

TransAtlantic Sailings on Disney Cruise Line: A Disney Cruise Line Review

by Roger Sauer, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Mediterranean sailings by Disney Cruise Line have become popular, if pricey, over the past few years.

The Grand Dame of the Disney fleet, the Magic, is again off to Europe this year (2013) and will be again in 2014. And, of course, in order to get to and from the Mediterranean for each summer's cruises, the ship will need to cross the Atlantic, a cruise that provides unique experiences and challenges to guests.

My wife Donna and I visited Italy, Greece, and Barcelona before joining the Magic for its westbound Transatlantic sailing in mid-September 2010. Having experienced two prior cruises on the Magic, we knew the ship well, but wondered how a couple of weeks at sea would be with only a few stops (Gibraltar, Madeira, St. Maarten, Tortola, and Castaway Cay). There were many hits, only a few misses.

□ The first hit was being upgraded from an ocean view cabin to a veranda cabin. We learned of this 45 days before sailing, when final room assignments were made. We had previously been assigned a "guaranteed" room in ocean view. There is much discussion on travel boards about how to be upgraded like this. Luck plays a part in it; being a member of Castaway Club helps, I think. And it may have helped to be a Disney Vacation Club member as there were salespeople for Disney's interval vacation program all over the ship.

□ On the other hand, we missed the grand entrance of the Disney Cruise terminal in Cape Canaveral. We opted for a bus transfer from Barcelona's Le Meridien Hotel to the port on the day of departure. This ride brought us to a warehouse in the port that, despite Disney garlands and posters, was still a warehouse. As dusk approached and dinner was served, our ship began its voyage.

Because the Transatlantic sailings take place in May and September, there were fewer children on board. We were told all the ship's cabins were sold. But because many of those cabins held two adults rather than two adults with kids, the ship seemed less crowded and even quieter at times.

□ As the trip extended over two weeks, we had not expected jet lag to be

a problem. However, as the Magic made its way across the Atlantic, on most sea days we were reminded in our Navigators to turn BACK our clocks every night. An extra hour's sleep might sound great, but this eventually caught up with us as we awoke at 5, then 4, then 3 AM. While I am generally an early riser, this got tiresome and led to some afternoon naps along the way.

□ But despite the time zone issues, the crew on the Magic provided many types of activities on sea days. An Epcot executive chef held cooking classes on several mornings (we can attest to the quality of the osso buco recipe). Disney animator Don "Ducky" Williams demonstrated his skillful cartooning much to the excitement of the audience. There were some lectures on sailing, geography, and history. And no Disney cruise can be complete without art auctions in the grand lobby. We purchased a lithograph created and signed by Pixar's John Lasseter. Pin trading was a popular activity and the activity staff held a few special pin trading nights with the ship's executive crew. A highlight of the trip was our luxuriating in a couple's spa experience mid-cruise. It was worth the modest expense. And for less-organized diversion, there is well-stocked lending library in the Cove Cafe to help with early morning or even poolside reading.

□ Each evening had a special stage show, from a Beatles tribute band in Gibraltar to "Little Mermaid" Jodi Benson. Stage shows included "Twice Charmed" and a funny pastiche of Disney villains.

□ Of course, the pools and sun decks were popular on the cruise, even the couple of days where the swells left the water in the adult and family pools sloshing around like water in a Maytag washer. Despite these swells we had no problem with seasickness on the cruise though we did buy some "wrist pressure bands" to make sure.

□ Maybe because of the length of our sailing, Captain Thord and other officers seemed very visible: at dinners, special events for Castaway Club members, and some Disney Vacation Club gatherings. We greatly appreciated the opportunity to mingle.

□ As part of their rotational dining experience, guests aboard the Magic visit Animator's Palate, Lumiere's, and Parrot Cay several times each. Evenings are themed as formal, informal, Pirate Night, Villain Night, and so on. We all were allowed to keep our elaborately printed menus that specified our unique sailing. As most of the parties on the ship were couples, we shared a table for dinner. Our tablemates from England and Colorado had over twenty Disney cruises between them.

□ Service aboard the Magic on this lengthy cruise was wonderful. From

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our cabin steward to our servers at dinner, the crew did everything to make our special trip memorable.

□ On this voyage, gift shops aboard had many souvenir cups, posters, memory books, and pins to commemorate our trip. There were Transatlantic T-shirts, sweatshirts, scarves, and key fobs galore. Note: prices did drop on the last day or two.

□ The stops along the way were fun though we only took one excursion: a tour around Funchal, the port on Madeira. This is a beautiful town, built on cliffs of a volcanic island blooming with tropical fruits, and flowers like plumeria. Reminiscent of Hawaii, Funchal offered scenic seaside moorages, intimate shops, and eateries, and very friendly people. This Portuguese island presented no problem for us English speakers.

□ We walked around Gibraltar, as the clouds were low and the cable car to the top of the rock was not operating. Similarly we strolled around the port areas while docked at Tortola and then St. Maarten, which is half French and half Dutch.

□ The evening before we arrived at Castaway Cay we took part in Disney's unique Pirates in the Caribbean dinner and party with fireworks set off from the ship. Very cool. It was interesting to see how many of the guests had brought elaborate costumes with them to celebrate on this sailing.

□ As for the cost of a Transatlantic cruise, the rates are very reasonable. The prices for the May 2013 Eastbound sailing run from \$1,750 per person in an interior cabin to \$1,900 for an ocean view cabin or \$2,900 for a room with a veranda. This means that one can have a two week cruise with Disney amenities, service, and meals for as little as \$125 per day (taxes and gratuities excluded.) This is a bargain.

□ Of course, if you sail one-way to or from Europe, you will need a way to arrive or to return. One-way airline tickets can be expensive. We booked a flight from Portland, Oregon, to Orlando before our European trip, knowing we would arrive back in Florida after the cruise. So all we had to do then was arrange a one-way trip from Orlando to where we started our travels (in this case Venice). We selected Martinair. The rate was about \$750. Shop around on the Internet with its many booking sites.

□ With plans to do the Eastbound cruise in May 2014, we are eager to see the renovations to the Magic scheduled for the fall of 2013 after its next Mediterranean sailings. The rear of the ship featuring Topsiders

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Buffet and Palo will be totally renovated to the style of restaurants on the newest Disney ships, the Dream and Fantasy. While the trip will be only twelve nights, it does include Madeira. Very cool.

About The Author: Roger Sauer, an Oregon native, has visited every Disney park and resort in the world over the past ten years. The next big trip for him and his wife, Donna, will be New Zealand and Australia in the Fall and Europe with a Disney TransAtlantic cruise in the Spring of 2014.

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