

THE PERILS AND PLEASURES OF A CRUISE ROUND THE HORN

After having visited every country in the world by air or land, I finally, at age 80, took my first cruise. In sixty years of traveling, I'd steadfastly resisting cruising because of four concerns: 1) it seemed too timid for my high-adventure inclinations, 2) I would gain too much weight from the constant and delicious food they serve; 3) there was less opportunity to meet indigenous people, and, 4) most important, and much as I hate to ruin my macho image by admitting it, I was afraid of getting seasick. To my surprise and delight, none of my four fears materialized, and I loved everything about my cruise – except the way my ship was constantly ripping off the passengers (about which, more at the end of this report).

I had decided that, at the very least, I had to find a route that would take me somewhere I'd never been, which is not easy if you think you've been everywhere. But I found it on a rare 40-day Norwegian *Sun* “repositioning” cruise that would enable me to visit the far southernmost quadrant of South America. (I had previously only driven as far south as Puerto Monte in Chile, in 2000). This voyage would take me out to the Falkland Islands, into the Beagle Channel, across the Straits of Magellan, on shore excursions to visit such isolated places as Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego, and Punta Arenas, around the Horn, and up the Pacific side all the way to Santiago, immediately followed by a continuing cruise up to San Francisco. A repositioning voyage is a twice-a-year event during which many cruise ships are shifted from a winter in Caribbean-like climates to a summer schedule on the Alaska, Mediterranean, or Scandinavian route (or vice versa). I was also attracted to what Norwegian Cruise Lines (NCL) calls its Freedom policy, which shuns the formality of fixed dining times, assigned tables, and fancy dress.

I acquired the plane tickets to Buenos Aires on American Airlines' Copa partner a full nine months before I was due aboard ship because I wanted to be sure I could purchase it with my frequent flyer miles, but even at that early date, I had to accept an eight-hour layover in Panama City to keep the cost from going above 30,000 points.

I also booked my passage on the Norwegian *Sun* seven months early, and was rewarded with a spacious cabin – one of those designed for the disabled -- that was slightly larger than the others in my row, and the farthest back from the bow of all the cabins on the fifth deck, which somewhat minimizes the ship's up-and-down motion.

Ten days before the cruise commenced, an email from my booking source soured me on NCL, as it read:

Norwegian has notified Vacations To Go of an important change to your upcoming cruise on the Norwegian Sun. We have been informed that Norwegian Cruise Line is making a nominal adjustment to its daily service charges, effective April 1, 2017. The new rates are as follows:

\$13.99 per person per day for any category up to a Mini-Suite Stateroom. (Previously \$13.50 per person per day.)

I was not troubled by the increase of 49 cents, but because this rookie was being confronted by an extra charge of \$1119 for me and my companion for the 40-day trip that no one had ever mentioned before in any way –not in the brochure, not in the contract, not in the confirmation. After I made strenuous inquiry, I was informed that this “service charge” was a tip for the stewards and waiters (which turned out to be a blatant falsehood).

Since I prefer to tip those who provide services to me according to the degree of service they actually provide, I told my travel agent that I did not want to pay any automatic “service charge” in advance. I was eventually informed that it was not mandatory— although the email certainly made it seem so to this retired attorney—but that I had the option, *after* I was aboard the ship, of going to the Guest Services desk and informing them that I did not want to be robotically billed for any tips – clearly not the most comfortable way to start a long cruise, and one that could easily have been avoided if the promotional brochure had added at least one line to alert prospective passengers to the “service charge” before they purchased the trip, instead of long after our refund period had passed.

I decided to take a break from all this aggravating cruise crap and watch an interesting long video my friend David Smith had forwarded to me, in which a female American astronaut takes the viewer on a complete tour of the International Space Station (ISS). The video was fascinating, but after 15 minutes of watching the narrator twirl and whirl through the zero-gravity environment of the ISS, I was so motion-sick that I had to turn it off and lie down for two hours. I could only imagine what would happen when I encountered the Cape Horn Current and the gale-force winds that blow on 30% of the April days there. .

A few days later, I came across a full-page article in *USA Today* which stated that those objectionable “service charges” are the most controversial issue in the industry. It went on to note that:

The practice of adding a gratuity charge to bills is at a bit of a crossroads in the industry. While mass-market ocean cruise lines such as Carnival and Norwegian are hiking the fees at a rapid rate, a growing number of more upscale ocean lines including Azamara, Crystal, Seabourn, Regent and SeaDream have been eliminating them. The practice also is disappearing at some river cruise lines. River lines Uniworld, Tauck and Scenic Cruises are among those that now include gratuities for crew members in their base fares.

External events also cast a cloud over the upcoming voyage. Just a week before our departure, a particularly active El Nino in the eastern Pacific combined with global warming to inundate the north western coasts of South America with torrential rains, from Peru to Ecuador to Columbia. The rains caused a landslide and flooding in Trujillo, one of our ports of call, destroying 14,000 homes, leaving 150,000 homeless across the county, and burying more than 100 people under thick blankets of mud, and 300 more were killed in Columbia. The rains continued as our departure neared, as did rapid glacial melting in the Andes that added to fierce flash floods throughout the region.

I had reserved an inexpensive room (only \$33 a night) and the adequate Hotel Central Cordoba in Buenos Aires, located one block from the woodsy Plaza San Martin, because it was the nearest hotel I could find to the port. I arrived in BA two days before the ship's embarkation in order to visit some famous landmarks, but the weather had other ideas, and the heavy rains were spreading across the continent. I'd barely walked down part of the 9th of July Avenue, the widest avenue in the world -- with seven lanes of traffic in each direction plus two more on each side -- and taken a few quick photos of the pink Government House, the Metropolitan Cathedral, and the Plaza Major, when the skies opened up and poured on what would be the first of 17 straight gloomy days.

As I went to board the ship, I suffered a totally unnecessary and unpleasant indignity when the ship's assistant doctor, a kid fresh out of med school with the bedside personality of a tarantula, refused to let me board because she had decided I was very ill and might infect the ship. (When they had handed out the medial questionnaire, I had filled mine out truthfully, and stated I was a bit dizzy because my ears got clogged from the plane's steep descent into the airport the day before.) The doctor haughtily told me -- despite doing no examination of any sort--that she believed I had the flu. I told her I had no fever, no sweats, no chills, no aching joints -- none of the hallmarks of flu. Without even taking my temperature, she told me that I would have to take a blood test, a very costly blood test, at my expense, to prove that I did not have the flu, and I would be quarantined in the infirmary until she had the results. I told her I would be happy to take the test, as long as she would pay for when it came back negative, as I was sure it would, since neither of us wanted to deprive the apparently impoverished cruise line of this creative source of income. She stormed off to find the head doctor, while I quickly reversed my jacket, pocketed my hat, and went aboard the ship unmolested, never to hear anything again from any mercenary medical personnel. So much for my Bon Voyage!

Save for one bright break in Montevideo the next day, I would scarcely see the sun for another two weeks, and the entirety of the trip south and around the Horn and all the way up to Santiago would be cold, cloudy, and chillingly windy -- one of the risks you take when heading down through the Roaring Forties and the Furious Fifties on a rare cruise as the southern winter is a comin' in.

As our ship neared Puerto Madryn on day 7 I purchased a grossly overpriced -- \$219 per person -- shore excursion to see the near-threatened Magellanic penguins in their nesting grounds at the Peninsula Valdes Wildlife Sanctuary. It was a three- hour drive each way across the most monotonous plains in Patagonia, relieved only here and there by the sight of a guanaco or Patagonian hare in the otherwise boring bush, a black turkey vulture atop an electric pole, a few white lesser rhea in the far distance, and a solitary sooty shearwater flying overhead as we neared the beach.

When we finally reached the wildlife sanctuary, we discovered that the NCL agent selling this excursion had failed to mention that almost all the Magellanic penguins had already migrated north to warmer climate in Brazil, and only a few late couples were left, waiting to finish their molting and recover their waterproofing feathers before re-joining the colony. After that preventable disappointment, I never, save for one stupid exception, booked another shore excursion on the ship, but found that, by walking to the port gates, I could always find dozens of vans and taxis willing to take us wherever that day's tour was going -- for between one half to one quarter the price .

Two days later, when we docked at Port Stanley, the capital of the British overseas territory of the Falkland Islands, I skipped the \$90 shore excursion and pretty much covered the entire town on foot for free in an easy three-hour peregrination. Stanley looks like a typical quaint English village – only one that gets battered by rain, snow, and gale force winds for half the year. Although it was a Sunday, the town had stayed open for our 1,837 passengers – the majority of whom hailed from the U.S., U.K., Canada, Germany, Mexico, and Argentina, in that order -- and I was delighted to find, in the charming, bright red post office, a block of nine unusual stamps displaying the strange creatures that inhabit the Antarctic Ocean depths, a superb addition to my five-volume worldwide philatelic collection.

For the next four days, while the real sun was hidden, the Norwegian *Sun* gallantly ploughed through dark and windy weather, powerful currents, and 20-foot swells, as we rounded Cape Horn, a 1300-foot headland that is the southernmost point of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago, a grey and foreboding presence barely visible through the mists where the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans meet and crash in combat. (Technically, the phrase “rounding the Horn” means to sail from 50 degree south latitude on one side of South America to 50 degree south latitude on the other side, a distance of over 930 miles.) We then shifted course and traversed the Beagle Channel and the Straits of Magellan and skirted the turbulent Antarctic Convergence, where the frigid waters of the White Continent clash with the tropical waters flowing down from the Equator.

I suffered none of the sea sickness I had so dreaded, protected by a silvery little scopolamine patch behind my ear, the only remedy I’ve ever found effective. I even slept soundly through what other passengers described as a frightening heeling over of the ship one night around 1 AM, when the *Sun* exited the relative protection of the Straits of Magellan for the open ocean and got suddenly blasted by the treacherous williwaw wind that roars down from the coastal mountains in that region. The bridge instruments clocked the blast at 90 knots (104 mph), and I don’t think the passengers exaggerated how far the *Sun* tipped over, because I saw, when I walked around the next morning, that many of the bottles and much of the stemware in the bars were broken.

The day after we passed the Horn, we anchored at Ushuaia, the self-proclaimed “southernmost city in the world,” the capital of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, with a population of 57,000 hardy souls, bordered on the south by the Beagle Channel (named after Darwin’s ship), and surrounded on the other three sides by the snow-speckled formidable foothills of the Andes Fuequinos, the largest of them, Mt. Martial, adorned by a year-round glacier.

I boarded a ferry in Ushuaia and sailed into the Beagle Channel, as imperial cormorants, skuas, and black-browed albatross flew overhead, and steamer ducks paddled alongside. We circled several tiny islands in the Channel, where families of sleek sea lions convivially huddled together and piled atop one another, and blubbery 6,000-pound southern elephant seal bulls each held separate courts with his harem of a dozen or so faithful cows. I took a hundred photos of colonies of Magellanic, Humboldt, king, and gentoo penguins cavorting, diving, fishing, and climbing back up the brown rocks. And everyone’s favorite, the tiny rockhopper, one of the world’s smallest penguins -- 90% of whose members have died since the early 20th century of causes still unknown, but suspected of being linked to warming ocean temperatures -- distinguished by its funny hippy-hoppity walk and its pink webbed feet, dark red eyes, bright orange beak, and spiky feathered head-dress. After leaving the birds, our ferry sailed out to the

Faro des Eclaireurs, a sturdy 74-foot-high red brick beacon tower with a wide white stripe painted in the middle, known as “the lighthouse at the end of the world,” the last light the ancient mariners saw as they sailed south toward Antarctica and the unknown.

The following day, we headed to the north side of Tierra del Fuego and entered the Straits of Magellan, a channel 730 miles long and varying in width from two to twenty-two miles, and notably placid compared to the turbulent oceans on both its ends. We entered the Gulf of Nicoya, and made port at Puntarenas, Chile, from which I misguidedly took an NCL shore tour for \$109 pp for the 90-minute ride to the rugged Park of the Straits of Magellan on a hill overlooking the water, while the wiser and more experienced passengers hopped into waiting taxis at \$35 a head for the identical tour— the last time I made that mistake!

Originally constructed by Chileans in 1846 to solidify their nation’s claim to this then-unsettled part of southernmost Patagonia, and reconstructed in 1946, the village, now the park, was originally a 30-acre settlement for hardy pioneers, consisting of a fort, lighthouse, jail, church, post office, houses, and watchtowers, all built of logs using primitive construction techniques that are visible and instructional. It still looks as it did in 1846, with only the addition of an ultra-modern visitor’s center, five built-up viewpoints, and a coastal trail. We explored the old settlement for two hours despite a bone-chilling wind, and all came away awed by the obvious courage, determination, and resourcefulness of the remarkable band of adventurous patriots who struggled to live here – adjacent to the aptly named Famine Bay -- in service to their country.

The final stop of this cruise was scheduled to be Valparaiso, which serves as the port for the Chilean capital of Santiago, but word reached the ship of labor unrest and a possible strike at that port, so NCL, with impressive efficiency, switched to the small industrial port of San Antonio, and we became the first cruise ship to ever dock there

I will not report on the voyage up through Peru, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Mexico to San Diego and San Francisco because ITN has thoroughly covered those more-familiar locations in past issues, other than to remark that the days, at long last, were warm and sunny, the ship’s pool was finally swimmable, and a school of about eighty dolphins off our starboard side escorted us part way, repeatedly arcing out of the water in a lovely ballet as they welcomed us to their watery world.

I enjoyed most of this voyage tremendously, and compliment NCL on the friendliness and helpfulness of their staff and crew, the professionalism of their services; the spotless shine of the ship; the clarity of daily schedules and communications; the extent, number, quality, and variety of the games, contests, and entertainment provided; the absolute deliciousness and all-hours availability of the food in the restaurants and the cafeteria; and the safe and comfortable operation of the motor launches they provided to ferry us ashore at the five or six ports where the water near the dock was too shallow to accommodate the *Sun*. All these aspects were carried out to perfection.

But I do have serious complaints of an economic nature. First, because the ship was continuously trying to sell us stuff, I felt trapped in a nautical shopping mall. And, second, because many of the items

they were selling were misleadingly over-priced, or because NCL gave us information that proved to be false.

As to the first point, there was a relentless and never-ending selling atmosphere aboard the ship: public address announcements to buy stuff; advertisements for liquor and perfume and crystal in the elevators; a gaggle of pretty spa workers hovering around the elevator door on the 11th deck to try to talk us into acupuncture, Botox, massages, Restylane, and orthotics; crewmembers costumed as colorful indigenous animals waiting at the bottom of the gangplank at each port to wrap their arms around us for a photo – a print of which we could purchase that very night for only \$24; a newsletter announcing six or seven different types of sales each day; a pricey “art” gallery whose over-hyped offerings were somewhat dodgy; slow Internet access at between 50 and 95 cents a minute; discounts if you purchased 3 or 4 of their over-priced shore excursions at one time; prepayments for future NCL cruises; water packages at \$2.50 a liter; liquor, tobacco, emeralds, cognacs, cubic zirconia, tanzanite, watches, binoculars, cameras, lottery tickets, and casino chips; laundry service at \$19.99 for a small bag; souvenir maps signed by the captain; beverage packages at \$79 a day; and on and on...endlessly

Perhaps all these sales pushes would have been tolerable if the ship was offering real bargains on the merchandise, but they were not. Quite to the contrary, everything was marked UP. I had naively expected that, as a guest on the ship, I'd be treated by my hosts with honesty and respect. Boy, was I mistaken.

On several days, the ship's atrium was lined with tables festooned with signs reading “75% Off” for a big sales of watches. I asked the crew member in charge of the sale if the price tags affixed to the watches were the true retail price, and he assured me that they were. So I bought an Invicta Pro Diver that carried a tag of \$916, for the “reduction” of 75%, and paid \$229. Imagine my shock and anger when I got home and found the identical watch being offered all over the Internet for \$150. I wrote NCL to demand my money back, and they replied that they outsourced the sales to a firm and had no control over the prices. I wrote that firm and am still waiting for an answer. ..

Similarly, the ship set up a table at the entrance to the cafeteria offering certain Chilean wines, at a price allegedly reduced from \$48 to only \$38 – the same wine I found in Chilean supermarkets for \$15 to \$18. And if you found you had forgotten to bring a piece of camera gear, the photography shop would happily sell it to you – at double the standard price.

The worst deception I found related to the “service charge” of \$84 a week per person, which the ship repeatedly assured us was “shared” with the crew and staff to supplement their wages. That was a total falsehood! I interviewed 20 employees on the ship – waiters, room stewards, bus boys, washy-washy girls – and not one of them received a penny from our “tips.” The staffers each told me that they signed a contract at a firmly fixed monthly rate of about \$1100 when they started their work – and that the amount they were paid never varied by a nickel, no matter how much or how little we paid the cruise line for this “service charge.” It went into the pockets of NCL and was never given to the crew. How dishonest! And how depressing. And now, many months later, I am still waiting for a truthful answer from the NCL public relations executives, who forbid the cruise director from answering my questions about incidents

like this, and who have been finding all sorts of excuses for not answering them, despite their promise to do so.

The constant selling and deception has alerted me to be wary of these scams in the future, as I hope you will be. But it has not quenched my new-found enthusiasm for the comfort, convenience, and camaraderie of cruising, as can be ascertained from my actions: I have already booked three more cruises for the following year! In fact, I leave for the first one this Sunday, aboard a Russian icebreaker, to transit the Northwest Passage. So stay tuned.