

On board a luxurious tall ship, a Caribbean trip becomes a voyage through time

BY ANNE GEORG, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD MARCH 22, 2013



The Royal Clipper is under sail as it leaves the Caribbean island of St. Kitts.

Photograph by: Anne Georg, Freelance

Sailing through the Caribbean Sea aboard the Royal Clipper I travelled into another time and another dimension. My fellow passengers and I metamorphosed.

We changed from pale, seasick landlubbers to tanned, life-embracing adventurers. We transformed from anonymous individuals, passing one another with a nod — to animated shipmates sailing together on a marvellous voyage outside of time.

We greeted one another, table-hopped during meals and leaned forward to hear the fascinating life stories we brought on board with us. We danced to a steel drum band, laughed at our crew's hokey antics during the talent show. And we grew silent when charming, newlywed Kate stood before us and belted out a hauntingly beautiful Ave Maria.

About 60 per cent of the 200-plus passengers were repeat customers of the Star Clippers fleet — Royal Clipper and her smaller sister ships Star Clipper and Star Flyer. On my seven-day cruise in February the clientele ranged in age from 20 to 95; the average was about 60 years old.

We set sail out of Barbados and cruised through the West Indies' Windward Islands of St. Lucia, Dominica, Antigua, St. Kitts, Iles des Saintes and Martinique; and returned to Barbados. Our days were structured around breakfast, lunch and dinner; sunrise and sunset; and the arrivals and departures of the tenders that carried us back and forth to shore.

And we were on deck every day to witness the emotional spectacle as our international crew raised the sails and the wind gracefully guided us out of harbour. The daily drama, was saturated by the sweeping music of Vangelis symphony "1492: Conquest of Paradise" and the calls of the captain from the unfurling of the first sail until each of the 42 sails was in place.

Captain Sergey lovingly orchestrated the event, I suspect as much for his benefit as for ours. An Estonian sailor, he was passionate about sailing and proud of the Royal Clipper's status among the largest and fastest clipper ships in the world. He couldn't hide a wistfulness when he admitted that he could never push the ship to its fullest speed because the guests would not like the extreme list required for full-throttle sailing.

Even at reduced speed, sailing around the Windward Islands aboard the 439-foot Royal Clipper was an extraordinary experience — a perfect balance between the adventure and tradition of sailing, the impeccable service of a five-star cruise and the lavish amenities of a sumptuous yacht.

I loved the windswept 19,000-square-feet of deck space. I thrilled at the sound and sight of powerful rippling sails towering above me on five masts as I absorbed the expanse of space and sea into my cells. I marvelled at the sunrises and joined my fellow passengers as we gathered on deck at dusk, scrutinizing the horizon for the elusive green flash, which under perfect conditions accompanies the sunset.

Although the Royal Clipper sails in the Mediterranean, the Balkan Sea, and does transatlantic crossings, being in the Caribbean made sailing even more of an adventure. The history of the islands resonates with sailing ships. Distant, scrappy ancestors to the Royal Clipper were critical to trade and to the battles fought off their shores. On many of the islands, old forts on sun-bleached cliffs stand watch — their cannons aimed — over the exposed bays below.

Inside the museum at the historical Fort Napoleon on Iles des Saintes, vivid illustrations of the epic 1782 Battle of the Saints line the walls. Fiery scenes depict desperate men leaping off burning ships amid heavy smoke and clamour. It was a brutal time.

Delightfully, it was centuries later that I stood at Fort Napoleon overlooking a tranquil bay dotted with luxury yachts and notably, the elegant Royal Clipper, truly the star of the sea. Unlike massive cruise ships, the Royal Clipper is able to anchor in small quiet bays. We passengers filled our days playing on white sand beaches, taking trips to quaint island towns and on a variety of shore excursions.

And we looked forward to getting back on board the Royal Clipper and the assurance of luxury. I was enchanted by the fabulous staircase that spiralled around a naturally-lit three-deck atrium. It extended from the well-appointed piano bar on the main-deck level and wound around the second level, entering

the dining room on the lower deck.

To descend the staircase into the dining room was to make the proverbial “grand entrance.” Thankfully, each evening the Maitre d’, who remarkably knew everyone by name, would greet me and ask me if I had company for dinner; or he would suggest a table that I may want to join. I travelled alone and most of the clientele were couples, so the Maitre d’s attention was pivotal in making my voyage on the Royal Clipper social and comfortable.

Dinners were sumptuous five-course à la carte affairs, including steak, a variety of fish, lobster, suckling pig and vegetarian cuisine. The buffet breakfasts and lunches were delectable and varied feasts.

When I returned my cabin at night I found my bed linen turned down, my nightie folded and a chocolate lying on my plush pillow. My cabin was a gem of comfort, with queen bed, abundant closet space, an adjustable thermostat, two large portholes and a marble bathroom. Each night I was lulled to sleep by the gentle rocking of the ship. I felt like an infant in a cradle.

I dreaded taking leave of my shipmates, which by the end of the cruise included the 100-plus crew and the guests. I was fond of so many of them and had befriended several. Once again, Captain Sergey provided the right sentiment.

“On the Royal Clipper, we don’t say goodbye,” he told us during the toast he made during the traditional Captain’s Dinner. “We say ‘See you’.”

That is a valuable piece of seaman’s wisdom, useful when leaving the Royal Clipper and while exiting the dimension that is outside of time.

If you go

Details at: www.starclippers.com

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