolutely wonderful time.

"Anyone who's in performing arts, if you don't love what you're doing ... don't be in the arts."

She is 22, and she's from West Aurora High School. Dancing in a cruise ship chorus - that couldn't have been the dream ...

"Honest, I just knew that I wanted to perform," she says. "I didn't really have a preference of whether I went to Broadway or L.A. - or a cruise ship. I just knew I wanted to perform, that's all."

At 9 and 10:45 tonight, it will be for real. The kicks will pop to the balcony.

"My next destination is L.A.," says Cassandra Porter. "I'm just going to go and see what happens. Maybe I'll end up back here ..."

"Wish me luck, the same to you.

"But I can't regret what I did for love."

11:38 a.m., Deck 5. Royal Promenade. Ken Rush, with a production crew of two, is roaming the mini-mall taping a promo with storekeepers that will appear on cabin TVs.

"And all these incredible deals ..."

12:35 p.m., Deck 11. Sports Pool. Ken Rush, with an assistant, is emceeding the Belly Flop Contest.

"From Ohio, here comes Jerry. No offense, but it looks like you've been training for this competition ..."

1:05 p.m., Deck 5. Champagne Bar. Ken Rush escapes a brief meeting to chat with strangers.

"I love what I do," he says. "I mean, it's that simple. It's corny but it's true - I love what I do every minute of the day."

Ken Rush is cruise director. He is 43, he's been working on cruise ships for 21 years, and every minute of the day he is everywhere.

"I love people, and that's what gives me my energy," he says. "I just love to see people smile, I love everything about the business - the busy-ness. I don't care that I'm sometimes running 10,000 miles a minute, because I think it's really exciting."

Ready for a nap?

"I can't. I still have the Sexy Legs Contest and ..."

2:09 p.m. Deck 5. Guest Relations. "We had a couple that was extremely irate about a leak," says Rissley, the hotel director. "It was actually two leaks - one was condensation, one was a leak, and they were in one of our finer suites, paying top-dollar of course . . ."

"It was one of those situations that tends to escalate, and they didn't feel they were getting immediate remedies for those concerns. They wanted to make sure they had my full attention ..."

The drips were fixed in the middle of the night.

"That's kind of a new-ship syndrome as much as anything."

He has been with this company since 2000.

"We have a significant number - probably 30 to 40 percent of our guests fleetwide - who are repeat guests," he says. "I meet people every week that say they have rooms at home that are literally Royal Caribbean shrines."

Business good?

"It's unrelenting," he says. "The demand for cruising, and particularly this product, is absolutely staggering."

2:42 p.m. Deck 13. FlowRider. Steps from the basketball court and the rock-climbing wall and the miniature golf, Jan & Dean are singing about ride, ride, riding the wild surf. FlowRider, the surfing simulator, is basically knocking people down, down, down.

"The grandkids could not wait to try this," says a silver-haired observer. "But on the video, it doesn't look this steep."

One of the grandkids, Jason Griffith, 19, a veteran Florida surfer, is figuring it out. "Every time you do it, it gets easier. You learn a new trick."

But it's not like surfing, he says after a semi-successful turn. (Definition: He didn't immediately get flipped off the board.) "It's different, because you're not trying to catch a wave. It's more like snowboarding."

4:17 p.m. Deck 14. Olive or Twist Bar. The bartender's name is Vineet Sagar.

"Sponsored by Oliver or Twist," he tells a couple who consider having a pre-meal libation. "I'm Charles Dickens, and I'll be your bartender."

The couple isn't sure what to make of this. The people already at the bar break up.

"Call me Vinni. Vinni the Indian Bartender."

Vinni is hilarious. He tells jokes. He does a little sleight of hand. He may be the happiest bartender I've ever known, and I've known several.

His explanation:

"People come on a cruise to have a good time. You get that positive energy from people, and you give it back."

Then he tells a joke we can't put in the paper.

5:50 p.m. Deck 3. Main Dining Room. Maitre d' Silvio Ghigo, Italian, has just ended chats with his servers in the three-level main dining room. There are, on Freedom of the Seas, 230 waiters and about 95 assistant waiters, and most will be on duty tonight right here.

"We discussed the latest updates with table arrangements. That's a big part of the job, because ..."

His cell phone rings. "Silvio speaking." A crisis is averted, with charm, and the conversation with strangers continues ...

"Because if they're not happy with their table arrangements, then the rest of the cruise is going to be spoiled.

"Then, special dietary needs. Some of them are allergic to nuts. Gluten free. Sugar free. All sorts of dietary needs. And of course, kids' requirements - baby chairs and booster chairs. Special occasions - some of them they have anniversary, birthday, and so on."

He checks his watch and excuses himself.

5:58 p.m. Now, his voice is pumped through loudspeakers. "We have two minutes to open the door." The pianist is limbering up with unmelodic tinkling. "All waiters and assistant waiters - I see tables with no name-tents. So headwaiters, check your tables ..."

6 p.m. "Open up. Open the doors ..." The piano music turns melodic. The doors open, and in they come ...

"Work in a regular restaurant," says Silvio, "you see them coming in two-by-two, strolling in, relaxed. On a ship, you open the door, you see 2,000 people hungry, looking for their tables.

"It's like a puzzle." He smiles. "We just love this game ..."

6:10 p.m. Deck 3. The Galley.

Assistant waiters are lined up for their rolls. Cooks are cooking, stirring, slicing, ladling, assembling. Silvio, standing near the door, eyeballs the outbound trays.

Johann Petutschnig, Austrian, formerly cook for the king of Norway, has for the last seven years been doing this. Now he is executive chef on the world's largest cruise ship.

"That's a difference between Royal Caribbean and I know a lot of companies that use readymade products," he says. "But here, everything is made here. Soup - everything is made here."

And that's a lot.

"We make around 80,000 plates a day," Petutschnig says. "We have 4,000 people for dinner here. How many eat only one plate? Nobody."

Complaints?

"Of course, sometimes you have guests they don't like something," he says. "You sit in the dining room, you see the menu, you order the fish, and then you find out the sauce is not actually your favorite. What do people do wrong? Instead of asking for an exchange, they say it's not good. That's the problem."

Ever dream of getting out of this and opening, say, a little bistro somewhere? He smiles.

"Oh, yeah, yeah," he says. "I have my plan already ready - but after the Genesis. I want to be here for the Genesis."

In 2009, Royal Caribbean's Genesis of the Seas is expected to become the next World's Largest Cruise Ship, and Petutschnig wants it. As he's talking, a zillion things are going on around him, some of them being performed by people with full trays and sharp objects

I confess I don't understand the attraction.

"It's a different life," says the chef. "It's just a flow. It's amazing. It's like a Swiss watch ..."

DAY 3: IN PORT

The Skipper. The ship has been hovering off Cozumel since 7 a.m. Tenders - taxi-boats carrying as many as 300 passengers - have been ferrying passengers into town since 7:30. It is now 8:37 a.m., and so far, Capt. Carlos Pedercini has successfully kept the World's Largest Cruise Ship from inadvertently drifting off to Belize.

"The current in this particular place is so strong, sometimes up to 4 knots, that this port of call is a challenge," he says. "Fifteen years ago, the ships used to hold position by running the engines, so somebody would have to give it a couple of turns ahead to compensate fully. You could spend the whole day doing that."

Today, it's done by computers and other gadgets, overseen by Pedercini.

Question: This is a ship with a crew from at least 65 nations. Isn't language ...

"The official language is always English," says the captain, who is from Argentina. "That's the way we have to communicate onboard."

But wouldn't it be easier if ...

"I'll never go back to a one-nationality concept. Sometimes we have a tendency to believe that we know everything, we are the best, we've got a great team.

"You don't realize there are so many people everywhere in the world, no matter what nationality they have, that can be as professional or even more. And you learn from that, you share that knowledge ..."

The Disembarkation. It is 10:23 a.m. For us it is time, with our luggage, to jump on a tender. There is no line, and according to uniformed personnel, there have been no real lines all morning. By 9 a.m., says one official-looking man with a clipboard, 1,770 passengers had already left the Freedom of the Seas for Mexico, to learn and to share. They will be back onboard, some in time for lunch.

We will stay in Cozumel, having already learned one thing, for sure:

This big boat works.