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# Bionic bar, bumper cars, simulated skydiving: Travel writer documents first time aboard Quantum of the Seas

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Royal Caribbean cruise line's new Quantum of the Seas ship sails into New York Harbor after completing its first trip across the Atlantic. The ship is the first at sea to offer attractions like bumper cars, simulated skydiving and an observation capsule called The North Star, with a bird's eye view 300 feet above the water. (AP Photo/Royal Caribbean)



Posted: Thursday, November 27, 2014 1:00 am

By SCOTT MAYEROWITZ AP Business Writer | 0 comments

ABOARD QUANTUM OF THE SEAS - I am the cruise industry's biggest problem: the avid traveler who is reluctant to sail.

I've been lucky enough to have hiked glaciers in Iceland, visited ancient ruins in Cambodia and seen one of the world's largest waterfalls in Argentina. Yet, until the other day, I had never set sail on a cruise. The idea just didn't appeal to me.

I'd toured a dozen ships as part of my job, sampling giant buffets, peeking at staterooms and getting a behind-the-scenes visit to the bridge and engine room. But that didn't necessarily make me want to take a cruise.

Nearly 22 million people are expected to cruise this year, according to the industry, with 40 percent of them first-timers. Those newbies are needed to fill cabins and help the industry continue to grow.

It wasn't a fear of gastrointestinal illness or sinking ships keeping me away. I just wanted to do other things with my precious vacation days - take a late-night stroll through Venice, devour barbeque in Austin, Texas, or go skiing in the Colorado Rockies.

The most memorable parts of a vacation for me are early-morning runs through deserted cities or fantastic local dinners. Cruise ships generally don't stay in port long enough for my interests.

So when an opportunity to spend two nights aboard the latest, most-innovative cruise ship - Royal Caribbean's Quantum of the Seas - presented itself, I jumped at the chance. It wouldn't be the full cruise experience, but just enough to get a taste and maybe, just maybe, fall in love with life on the high seas.

Quantum was unlike any other boat I'd seen. It was contemporary, with tasteful furniture and funky, whimsical artwork. It didn't remind me - like so many ships do - of a 1970s Vegas casino.

It's packed with all the latest technology and amusements: roller skating, trapeze classes and robots that make cocktails. And don't forget the bumper cars. What a totally insane - but brilliant - idea.

Long lines prevented me from getting to ride North Star, an observation capsule that rises more than 300 feet (90 meters) above the sea, offering views of the surrounding ocean and the deck below. Those that tried it loved it.

But it was the skydiving simulator that ended up being my highlight of the trip.

After putting on a flappy blue canvas suit, earplugs, goggles and a helmet, I was escorted into a giant wind tunnel

where a powerful fan provided enough of a gust to let me float in the air. With an instructor standing nearby, I moved left, then right, floating through the tube like I was skydiving. It was amazing and left me giddy for hours.

The food was much better than I expected. Quantum offers "dynamic dining" which means no giant, 2,500-seat dining room but five main restaurants (one reserved for frequent cruisers or those in suites) and seven specialty restaurants that cost extra. Another six smaller food outlets fill those midday snack cravings. All of that helps attract first-timers like me who dread one giant kitchen trying to feed the masses.

The ship's crew kept equating meals to the quality you'd find in New York City. While very good, they didn't match those in my home city. One themed restaurant that mixed Vietnamese, Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Indian food together was tasty, but didn't come close to the meals I had in Bangkok or Tokyo. Another restaurant recreates iconic American dishes; the gumbo was good but nothing like that in New Orleans.

Yes, I know I'm being picky here. But it felt like somebody was walking me down Las Vegas Boulevard, telling me I'd seen Paris, Venice, New York, ancient Egypt and medieval Europe.

The rooms and showers were much smaller than anything I am used to on vacation. Everything is more compact on a ship, but it felt cramped during my two nights; a week would seem claustrophobic. The stateroom walls were extremely thin and there was constant noise from doors slamming and toilets flushing.

Given the size of the ship - it can accommodate up to 4,905 guests - I didn't expect memorable interactions with other passengers. Boy was I wrong. Conversations were struck up in my skydiving class, at a bar and during dinner. I can see how lifelong friendships can start on cruises.

Ultimately for me, the problem was authenticity. I'd just rather spend my time hiking the Grand Canyon.

Cruises are an affordable way for families - especially those of multiple generations - to get away. But for me, it felt too much like being trapped in a floating shopping mall. I had fun, but I prefer local culture and the sense of place that comes with vacationing on land.

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