

FREESTYLE CRUISING

Departing New York, Eating at Will

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Our waitress aboard the Norwegian Sea had apparently been listening as we considered our options for lunch.

"What do you want?" my husband, Richard, asked me.

"I can't decide," I whispered. "I really want the grilled swordfish, but the Cuban sandwich sounds good."

I bit my lip.

"Why don't you try both?" our waitress asked.

I smiled demurely, shaking my head no. Then I remembered we were cruising to the Bahamas, freestyle.

I took the waitress's recommendation for lunch that day, sampling the swordfish and the Cuban sandwich, as well as a prosciutto, mango and Parmesan salad, a bowl of Scotch broth, some of Richard's leek-and-goat cheese tart, a big spoonful of his clam chowder and an apple fritter all my own for dessert.

I had a wafer-thin mint back at our cabin.

At Norwegian Cruise Line, "freestyle" means that passengers can eat "when they want, wherever they want and with whomever they want," according to the Miami-based company. With four restaurants, poolside buffets and barbecues and 24-hour room service, it didn't take us long to get with the program. After all, this is what we were paying for.

And it was all so hassle-free, even from the very start, one of the reasons for taking the seven-day cruise from New York City. We took the Long Island Rail Road to Penn Station, then a cab to the ship, although we could have driven in and parked right there, at the New York City Passenger Ship Terminal on 12th Avenue.

Without a cloud in the sky, we departed one late Sunday afternoon in July only to discover that our first moments of the cruise would turn out to be some of the most inspiring. Passing Ground Zero, we waved goodbye to the Statue of Liberty and ducked under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, as we headed for the open seas — and barbecued salmon steaks on deck.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner were always available poolside, which was nice for those couple of days when we didn't want to change out of our bathing suits. Most of the time, though, we dined at the ship's elegant main dining rooms, the Seven Seas and Four Season restaurants, where the menus changed daily.

So we ate, and ate, and ate some more — oatmeal-buttermilk pancakes, cheese blintzes and smoked haddock for breakfast; blackened tilapia, braised lamb shank, beef fajitas and sweet-and-sour grouper for lunch; pan-seared scallops, spinach gnocchi, poached sea bass and grilled leg of lamb for dinner.

And everything, except for the alcohol, was included in the price of the cruise.

One night, we dined at one of the ship's specialty restaurants, the Pasta Cafe. We shared the buffalo mozzarella and beef tomatoes, as well as a Caesar salad. I had grilled mountain trout, which was marinated with basil, garlic, olive oil and lemon pepper, served with fettuccine in a light pesto cream sauce; Richard had the fettuccini with beef sautéed in cognac.

Another night, we splurged at the other specialty restaurant, Le Bistro, paying a \$10-per-person cover charge. There, I had the salmon, and Richard had the filet mignon, but the true hits



Freestyle dining aboard the Norwegian Sea means that passengers can eat "when they want, wherever they want and with whomever they want," according to the Miami-based company.

were the escargot and the chocolate fondue.

We dressed up that night, but we decided that the description of what it means to cruise "freestyle" should include that passengers can eat "in whatever they want." Although T-shirts and shorts seemed appropriate for the buffet at the casual Big Apple Cafe, we soon noticed that they were sometimes just as commonplace as the white linen tablecloths at the restaurants.

Some passengers we spoke to said they longed for more formality, where their waiters knew them by name and they got to know the strangers assigned to their table. Although this was our first cruise, and we preferred to dress up for our meals, we decided after being introduced to the freestyle concept that we liked the freedom.

We really were decked out for the captain's welcome party, although even this occasion was considered "formal optional." After snapping photos with Capt. Paul von Knorring — Richard in a suit and me in a long black gown — we attended a cocktail party, followed by a dinner of lobster tail and beef tenderloin.

But the real fun came at dessert.

At midnight, the cruise held a "Chocolate Buffet," where we tried to taste as much as we could, from chocolate fan cake, midnight layer cake, blueberry chocolate cake, raspberry chocolate

cake, lemon chocolate cake, chocolate truffle cake, chocolate cheesecake, chocolate marble cheesecake, chocolate velvet cake, strawberry-strips cake, sachertorte and black forest cake, to the other endless array of treats, including chocolate-coconut pieces, chocolate Swiss roll with strawberries and kiwis, chocolate pecan pie, dark chocolate nut bars, coconut macaroons dipped in chocolate, mocha cream slices, chocolate mousse roulade, chocolate eclairs, chocolate swans, marshmallow chocolate slices, white-and-dark cream slices, white chocolate puffs, Rice Krispies treats, banana-melon fruit skewers dipped in chocolate, dark chocolate mousse, white chocolate mousse, brownies with chocolate frosting, brownies with pistachio nuts, brownies with white chocolate, blondies with chocolate frosting, and chocolate chip, macadamia and peanut butter cookies.

My only disappointment was that the buffet lasted just one hour.

We made some friends during the buffet, a couple from Flushing we had met at a tango class, one of several dance lessons we took that week. Most of the passengers we met came from the New York metropolitan area. Many were people, like me, who liked to avoid airplanes during vacation, especially now. A Staten Island woman we ate breakfast with announced that

she and her husband were headed to Puerto Rico next year — on a cruise out of New York Harbor. "Just keep those cruises leaving New York," she said.

"I don't think we're so unusual," said another woman, this one from New Jersey, who ate with us. "A lot of us don't like to fly."

Of course, leaving from the Northeast means spending more time at sea. Our ship only spent two days in port. In Nassau, we chose to go on a dolphin excursion, in which we got to hug the playful, 240-pound "Miss Merlin." The early morning outing left us plenty of time to explore the city. We would spend the next five hours shopping at the Straw Market and the boutiques downtown. In the tropical heat, all that walking provided some much-needed exercise, even though we worked out at the ship's gym and broke a sweat practicing the rumba. The exercise was intentional, and it must have paid off — we both came back a pound or two lighter.

While we made plans to spend the evening in Nassau, we decided to eat onboard when they posted the Caribbean-style menu that night — broiled mahi-mahi topped with fruit salsa, roast duck glazed with curacao liqueur and cognac, pork roast with fried plantains and cassava dumpling.

Then we decided to stay for a cabaret show, some dancing and a stroll through the casino.

The next day, we were in Grand Stirrup Cay, a Norwegian Cruise Line-owned private island in the Bahamas, where we snorkeled with stingrays and sipped drinks on the beach.

Really, though, the best moments of the cruise happened at sea, whether we had a fork in our mouths or not. One evening, before dinner, we headed for the deck to smoke Cuban cigars we bought in Nassau. As we stood there, Richard puffing his Cohiba and me my Montecristo, we saw fins in the ship's wake. I thought they were sharks until a member of the captain's crew came by to clear up the matter.

"What are they?" I screamed to the man in uniform, who was standing on a perch looking through binoculars.

"Orca whales," he shouted.

Other moments would also linger with us long after the cruise had ended, like when we drank merlot on a nearly empty pool deck and listened to a band sing Bob Marley songs to us, or when we power-walked six laps around the ship while the sun set.

Even a distant thunderstorm that sent waves crashing against the ship, waking me in the dead of night, is a sight from the little porthole in our cabin that I'll never forget.

Alas for those Bahama travelers who prefer time at sea to island-hopping, the Norwegian Sea, which entered service in 1988, will soon be taking a different route. Next year, the Norwegian Dawn, the cruise line's newest ship, will take over the route to the Bahamas. Bigger and faster, the Dawn will add two additional stops — Miami and Port Canaveral, Fla.

For the rest of our cruise, we ate, danced and bingo'd all the way back to New York. The last day, as we waited for our floor to be called for disembarkation, we ran into some other friends we made in tango class, a mother and daughter from Poughkeepsie.

"So what did you think?" the mother asked.

"I loved it," I told her, a tear in my eye. "I want to keep on going." •

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