

CRUISE '94 FAMILY AFLOAT: A THANKSGIVING REUNION AT SEA

By Lorraine Swerdloff
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When we first proposed a three-generation family reunion at sea, my sister-in-law, who had never been on a cruise ship, was skeptical. Would the children feel awkward around all those sedate retirees -- or partying singles -- who supposedly populate the luxury liners?

Perhaps what changed Lynne's mind was our account of two previous cruises, where we met people of all ages and backgrounds by participating in the many activities offered. Or maybe it was her children's eagerness to compare the real thing with the TV show, or her parents' appeal for more time with the grandkids.

But most likely what convinced Lynne to spend Thanksgiving week in this multigenerational experiment was the alternative: juggling airplane schedules, activities, meals and sleeping arrangements for nine of us under her roof.

So, pilgrims in search of both relaxation and shared experiences, we boarded our own Mayflower, Royal Caribbean Cruise line's Monarch of the Seas, and discovered an ideal solution for family reunions. With plenty of "together time" interspersed with activities to suit every age and taste, the Monarch turned our family's usual gravy-and-gridiron Thanksgiving gridlock into a seven-day vacation.

The proof was most evident on the holiday itself. Back home, we would have been up early, baking and basting the bird. Instead we oiled ourselves against the strong Caribbean sun as our enormous floating resort, carrying more than 2,000 passengers and 800 staffers, docked at St. John's, the capital of Antigua.

This small island, famous for its 365 beaches, was our third port of call in as many days. Departing from San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Sunday night, the Monarch spent only one day at sea before lowering anchor at Martinique on Tuesday and Barbados on Wednesday. St. Martin and St. Thomas completed the week before Sunday's return to Puerto Rico.

Before every port, the ship's personnel held a briefing on what to see

and do on each island, with an emphasis on where to shop. Although we took guidebooks and maps with us, one family member normally would attend these gatherings to obtain handouts and ask advice on getting around. Then together we would decide how to spend our time, which ranged from five to 10 hours in port.

Experienced cruise-goers learn to pace themselves, ignoring some activities, meals and even islands in order to relax. By Thanksgiving Thursday we were catching on. So, when the Monarch moored at St. John's, we leisurely ate breakfast together; then all nine of us went ashore.

Avoiding the main street, its shops overflowing with passengers, we turned left toward a residential section. Antiguans waved and nodded as we walked together, passing tidy pastel houses, a corner grocery and a sign painter's shop until we reached St. John's Cathedral. The handsome Anglican church, its interior made entirely of pine, sits atop a hill that offers a view of the town and the sea beyond. By late morning, the grandparents had gotten enough exercise, so we split into two groups. They remained in town to try their luck at the casino (gambling is not allowed aboard ship while in port) before returning to their cabin for a siesta. The rest of us decided to hit the beach.

We selected a van driver from among the many vehicles for hire meeting the ships and solicited beach advice. Most of the passengers were heading toward Buccaneer Cove, a full-service strip suggested by the cruise crew. But Ernestine, a powerful Antiguan with equally powerful opinions, steered us to the quieter Runaway Cove for \$2 a person (American money is welcome at every port).

Fifteen minutes later, we faced a broad half-circle of turquoise sea edged with white sand. Uncrowded and laid-back, Runaway Beach still offered plenty of amenities, including para-sailing, sailboats, horseback riding and a dive shop and restaurant. So, just as on board ship, each of us could choose to relax or participate in activities, yet still be together.

For \$45, three of us arranged for a sailboat out to a reef, where John, a cordial Dominican now living in Antigua, supplied us with snorkeling equipment and joined us in the warm water to point out the most colorful coral and exotic fish.

Interested in some activity after a few hours of sunbathing, teenagers Andrea and Rebecca and 11-year-old Deborah took an hour-long

horseback ride along island trails and empty stretches of beach.

Back aboard ship, we changed for dinner in our tiny cabins (the Monarch's rooms are astonishingly small, but many feature balconies overlooking the sea -- a view that may make one forgive bathrooms the size of phone booths). Then the family rendezvoused on deck to watch the sunset and anticipate with relish an old-fashioned American Thanksgiving feast.

Gathering around the dinner table had become a daily high point for our extended family, a time for the children to excitedly share their experiences and for the grandparents to beam in delight. In many ways, each evening's meal had the feel of a Thanksgiving celebration, as we took turns around the table talking about the day's adventures.

But for our Turkey Day meal, we found that we had one foot in the Old World, one in the New -- and tongue firmly planted in cheek.

Every dinner and midnight buffet on the Monarch of the Seas has a theme, and each week, Thursday evening is Italian Night. True to schedule -- even as decorations of button-nosed pilgrims looked on from the walls -- the waiters and busboys appeared sporting smart gondolier outfits.

They offered us both Italian and Thanksgiving menus -- the butternut squash-apple soup on the latter was one of the tastiest dishes all week -- and as we enjoyed double portions of pumpkin pie, the waiters regaled the dining room with a spirited rendition of "Funiculi Funicula."

Meals on the Monarch are generally of high quality. Each menu offers several low-fat and low-sodium items and the kitchen accommodated our vegetarian teenager well. Passengers are encouraged to order as much as they like, so we reveled in multiple shrimp cocktails, lobster tails and Key lime pies. (We justified such gluttony by passing up the midnight buffet.)

Although the Monarch offers separate schedules of activities tailored for kids, teens and in-betweens -- dances, games, scavenger hunts and sports -- our children preferred to hang out with the grown-ups after dinner, attending the evening variety shows and "checking out the lounge lizards" as they wandered from deck to deck.

At one club they witnessed Lynne being crowned "Hula Hoop Queen" for rotating 18 hoops around her hips at the same time -- an

accomplishment they dubbed "awesome."

Their moment in the spotlight came Thanksgiving night at the passenger talent show, another project of family togetherness. As their Uncle David sang a song about feasting aboard ship to the tune of "Day-O" ("Say no, say no, mealtime come and I can't eat no more"), the girls, portraying spurned waiters, calypsoed across the stage.

The audience ate it up. And we had another family memory that three generations would cherish.

--Lorraine Swerdloff is a Washington writer.

A seven-night, Southern Caribbean cruise on the Monarch of the Seas costs about \$1,700 per person, double, for a typical (tiny) inside cabin on a lower deck, while outside staterooms with balconies go for around \$2,500. The price includes air fare between the departure point of San Juan, Puerto Rico, and most cities in the continental United States, plus several Canadian cities; transfers between airport and dock; more meals than you care to eat; entertainment; and use of the ship's facilities, including exercise room.

Not included are bar drinks, port charges (currently \$89 a person), shore excursions (we found these overpriced and used local drivers instead) and tips.

For more information, contact a travel agent or the Royal Caribbean Cruise Line, 1050 Caribbean Way, Miami, Fla. 33132, 800-327-6700....