

# **Cruising the Western Caribbean**

**Grand Cayman, Roatan, Belize, Cozumel**

**Cruising the Western Caribbean on the NCL Sun (March 15-22, 2003)**

**The m/s Norwegian Sun is a "Freestyle" purpose built ship which seeks out adventure while plying the azure waters of the western Caribbean.**

**The ship has one of the friendliest crews afloat, headed by Captain Constantinos Fafalios and hotel director Michael Klieverik who keep an immaculate ship. Norwegian Cruise Lines should be proud of the ship which is adorned by beautiful artwork, sculpture and a very classy motif throughout the ship.**

**Pre-cruise at South Beach. I usually like to arrive a day in advance to the point of departure, in case of weather delays for flights. It's also a great way to transition from working to the vacation. For this cruise, I chose to stay at the Marriott on South Beach which is a very nice hotel, centrally located on Ocean Drive. The highlight of the day before the cruise was sunset and dinner at Smith & Wollensky's. Manager Paul Spiess does an excellent job overseeing what I believe is the best place to dine in South Beach. Having a martini at sunset while watching the ships navigate the ship channel at Government Cut is a great way to end the day. The restaurant is located right on the ship channel, and the ships pass so close that you can almost touch them.**

**This provides a fantastic backdrop for the restaurant. The food and service at Smith and Wollensky's is incredible, and an event that you should not miss on your next visit to Miami. Dining is either outdoors next to the water, or indoors with capacity up to 400. Show up a bit early for the sunset and have a martini or glass of champagne while Paul prepares a table for you. I had the crab cakes and lobster bisque for an appetizer which were just an incredible fusion of seafood and spice. For the main entree I had the lobster and steak, which was one of the best meals I've ever had. Paul is to be commended for running such a great operation. ( Smith & Wollensky, One Washington Avenue, South Pointe Park, Miami Beach, FL 33139 tel (305) 673-2800 fax (305) 673-5943 / Paul Spiess, Manager)**

**The next day I boarded the Norwegian Sun around 3:00 p.m. and did not have to wait in line. It appears as though the big rush to embark is right at 1:00 p.m., so if you show up after that, you don't have to worry about the huge mass of people trying to get on the ship. The embarkation procedure is both fast and efficient. You have your photo taken and are issued a key card which not only opens your room, but also acts as your onboard credit card. After a security screening, I boarded the ship and proceeded to my stateroom cabin.**

**On such a huge ship, passenger navigation can be a challenge, but Norwegian has properly fixed a generous number of easy to read maps at every major intersection. Elevators and stairways are strategically located to handle even the most tempest amounts of traffic. The beautiful atrium in the center of the ship from Deck 5 to Deck 11 is capped by a skylight which allows the entire area to be bathed in the tropical sunlight. The ship is a delight to cruise on.**

There were a number of public rooms on the ship which really stood out. The Observation Lounge on Deck 12 forward is a great place to view the Caribbean as the voyage progresses, or a martini before dinner with live entertainment after dinner. Amidships on Deck 6 is the Windjammer Bar which doubles as a piano bar in the evening with the fantastic Roger Hernandez who plays both guitar and piano to all your favorites.

With a full capacity of 2,400 passengers on this Spring Break March 15, 2003 cruise, the ship never seemed crowded except however, during the sea days, when passengers teemed onto the upper decks scrambling for tanning space. I found if you just wait until after 2:00 p.m., there was no problem finding room. On such an efficiently planned ship, it seems odd that day tanning space is always at a premium. I'd eliminate the golf driving rooms and shuffleboard to make space. The basketball court takes a huge amount of room, but seemed well used during certain periods of the day. As far as I'm concerned, sports venues aboard a ship is a needless waste of space. The exception to the rule is a workout room which can be placed anywhere. Instead of deck lounges, I'd go to some type of hammock system which could easily be rolled up to save space.

Towards the aft of the ship, there is a multilevel deck for morning and afternoon breakfast and lunch, which is covered from the Sun by a translucent canopy. When the ship is steaming along at 20 knots, combined with a sea breeze, it can get quite windy on the top decks. We had one day with 35 knot winds which made the upper decks extremely windy.

One feature which I particularly loved, was the use of plants in the Atrium, and throughout the ship. It gives the ship a more lived-in warm look and enhances the classy nature of the ambiance while aboard.

I had cabin 0008 on the Norway deck, which was unfortunately located right below the exercise room, and was awakened a few times by an aerobic class early in the morning. I always try to see where a cabin is located before booking, to make sure there is nothing but another cabin above me. The cabin had a small balcony and was well appointed with Cherry veneered cabinets with plenty of storage. The bathroom was compact and efficient. Both 110V and 220V outlets were available in the cabin, and a hairdryer is permanently affixed to the bathroom wall for your convenience. A small bar refrigerator is in the room, and two bottles of water are available for a \$3.00 charge each.

Ship cleanliness was perfect. Even above decks where the wind was blowing everything around. Pools and Jacuzzis were drained and cleaned nightly. After a day at the beach, people bring aboard amazing amounts of sand, which is promptly vacuumed by the staff.

There are a few noticeable features of this cruise which really stood out. The first one is usually only found on luxury ships, and that is the attempt of the crew to learn your name. With 2,400 passengers, even that attempt is splendid, and by the end of the cruise, a good number of staff knew my name. This is the hallmark of great service. Kudos go out to the staff of the Norwegian Sun.

The second feature which really stood out, was the incredible effort on behalf of Ray Williams, the concierge. I have never even seen a concierge on an economy line such as Norwegian, and I have to admit, it works quite well. What is a concierge you ask ? A concierge is primarily for the passengers in the upper class cabins, but is available to other passengers as well. They can accommodate small and large demands, but primarily act as a liaison for the passenger. As for me, I had contacted Public Relations in advance to arrange for a number of things on the ship (to make performing my ship review a bit easier). Of course, when I boarded the ship, nobody knew who I was and Public Relations turned out to be a flop. Luckily, I explained my situation to Ray, to was extremely helpful and did everything he could to accommodate my requests. He made up for the poor service from Public Relations in Miami. Thanks Ray ! It's the little things like that which make a cruise really stand out.

With the outbreak of the Norwalk Virus on other cruise lines, Norwegian has taken a proactive stance, and has in-place an extensive regime of measures to insure that the most sanitary conditions as possible. The crew will opt-out from shaking hands (most of the time), and moist towelettes are required for all to be used when boarding the ship, and recommended before meals. There was never a time when I didn't see somebody cleaning the handrails or hallway walls, which reinforces the effort on behalf of Norwegian to keep a clean ship.

The food on the ship was quite varied. Part of the "Freestyle" design is for a number of restaurants ranging from Oriental to Italian. Food quality ranged from fantastic (Tepanyaki) to good (main restaurants) to average (Pacific Heights). The downside to the more upscale restaurants was the fact that you needed reservations, and you had to pay for them (either a flat cover charge or in the case of Sushi, a per item fee). The reservation system needs to be thrown out, it simply doesn't work. The Ginza area was never at more than 20 percent of capacity, while in the main dining rooms, there were times you had to wait more than 20 minutes. A better system for all the restaurants is to eliminated the reservation system, and go to a beeper system in high demand (a beeper is provided when your table is ready).

While the room service menu was fairly basic, the service was prompt (usually within 15 minutes) even at 3:00 a.m.

The shore tours were well varied. I chose to take the most expensive tour, a day trip to Guatemala to visit the ancient Mayan ruins of Tikal. After tendering to shore in Belize City, we bused to the international airport and flew to Peten, and after boarding another bus finally arrived at the most spectacular array of temples that I have ever seen. This tour is priceless. The sheer size of the Mayan pyramids against the backdrop of the jungle simple makes you gaze upon the temples in awe. In this one area there were over 10,000 platforms covering 200 square miles.

In Cozumel, a rental car proved to be the most economical and fun way to see the island. Sometimes it's fun to plan your own adventure. However, if you want an organized tour, the ship tours are always a good option.

This is one of the newer ships which was specifically built for what Norwegian calls "Freestyle Cruising." Let me tell you, there's nothing "Free" in the coined term, which is designed to mimic what happens normally on the upscale and luxury ships. I'll give credit to Norwegian for providing an option to "traditional" cruising, but it's clear the concept still needs a great deal of work. The number of different restaurants definitely worked well, however when I pay for a cruise, I just assume the food is included. With "Freestyle" only the main restaurants are included (Pacific Heights or the Tapas Bar didn't charge either).

**"Dine when you want, and with whom you want." Not exactly. You can only dine when you have a reservation to dine (if you can get one) in the specialty restaurants. What surprised me was the 20 minute wait one evening for one of the no-cover main dining rooms. I actually miss having a set dinner time and being able to sit with people I don't know. Part of traveling is meeting new people, and "Freestyle" dining precludes this. Why would you want to eliminate one of the best aspects of cruising ?**

**While Norwegian "suggests" proper attire, it was common to see people in shorts, amongst people dressed in tuxedos. An evening dress code should be enforced. Freestyle in this case means a large discrepancy in tasteful attire.**

**The other touted benefits of "Freestyle" cruising include not waiting in lines, and other benefits, none of which became ever became reality.**

**So while Norwegian might be on to a good concept with "Freestyle" it has a lot of work yet to be done. My overall impression on the concept was that I was being constantly being nickel-and-dimed, and was relentlessly exposed to up-selling. At dinner, you are offered your choice of two bottled waters-- choose the "NCL Ship Water." There's a fine line between a classy presentation and up-selling.**

**My overall impression of the Norwegian Sun is very good. The ship is new and the staff is just wonderful. Even though we missed the port of Grand Cayman due to poor weather, the entire itinerary in the Western Caribbean was excellent and I highly recommend a cruise on this ship. Adventures abound when you look for them and the Norwegian Sun is part of a fun adventure.**

**Good seas and fair winds**

**Greg "Pepe" Giese  
Madison, WI 3/25/2003  
Photo Tour of Ship and Cruise at:  
[www.cruisingreview.com](http://www.cruisingreview.com)**