

LIVING

A robot bartender hit on my wife during our cruise

By Sid Lipsey, Yahoo Travel

November 19, 2014 | 2:56pm



Meet the bartenders at the Bionic Bar (did they cost \$6 million?)
 Photo: Instagram/Royal Caribbean

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY:
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“Welcome aboard! You must go to the bar with the robot bartenders!”

Rarely have so many of my favorite words cohabited in the same sentence. But that was the recommendation I got upon boarding Royal Caribbean’s so-awesome-it’s-ridiculous ship, Quantum of the Seas. The ship is a floating technological marvel with enhanced Wi-Fi, downloadable apps that help you find your way around, and wristbands that open your stateroom doors.

But none of Quantum’s perks are as deliriously awesome as the Bionic Bar. It does away with the old-fashioned inconvenience of having to shout to get your bartender’s attention by eliminating the bartender altogether: Two industrial robots prepare, mix, shake, and/or stir your drink and bring it to you.

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It's the kind of thing Star Trek's Captain Picard would dream of — that is, if he ever drank anything stronger than Earl Grey tea.

"It was a very whimsical idea." Royal Caribbean CIO Bill Martin told me as we relaxed in Quantum's Concierge Lounge. "Someone said, 'What if we could have a bartender that was a robot?'" That led Royal Caribbean to partner up with robotics firm [Makr Shakr](#) to create the Bionic Bar, which is now one of the most talked-about features of the heavily-hyped Quantum of the Seas. "It is amazing to us the amount of interest in it," Martin told me. "People are just really enamored with it. When you see [a robot] close up, it's personal because it's making a drink that you're going to drink."

I was sold. The second I finished my chat with Martin, I ran down to Deck 5 to try out the Bionic Bar for the first time. I was met there by my wife, Tracey, who had a drink in her hand and a sly grin on her face.

"The bartender just flirted with me!" she announced. That statement didn't surprise me; there aren't any downsides to being married to an attractive woman, but having strangers hit on your wife when you leave her alone in a public place is a fact of life and...

Waitaminute! I thought. Isn't the bartender a...

"...robot!" she said. (Yes, she sometimes finishes my thoughts. Scares the hell out of me when she does that.) During my chat with Bill Martin, Tracey had started pre-graming at the Bionic Bar, where she ordered a drink using its virtual ordering system. And on the big display that shows drink orders, the "bartender" had written next to her name: "If I had a heart it would belong to you."

Yes, that robotic bartender just flirted with my wife — and very well, she informed me. She should know; she's a flirting expert.

The whole thing was amusing but a tad disconcerting. Robots hitting on people's wives — is that some kind of first step toward machines becoming self-aware? Who knows, the prelude to a Terminator 2: Judgment Day-style apocalypse might be a drink-making C-3PO mackin' on some dude's girl.

Man or machine, besmirching my manly honor by hitting on my wife was an insult of the highest order. Maybe I should have confronted this robotic interloper. But I really wanted a drink. And in my book, thirst trumps honor (maybe I should translate that into Latin and incorporate it in the Lipsey family crest).

So Tracey, who was halfway through her first robot-prepared drink, walked me through the drink-ordering process. Set up throughout the Bionic Bar are several tablets that you access by touching the screen with your "WOWband" — one of Quantum's personalized RFID (radio-frequency identification) wristbands distributed to all the passengers; it allows you to navigate the ship, make purchases, and open your stateroom.

Once you're logged in, you select your drink from a menu of the ship's specialty



An electronic board shows you where your drink is in the queue. The robot bartenders also apparently use it as their own personal Tinder.
Photo: Royal Caribbean



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cocktails. Or you can make your own from the menu list. When you're done selecting your drink, you have the option to name and save your concoction so that you can order it later in your trip.

Soon, the name of my drink — which I called "Sidney's Cocktail" — was presented on two big screens on either side of the bar that showed my order and the orders of the other bar patrons. Seeing your name on a big screen along with the names of all the other passengers can unexpectedly fulfill any TV-fed fantasy of truly going to a bar where everybody knows your name.

After a five-minute wait in the lightly crowded bar, the robo-bartenders got to my drink. I'd ordered a Jack and Diet Coke (the latter being what turned out to be the healthiest thing I ingested during the trip), and the robot took care of it quickly.



The WOWband has multiple uses aboard Quantum of the Seas, including unlocking your stateroom, interfacing with the ship's map, and ordering drinks.

Photo: Royal Caribbean

And hence the main problem in dealing with robot bartenders: They can be a little literal. Most people walk into a bar and say, "I'll have a Jack and Coke," and the bartender knows what they mean. But I ordered my drink without inputting important details, such as measurements and ice. So "Sam" (what I call my new bartender/romantic rival) defaulted to a one-part measure for each ingredient and no ice, resulting in my getting what was essentially a shot.

"This never happened on Star Trek," I thought to myself when presented with my unexpectedly fun-sized concoction. But that was my fault: The high-tech world has no place for ambiguity. Oh, well — live and learn. And bottoms up!

At the end of the day, the Bionic Bar was a big highlight of a terrific cruise. I could come home and tell my friends that a robot made my drink — which is almost, but not quite, as cool as being able to say, "A robot hit on me."

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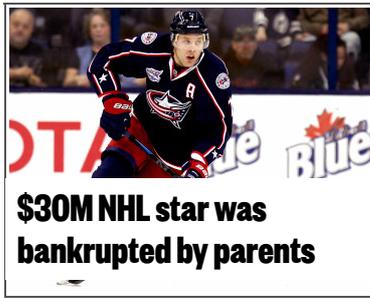
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