



It's About Time!

International Leisure Travel Resuming Slowly

I had almost forgotten the joy and excitement of setting out on a cruise — even for a short getaway — until boarding *Freedom of the Seas* last weekend for a CDC-mandated “test” cruise.

As we departed Miami, little did we realize that a federal court had just ruled that the CDC had overreached its authority by mandating restrictions on the cruise industry. Nevertheless, Royal Caribbean and other lines will continue to meet CDC protocols. We sailed with only about one-third of the ship's 3,900-guest (double occupancy) capacity onboard.

A month earlier, when Celebrity *Edge* departed Port Everglades June 25th, it became the first passenger ship sailing from U.S. waters since the CDC halted cruising some 16 months ago. It also marked the first time an American woman captained a large cruise ship from a U.S. port.

Major cruise lines expect to have at least a dozen ships cruising from South Florida, Galveston and Seattle in August despite the recent uptick of COVID cases. Ironically, while cruise lines departing the United States are just beginning to welcome vacationers onboard again, more than 600,000 guests have cruised since last year from other ports around the world.

SO, WHAT WAS MY CRUISE LIKE?

I obviously did not know what to expect when I arrived at Royal Caribbean's sparkling new terminal at the Port of Miami. Boarding was a paper-less breeze that took less than 15 minutes using an App on my smart phone. This downloadable application contained my sail pass, passport scan and ID photo, along with information about excursions, dining menus and other onboard activities.

Most guests sported purple wristbands identifying themselves as vaccinated against the virus and gaining access to areas of the ship off-limits to the unvaccinated (I estimate fewer than five percent of the guests). Although masks were required in certain public areas, to me it felt like an extreme precaution given the number of vaccinated people onboard, including the entire crew. I also felt the number of hand sanitation stations throughout the ship was slightly over done but not objectionable.

Other protocols I expect to become fixtures on future cruises include self-directed safety briefings, excursions vetted for health and safety, and upgraded air filtration systems providing cleaner air than what's found in most homes today. Meanwhile, the ubiquitous onboard buffet is no longer self-serve.

Given my onboard experience, cruising clearly is on the way back in the months ahead and as we move into next year, although the virus and its variants may create a few setbacks along the way. Certainly, everyone onboard was delighted to celebrate, along with the crew, cruising's return to almost normal with several onboard changes only enhancing the experience.



Freedom of the Seas visited Coco Cay and Nassau, Bahamas during my three-day cruise and the protocols were not onerous.

EU DROPS QUARANTINE REQUIREMENT— The 27-member European Union has eased travel restrictions and currently requires vaccination documentation, a negative Covid-19 test prior to arrival or proof of immunity based on recovery from the virus. However, not all member countries have re-opened their borders to tourists at this time. Greece, Italy, France and Spain's borders, for example, are open to vacationers, while the U.K. borders are set to re-open next week.

Yet, at least for the balance of this year, I am recommending escorted tour groups for European land travel instead of independent travel. Major tour operators have created new itineraries with health protocols, as well as introduced tours with as few as 24 travelers. Independent travel remains an option for fall and early winter but such travel likely will require careful planning.

Wide distribution of COVID vaccines has truly opened flood gates for three types of travelers —

- **GET ME OUT OF HERE NOW**—About 30 percent of clients just want get on a plane bound for anywhere. These people will be enjoying a cruise or land tour in the Mediterranean or Caribbean, as well as U.S. land tours and motor trips, between now and end of the year.
- **I'M VACCINATED BUT WILL DELAY LEISURE TRAVEL FOR NOW**—Just don't wait too long to make your plans or you may be disappointed. Vilas, European river cruises, certain ocean cruise itineraries and accommodations are already selling out for travel up to a year from now. The vast majority of clients fit into this category. (*Travel TIP: European river cruises on the Danube or Rhine rivers sailing between Thanksgiving and Christmas this year offer a special travel experience and excellent value.*)
- **NO TRAVEL UNTIL COVID IS 'WIPED OUT'**—This small segment includes people with underlying medical conditions and some who opt not to vaccinate against the virus. This group will likely avoid international travel and cruising until they believe it's reasonably safe.

So, whether you are thinking about international travel later this year or sometime in 2022, now's the time to double check the expiration of your passport. Many foreign countries require your passport to be valid for at least six months after you return home and recently passport renewals have been averaging 12 to 16 weeks.

Looking at post-COVID travel trends, clients are seeking destinations that get them closer to nature in regions well away from major cities. For example, I am currently working with several extended family groups of eight to 12 guests interested in travel to Iceland, the Azores, Mallorca and the Greek Islands. By December, a growing number of longer cruise itineraries will become available and several will include new ports of call in the Caribbean and other parts of the world.

Clients also are redeeming the vouchers they hold for previously cancelled cruises and exchanging them for upgraded accommodations or longer itineraries. Personally, I hope and expect to travel to Nairobi in mid-November for a Kenyan safari originally planned for last year.

Whatever your plans, please know that I have access to the latest worldwide travel protocols and requirements. Remember, travel conditions can change rapidly — not just at your final destination but also in countries you must transit to reach your destination. Vacation travel is slowly returning to normal as more people are vaccinated, yet remember COVID and its variants are still with us. Travel safely and be a smart traveler wherever in the world your travels take you.

Yours in Travel,



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