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Eastern Caribbean Cruise

The Ship



In all fairness, I should point out our last cruise a few months ago was onboard the Holland America Rotterdam and as such, just about any cruise we would take after that would be a slight disappointment by comparison. So I'm sure some will find my review of this particular cruise somewhat unflattering – just keep in mind we have fun on every cruise, even if some are disappointing and don't meet our expectations.

The Royal Caribbean Grandeur of the Seas is one of the older style Vision-class ships and is in need of refurbishing. It was scheduled to enter drydock in October 2004 for new carpet, painting, and other much needed cosmetic repair. We've also

been told that within a few years, it will be taken out of service for several months so it can be lengthened. They will also add/change several features of the ship.

Due to the bridges they must pass under, ships leaving out of Baltimore are limited in size, so the Grandeur is one of the largest capable of making the transition.

We were disappointed to learn that the Grandeur of the Seas will be the only ship using Baltimore in 2005 on a regular basis. Carnival, Celebrity, and Holland America, who used Baltimore as a departure point in 2004, will not be leaving from Baltimore in 2005. This will

make our job harder to find cruises for those not wanting to fly to Florida from the Mid-Atlantic area.

Okay, back to the ship. As I mentioned, the Grandeur is an older design and thus the staterooms are much smaller than equal cabins on newer ships. For example, we had clients who booked a Junior Suite on the Grandeur, so we were anxious to see what it looked like. The first thing we did after boarding was to find their cabin and check it out. We cruised on the Navigator of the Seas and we stayed in a Junior Suite. The Junior Suite on the Grandeur was about half the size of the Junior Suite on the Navigator. In fact, the Junior Suite was about the size of a normal balcony cabin on the Navigator.

Regular suites on the Grandeur were about the same size as the Junior Suites on the large Voyager-class ships. While checking out our clients' cabin, we were happy with the size of the balcony. We had specifically booked this particular cabin on the very back of the ship knowing it had an oversize balcony so they could entertain their family, who were also going along with them. But we were very disappointed in the amount and quality of the deck furniture. It consisted of two old chairs and a small table – all of which were in desperate need of replacing.



We then proceeded to find our own cabin. We were actually on this cruise to attend a Seminar-at-Sea so we could gain valuable knowledge to help us provide a better service to our clients. So unfortunately we had no choice of cabins and were assigned an inside cabin, much to our displeasure. Since the ship was sold out, there were no other cabins available. Unless you plan on spending all of your time in some other part of the ship, I would highly recommend you do not get an inside cabin on this ship. Talk about small – my wife had to step over the bed to get in and out of her side because the corner of the bed was up against the vanity. And, if she was at the vanity, I could not get around her to get to the closet or into the bathroom. It was too small for us and we have vowed never to book an inside cabin again.

The bathroom was only big enough for one person at a time and the shower was just large enough to stand in. It was one of those where you took the soap and spread it on the shower curtain and then just turned around. The shower curtain and I became very intimately involved with each other during the course of our cruise!

The bed was in desperate need of a new mattress. Everyone we talked to said the same thing. They were very uncomfortable, resulting in poor sleeping for both of us.

Our cabin (#8011) was at the front of the ship, right next to a main hallway and the stairwell. Due to the location, it was very noisy since parents did little to control their children from hollering and running up and down the stairs and hallways late at night. This further exasperated us during our sleepless nights.

We ate in all the various dining venues and found the food to be overall sorely lacking compared to all the other Royal Caribbean trips we've taken. The only exception was the lobster, which was excellent, but the prime rib served on the same night was dry and not very flavorful. There

was one dish I tried for the first time in my life and found it to be very good; escargot! The thought of putting a snail in my mouth has never tempted me to try it, but I made an exception on this cruise and was glad I did. Others also found it to be the best they have had. I was really looking forward to having the shrimp scampi one night only to find it very disappointing. Everyone else at our table found it equally undesirable. By comparison, we had a group of 10 on our Navigator cruise and no one complained about any of the food – it was all very good! So we can honestly tell you that the food quality varies from one ship to another within the same cruise line.

Overall, we found the Grandeur of the Seas to be disappointing in just about every category with the exception of the service. Our cabin steward, waiter, assistant waiter, and every one else who waited on us were outstanding! They were among the best we've encountered during our many cruises. In fact, on the second formal night, our party of six did not want to get dressed up so we called room service and asked if they could deliver our lobster and prime rib dinners to the solarium. They were very accommodating and we relaxed in shorts while dining on the excellent lobster. One of the staff came by and commented she had never seen anyone do anything like that in her six years on cruise ships. She thought it was a wonderful idea and everyone acknowledged that in fact I did have an occasional good suggestion.

We have a group of cabins booked on the Grandeur for an October 2005 Special Halloween Cruise we are sponsoring. We're anxious to see if refurbishment makes this a better ship for seasoned cruisers. First time cruisers we talked to were happy with the accommodations and the food, so I know newcomers will enjoy this ship.

Port Reviews

Freeport, Bahamas

This was our first time in Freeport and we not only wanted to visit the local shopping areas, but we wanted to take a tour of Our Lucaya resort in case any of our clients wanted to stay there. A couple we had met on the ship who were also Cruise Planners decided to go with us, so we shared a taxi, which cost \$10 each for the 20 minute ride to the other side of the island. This was also the same area as the large shopping area where everyone goes. Our Lucaya is actually two hotels connected in one area – the Westin and the Sheraton. They are very different in décor, price, and clientele. Where the Westin is more for adults looking for an elegant hotel, the Sheraton is less expensive and caters more to families. Both are nice in their own way, but the Westin was more to our liking with some outstanding suites.

After taking a tour of the property, we walked through the casino and over to the main shopping area. It was hot and humid, so the first thing I wanted to find was the bar. We walked around for a few minutes until I found a little sidewalk café and ordered a couple of local beers before I even sat down. The waiter brought us some Lucaya Lager beer (2 for \$5), which was 5.4% alcohol and surprisingly very good. It's brewed by the Grand Bahama Brewing Company and tastes a lot like a German lager yet lighter. I always like to try the local beer wherever I go and have found most beer in the Caribbean usually to be very enjoyable.

After having a few, we walked around the area until I found a liquor store. We needed to stock up on some rum and I asked the young lady if there was anything made in Freeport. She said

there was only one (wish I could remember the name) and we were offered a sample. After giving it a try, we decided to buy a bottle. We then shopped around a little while, finding nothing of interest, until we found a place offering two-for-one daiquiris. Unlike most places in the Caribbean, this place skimped on the rum. So we opened our newly purchased bottle and added some kick to our drinks, making them much better.

We found a taxi, but he would not take the four of us back to the pier until he found at least two other passengers to fill his van. We lucked out and shortly another couple came along looking for a ride and with \$60 in hand, the driver started out on our 20 minute ride back to the ship.

Unless you like spending \$10 per person each way for a taxi, then shopping in the heat and humidity while looking at the same items in every store, there's no reason to leave the ship in Freeport. It was very disappointing and we would have much preferred to visit Nassau.

Key West, Florida

What can I say about Key West? A friend of mine once said that many years ago a hurricane hit the Florida Keys knocking all the fruits and nuts out of the trees and they all landed in Key West. After visiting there many times, I have to say he's not too far from wrong on that one! This is a place where you can always find something strange happening somewhere. It's a great place to visit because you're never quite sure what you'll see. It truly is a party town.

Having been there before, we opted to do something a little off the beaten path for this trip. The Florida Keys are beautiful and worth exploring. Although you can rent scooters around Key West, if you want to get out of town, you have to rent a car, which you can only get at the airport. Or, if you're really adventuresome like we are, you can rent a Harley Davidson. There's only one place in Key West to rent motorcycles; Rent To Ride (you can call Chris at 305-293-8883). The prices are higher than other places we've rented around the country, but then again when it's the only place in town, the price is naturally going to go up. We rented a Harley Softail for 6 hours for \$200 (included insurance, taxes, and gas).

The Florida Keys is a wonderful place to ride a motorcycle. The speed limit is relatively slow (no more than 55mph in some areas) and helmets are not required. We made a few stops along the way, taking pictures and sightseeing, while making our way across the various islands. We had been told to make sure we stopped at Bahia Honda State Park, which was picked as one of the most beautiful beaches in America. It was only \$3 to get in and well worth the price of admission. After finding a nice spot with a changing facility, showers, and restrooms, we changed into our swimming suits to cool off. It was a very warm day (93 degrees) with high humidity, so we were really looking forward to a refreshing swim. Needless to say, we were surprised to find my scuba diving watch registering the water temperature to be exactly the same as the air temperature – 93 degrees! The water was clear and the sand was white – it was beautiful. But it wasn't refreshing until we got out and let the breeze cool us.



We made our way to Marathon, where we headed to Herbies Restaurant (Mile Marker 50.5). This place is a little hole in the wall on the north side of the highway that has been there forever and all the locals know it as a great place for seafood. (Unfortunately, they do not use Old Bay Seasoning for cooking their seafood, but we forgive them.)

After lunch we began a slow trip back to Key West. It is a great ride across 7-mile bridge and the water and sky were beautiful as always, making it well worth the trip.

Upon arriving in Key West, we dropped off the motorcycle and headed into the main shopping area. Being a typical day in Key West, it was hot and humid, so we did not spend a great deal of time walking around.



Word of advice concerning shore excursions in Key West; many of the shore excursions you can purchase through the cruise lines are offered in port at better prices.

The greatest thing about Key West has got to be their famous beautiful sunsets!!

Coco Cay, Bahamas

This is Royal Caribbean's private island and is a great place to visit. The beach is large enough to handle a couple of ships, but don't think the main beach is all there is to this place. If you walk around, you'll find it goes for ½ mile on the back side away from the crowd. The one real nice thing about the beaches is that the water is never more than about 5' deep anywhere you go. So you can actually walk out 200 yards and still not be in above your head (for most people that is). The food is the typical fare for these situations – basically like a large cookout. The shore excursions are also typical for a private island; jet skis, sailboats, parasailing, etc. There's also a 'water park' area, but considering the limited items and the cost, it's definitely not a bargain. They have a couple of floating trampolines and some inflatable rock climbing walls, but the price is \$15 for 50 minutes. Unlike some other cruise lines private islands, Royal Caribbean spent a great deal of money importing a large number of palm trees, making it easy to find shade. They also have a huge number of lounge chairs, so there's never any problem finding a place to lay down.

Port Canaveral, Florida

I have always wanted to visit Kennedy Space Center (KSC), but have never had the opportunity. So it was our only choice of options for this port. After looking at the KSC website, we determined it would probably be better and easier to just do the shore excursion offered by Royal Caribbean. It was \$30 more than KSC prices, but figured this was worth it for the bus ride to and from the pier so we wouldn't have to hassle with a rental car or pay much more for a taxi. We looked at the different tours and opted for the Up Close Tour for \$87 each. We were disappointed that the tour did not stop in some strategic locations for pictures and we didn't get to see any of the three shuttles currently there as they were all inside buildings. This is a working facility, so you have to take that into consideration.



It was great to see the Space Shuttle launch site up close, even if we couldn't stop. Seeing a full-size model of the Space Shuttle was a surprise in that the size is not actually as large as you would think based on what you see on television. Seeing all the different space craft used in the various stages of our space program was very interesting and well worth the trip.

The only two complaints I had about the experience is the bus driver spoke too fast when explaining things and we did not have enough time to see everything. The bus got there right before they opened, but left at

3:00pm. Since the ship was not scheduled to leave until 8:00pm, they could have extended the time by a couple of hours or offered a couple of departure times to accommodate those of us who wanted more time at the center. We got to see one of the two Imax movies and it was awesome! We wanted to see the other one, but time did not permit.

We got back to the ship around 3:40 and found there was really no place to go since there was nothing close by. So we boarded the ship and took a nap.

When the ship left at 8:00pm, we got a couple of drinks and stood along the railing watching as we pulled out of port. There are many restaurants along the water front, several of which were enjoying happy hour by the sound of their patrons who waved as we went by.

Overall, this was not one of our favorite ships, but we did learn a lot while networking with other travel agents during our Seminar-at-Sea sessions. As I mentioned earlier, the Grandeur of the Seas was refurbished in October 2004. We are hosting a special 9-night Halloween Cruise on the Grandeur in October 2005 and are anxious to see how the improvements affect the overall experience.

I will say that clients of ours who have not been cruising before found the Grandeur to be very nice with good food and they enjoyed all it has to offer.

But those who have many cruises under their belts will find the Grandeur lacking. We missed the good food and amenities we have become accustomed to on both the Radiance-class and Voyager-class ships of the Royal Caribbean fleet.

Please contact me if you have any questions or would like to discuss details of this ship or the ports of call.



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