

Cruise Overview

Review and Tips from the NCL Sun 3/18/06 Eastern Caribbean

This covers the Eastern Caribbean cruise of the Norwegian Cruise Line Sun, which sailed out of Miami on March 18, 2006.

Overall, the weather was great (we had unusually beautiful temps, with no daytime rain showers and only slight conditions on the water). The captain kept talking about how rare it was to have such great weather on the cruise.

The itinerary was also special -- with a unique stop in Samana, Dominican Republic, and an opportunity to dock in Tortola, B.V.I., a place I might never have visited otherwise.

As first-time cruisers (I went on a 7-day Alaskan cruise with my family nearly two decades ago, but since I was a kid, that doesn't count), I wasn't sure if Christopher and I would really take to this kind of vacation travel. After a week on the Sun, I'm sold.

We had free flights down to Ft. Lauderdale, so between tips, our shore excursions, shopping and eats at shore, drinks and incidentals on board and the original cruise ticket, we spent about \$2100 total. But that covered everything -- a full eight days and seven nights of fun in (and on) the Sun for two people.

Below I've offered some commentary on the entire cruise experience, but mostly, it's just one big list of unsolicited advice. This document is also available as a PDF (link below).

Resources:

- Jen's complete Sun 3/18/06 review website with overview, scanned files, pics and more:

<http://www.geocities.com/norwegiansun2006>

- Pics from the trip:

www.flickr.com/groups/norwegiansun/

(If you view the images as a slideshow and want more information on a picture, just click on the image. This will give you a small caption and other information).

- PDF and online versions of this document:

<http://www.geocities.com/norwegiansun2006/overview.html>

- Travelogue:

<http://www.geocities.com/norwegiansun2006/travelogue.html>

- Cruise critic.com live reports thread:

<http://boards.cruise critic.com/showthread.php?t=317234>

- Scanned copies of the Freestyle Daily, menus, port backgrounders and more paper from the Sun:

<http://www.geocities.com/norwegiansun2006/scannedstuff.html>

- To reach the author, email jensex@gmail.com. Please put "cruise" in the subject line.

Who We Are:

Christopher and I (Jennifer) are both 28-year-old reporters who live in Washington, D.C. And both of us are essentially first-time cruisers (though I went on a seven-day Alaskan cruise with my family nearly two decades ago).

About Our Fellow Passengers:

- There were not as many kids as I'd have expected, given that the cruise ran concurrent with spring break for many people. As you'd expect, some children were fun and well-behaved. A few others seemed a bit out of control.

- I never expected to meet so many fun, friendly fellow passengers, but it was great to meet all sorts of people on board. People are eager to make mini-cruise friendships, to connect with folks for the vacation. Even at the Ft. Lauderdale airport, Christopher and I had nice chats with people who were coming back from other ships. Cruisers are a fun bunch!

Food:

- Food in the main dining rooms, Four Seasons and Seven Seas, was okay. Channelling my inner "Top Chef" critic, the presentation was somewhat amateurish. That said, items were still generally well presented. The real problem was with taste. Although some items were standouts in the taste department, there were also a great many disappointments (items that did not live up to their billing on the menu or just came out bland or incorrectly textured).

- The buffets in the Great Outdoor Cafe and Garden Cafe were okay, too. There were some definite misses (I was disappointed by the stir fry), but there were also occasional highlights. Fries in the Great Outdoor Cafe were tasty (though I only had a few over the week). Pizza, when available, also was very good (not compared to a fresh pie from New York, but given the setting and style, it excelled).

- The fruit salad was always yummy. Often, individual components, such as the honeydew and cantaloupe, weren't ripe, but overall, the fruit mixes were cool and refreshing.

- The pizza available in the Sports Bar was always tasty.

- Dessert options in the buffets were generally a disappointment. Many of the items tasted the same or had very similar consistencies. The only times I saw cookies were at Great Stirrup Cay and at a cruisecritic.com gathering.
- Take advantage of the breakfasts in the main dining rooms. The eggs benedict, I've now learned, will not come out with any predictable yolk consistency. But I like mine any way I can get it. And the cappuccinos are always free in the main dining rooms, for breakfast, lunch and dinner.
- The brioche available in the main dining room at breakfast is light and tasty.
- Stretch your limits and sit with other guests, if that's offered to you. I was not inclined to do it, but Christopher and I agreed to share a table once when the hostess asked. We ended up having a delightful breakfast and conversation with a couple from Canada (by way of England).
- If you're ordering breakfast from room service and like your orange juice, make sure to ask for two servings. The juice is served in smaller glasses than you'll find in the main dining rooms or at the buffets; it is about a six ounce serving.
- When ordering breakfast from room service, you can ask for various items to be combined on one plate. Otherwise, each individual item (a single wedge of cantaloupe, for instance) might come on individual plates -- and that's just a mess for everyone.
- Iced tea is not available at breakfast in any of the buffets and it isn't on the breakfast menu in the Seven Seas. So, if you want a cold beverage in the morning and orange juice, apple juice, milk or water doesn't cut it, make sure to fill a bottle with iced tea the night before and stash it in the fridge in your room.
- Sprinkles, the ice cream spot at the edge of the Garden Cafe, always has some kind of cobbler or bread pudding available. It's kind of hidden away, but these made for tasty treats, with or without ice cream.
- The ginger ice cream at Sprinkles was a treat.
- It looks like there are sugar-free dessert alternatives available at most food stations and in the main dining rooms each night.
- Take in tapas at Las Ramblas before dinner one night. If you're a fan of chevre, you'll love their marinated goat cheese.
- Folks on our cruise raved about the Cooking Light specialty restaurant on the ship. There is no cover charge for it, but reservations are recommended. I wish Christopher and I had found room to fit this in.

Drinks:

- I didn't find prices that objectionable, though I'm coming from D.C., where martinis now routinely cost \$10 and up. On board, non-fruity drinks, like the Long Island Iced Teas I got the first day of the cruise, had a good amount of alcohol. Just make sure to get drinks in a non-souvenir glass. When we did, they were generally \$6 plus tip.
- The martini clinic was worth it. Heavy on the alcohol and light on the instruction, it was still a nice opportunity to taste four different martinis for \$15. In our case, the martinis were very strong.
- Ask for the "regular" size of drinks or to get drinks in a non-souvenir glass to save

money.

Crew:

- In general, the crew members were always pleasant -- offering smiles and greetings as you passed by -- and were always ready to help. The one exception to this was in the two main dining rooms, where some (definitely not all) of the wait staff seemed to simply be going through the motions, smiling perfunctorily (or not at all) and offering service without going the extra mile.
- Room stewards were efficient and always ready to help. Before going on the cruise, I wasn't sure if excellent service was limited to those on higher decks and with larger staterooms, but the attendants for our inexpensive stateroom on deck four were great. Anthony and Edward were helpful, efficient and pleasant. Plus, they delivered some great towel animals.
- It seemed like crew members were always cleaning, painting or making minor repairs to the ship.

Entertainment:

- The house bands were generally okay -- not outstanding but not so bad as to send you running out of the room.
- Roots Link, the group that sung reggae and other caribbean-inspired tunes frequently on the pool deck was pretty good, especially as house bands go. They were always adding some nice flavor to times on deck or at Great Stirrup Cay.
- Rhythm and Harmony, the group that performed 60s, 70s and 80s hits in Dazzles disco most -- if not all -- nights, was a bit of a disappointment. They were just okay (a bit like karaoke or bad wedding music fare).
- The production of "Cirque Pan," the Jean Ann Ryan company's version of Cirque du Soleil, was entertaining, although performers were limited in what they could do by the size of the performance space. Also, I thought the routines did not give them enough opportunity to show off their skills; at times, some of the choreography was closer to what you'd see from a group of high school cheerleaders than professional dancers and acrobats.
- In general, passenger-based entertainment, like the newlywed game and a drag "Miss Norwegian Sun" contest were funny.
- The "Liar's Club," a version of "To Tell The Truth" with the ship's comedian, magician, cruise director and assistant cruise director, was amusing -- for a while -- but it dragged after 20 minutes (especially since the Chocoholics Buffet was beckoning).
- The comedian simply was not funny, and he had to resort to canned blonde jokes to fill time and elicit laughs.

Pool and Fitness Facilities:

- There was definite deck-chair hogging. Thankfully, I was never eager to find a reclining deck chair right by the pool, but had this been important to me, I'd have

been disappointed.

- Body Waves, the gym on Deck 11, was frequently crowded, and it could be very hard to find a vacant elliptical machine (as there were only four). There were at least twice as many stationary bikes and roughly 10 treadmills.

- A nice alternative to the gym, for running or walking, was the track ringing deck six. The track is divided into two sections, one for walking and the other for jogging. There are some snug spaces where it can be tough to pass other walkers or sightseers. But large mirrors are used in these to make it easier to see what's coming up behind you.

- There no longer is a batting cage on the Sun, though ship maps and signs on board still say it is available. There are, however, three ping pong tables, a shuffleboard court, a basketball court with two hoops and two golf driving stations.

Packing:

- We had an incredible amount of luggage, both coming on board and leaving the ship. But amazingly, I wore roughly 90 percent of everything I brought. You can never have too much clean underwear (and, frankly, I didn't have enough v-neck, single-color t-shirts to go around) on a ship that doesn't have self-serve laundry facilities.

- Use space-saver bags or extra-large zipper bags in 2.5-gallon and much, much larger sizes to help condense your packed clothing. Surprisingly, I didn't have problems with wrinkles using this technique, and it helped me cram a lot more clothes into my bags. Of course, they also grew much heavier as a result. :) The bags also came in handy during excursions, for packing wet clothes, storing sunscreen and protecting passports and camera equipment from water.

- I didn't bring an over-the-door shoe organizer (I use them all over my house already), and I didn't regret that decision. Our deck four outside stateroom had ample storage space, and it was all very cleverly designed. There were, for instance, an abundance of shelves in the closet, six corner shelves bordering the mirror in the bathroom and a completely vacant space under the beds, suitable for storing suitcases and less-frequently used items.

- Bring insulated cups, either with lids or not, for filling with iced tea, milk, orange juice or coffee at the buffets. Since juice is only served at breakfast and iced tea isn't available then, you might want to stash some in your stateroom fridge for drinking at other times. The sealable bottles were also essential for bringing ice-cold water to ports.

- Bring wire or other light hangers. We only had eight in our room, and though the steward brought a few more, there still weren't enough.

- I brought a highlighter for marking up the Freestyle Dailies, but I never ended up using it. It's generally easy to remember what you want to do each day, unless you're planning on spending lots of time (even on port days) on the ship. I did, however, pack quite a few pens. And those got plenty of use.

- With all of the activities onboard and excursions at shore, you'll be running around a lot -- and, trust me, you'll be showering a lot, too. The shampoo-conditioner mix in the staterooms is pretty weak (I didn't get much conditioner from it, at all). If you

have long, thick or tangle-prone hair, bring your own conditioner.

- Pack an expandable, but lightweight, bag for carting stuff home at the end of the trip. You'll need it, no matter how much you plan to go through while on your cruise.
- Before your trip or early during it, make sure you get yourself a good hat with a wide brim that will stay put in the wind. I got a hat with a wide brim for \$5 at the straw market on Great Stirrup Cay, but it wouldn't stay on in a breeze. I packed a hat that would stay on -- but fell short in the brim department. Do yourself a favor and make sure you get a hat with both features.
- The hair dryer in stateroom bathrooms are pretty weak (about what you'd find in most hotel rooms). If you have a hairstyle that demands precise blowout, or you have thick hair, you will want to bring your own.

Room Amenities:

- We were in stateroom 4013, one of the lowest-quality outside staterooms available on the ship (we had a large porthole -- right in between the other offerings: a small porthole or big picture window).
- Rooms on the Sun offered an amazing amount of storage. You can really cram stuff -- neatly -- into a very small space, because of all of the shelves and cubbies.
- Our bathroom had a hair dryer, a vacuum toilet and tons of shelving. Liquid soap and a shampoo-conditioner blend were available from a dispenser in the shower (but anyone with thick or tangle-prone hair will want to pack their own conditioner).
- The room itself had a safe, a small fridge (no freezer), a small television and a DVD player. There were six pillows and extra sheets in the closet. The bed itself was dressed with a duvet and a fairly obnoxious green bedspread.

Ship Design and Navigation:

- The overall ship layout is logical, and within a day, Christopher and I had the hang of the place (with a few notable exceptions).
- It is difficult to get to Seven Seas, one of the two main dining rooms. Although it is on deck five, there basically is no way to get there from the other side of the ship -- on the same level. Instead, you have to make your way there through the residential hallways on deck four or by meandering through deck six and then going up or down a floor.
- Maps of the Sun available online at ncl.com and in the cruise line's brochure are far more informative than what is available in paper form for passengers on the ship. The small cheat sheet only tells you what deck various lounges and restaurants are on -- not where on that deck they can be found.
- Entering the Garden Cafe from the pool area was difficult. Often just one of the two main doors were locked, and long lines for Sprinkles, the free ice cream place, obstructed the entrance. This is a nuisance, and, at times, a hazard.

General Tips:

- Take advantage of the honeymoon/romance package, even if you're not

celebrating one of those special occasions. The components of the \$79 package cost more individually, and they're all things you might get and enjoy. Remember, the photo offer in the package is really just a \$5 credit toward the purchase of an 8.5-by-11 photo.

- If you have your laptop with you on the cruise and are using wireless, make sure you check it out on the pool deck. I didn't realize it was a hotspot until Friday, and, of course, it's much better to sit poolside to check your email than in some stuffy lounge on the sixth floor.

- The night before you head ashore, write-in "ice" as an order on your breakfast room service card, if you're ordering the meal for your room. Your room stewards will keep the room's ice bucket replenished, but they won't usually have visited for the morning clean-up before you head out on excursions. And it's handy to have ice for water bottles at the ready (without having to trek over to the Garden Cafe to get some).

- Sure, NCL offers "freestyle cruising," and you can dress most any way you want for dinner. But, if you want to take advantage of nights for more formal dressing, be sure to check the clothing specifications and guidelines on the top right corner of each Freestyle Daily. We didn't realize Thursday night was a semi-formal night (optional, of course) until after we were in the dining room. I had two long dresses with me on the cruise, and I'd have loved to wear the second this evening.

- Snag towels from the pool deck for use as extra towels in your cabin and for use on shore. This saves time checking out towels by the gangway.

- Sea days might be the best opportunity to sleep in (a little), but be warned: plenty of stuff starts happening very early on board.

- Book those shore excursions early! If something is booked up when you try to get it, consider trying again on the ship. Folks might have canceled, freeing up space for you.

Positives:

- Space in the cabins was amazing. I was impressed with all of the storage options.

- Both embarkation and disembarkation were generally smooth, quick and efficient.

- NCL really has Freestyle dining down. One of my memories from the Alaskan cruise I took with my family as a kid was all the waiters carrying flaming Baked Alaska to the tables at once in dramatic fashion. That's not an experience you'll get on an NCL ship, because, with everyone choosing their dining times, that kind of coordination just isn't possible. But, you get the freedom to go to dinner when you choose, be served by new or well-liked waiters and avoid sitting with unfriendly dinner companions. If you're someone who likes a lot of autonomy, you'll find the Freestyle approach a good fit.

- The Chocoholics Buffet is pretty darn fun.

- With the exception of many of the main waiters we had in the Seven Seas and the Four Seasons, service on the ship was stellar -- and crew members really seemed to be eager to ensure you were having a good time.

- Our room stewards were excellent. It became something of a routine, chatting with them in the morning and at night in the hallway, as we departed our cabin, and I

enjoyed that. They tracked down things for us, going beyond extra towels and glasses. Plus, they made some mean towel animals.

- We docked at two of our four ports, which made for quick-moving crowds and lots of convenience.

- The martini clinic in the Windjammer was a fun time, and, even at the new price of \$15, cost-efficient.

Negatives:

- If you go expecting gourmet meals, you will be disappointed. The cruise fare in the main dining rooms is mostly okay to good. There are some hits (I had some really great items over the course of the week) and there are some misses. The buffets are not nearly as bad as I feared, having read some pretty negative reviews and having seen some pics from other cruisers, but fundamentally, they were still buffets of mass-produced food. Specialty restaurants were better options, when it came to service and the quality of food, but the drawback there is the cover charge, which is not insignificant.

- The atmosphere in the main dining rooms leaves a lot to be desired. The background muzak is pretty dreadful, and if you only hear "Wind Beneath My Wings" once every night you dine in the Four Seasons or Seven Seas, you'll be very lucky.

- Don't go expecting top-notch entertainment. This is a cruise ship, and the entertainment reflects that. That said, there are some bright spots (I, for instance, enjoyed Roots Link, and I heard great things about the Latin dance performance).

- The time in ports generally wasn't enough. Our time in Tortola was extremely brief and the next stop was just 1.9 nautical miles away. In that case, I really wish NCL had given us more time to explore Tortola.

- The soda card concept. I weaned myself off diet soda in preparation for the cruise, and neither Christopher nor I ever indulged in a soda bought from the ship. I know this is a money-maker for the Sun, but I wish they'd consider making sodas free -- or cutting the price significantly. Even if you drink enough to cover the price of the all-you-can-drink soda card at the ship's prices for soda, it's unlikely you'd drink enough to cover the cost of the card at anywhere near normal prices. At 50 cents a can, you'd have to drink roughly 100 to cover the card and included tip. That's more than a dozen cans a day.

Ports (General tips):

- The time at ports was far too short, and the time kept shortening as the cruise approached. Originally, for instance, we were expected to be at Great Stirrup Cay from 8 until 5. In the end, we were there from 7:30 a.m. until 2:30 p.m.

- Bring iced water with you from the ship, so you aren't stuck without it or forced to buy expensive bottled agua (unless, of course, that's your preference). We found it very convenient to fill our own insulated bottles with ice and water at the Garden Cafe.

- Don't miss the boat. In chatting with the cruise's shopping expert, we learned that

for those who miss the boat in Tortola, there is a \$2,000 per person repatriation fee.

Ports - Samana, Dominican Republic:

- Cruise ships just started sailing to Samana, Dominican Republic late last year -- and the newness is evident everywhere at this very small port. Poor children from the town crowd sidewalks near the port and ask you to exchange their quarters for fresh, spendable U.S. dollar bills. The single bathroom at the port is barely functioning. The single pier jutting out into the sea can only handle a couple dozen people unloading off tenders at any one time.
- Because the port is just getting used to boatloads of tourists, we decided to book an official NCL excursion: the cave, rainforest and mangrove tour.
- The tour was a blast, though I suspect the quality depends in large part on who your tour guide is. Ours, Kelly, has been operating tours like this since 1978.
- If you take the cave, rainforest and mangrove tour, and you get cold easily, be sure to wear a long-sleeve cover up or bring a beach towel to wrap around you while on the speedboat. It's fine at slow speeds, but when you're speeding along, it can get pretty chilly.
- If you're uncomfortable climbing along rocky paths, the mangrove tour isn't for you. You will have to navigate across rocky paths, and at times climb up a couple feet in a single shot without handrails or other places to brace yourself. Good shoes are a good idea (sandals, like the Teva ones that anchor to your feet are fine).
- Before getting to Samana, if you are waiting for a tender as part of an official NCL excursion, feel free to bring some breakfast with you to the designated waiting area. Though we were told to show up at 7:45 the day we dropped anchor outside Samana, it was at least 20 minutes before we headed off the ship, and in the meantime, we were just sitting in the dining room wishing we were eating fruit or drinking coffee.
- Bring cash for this port. We were warned on the ship that few operations on this port accept credit cards.
- There are a few restaurants available on the main drag, just a few blocks away from the port. Most, if not all, offer their menu prices in pesos. It can be handy to know the exchange rate ahead of time.
- Shopping on Samana (at least on the main drag) is very limited. Locals hawk their wares close to the port (the further you get away, the cheaper the prices can be). There's also a small market a few blocks from the port, but cigars are the main offering there.

Ports - Tortola, British Virgin Islands:

- We did the NCL shore excursion to the Baths, since our time in port precluded us from doing it ourself with the two ferry services available on Tortola. This is a much cheaper option.
- On the official excursion, you are driven from the Sun to a ferry that takes you to Virgin Gorda (the ferry ride takes about 45 minutes). At Virgin Gorda, you hop in open-air vans for a short drive to the Baths National Park. At the park, guides give

you an overview, and everyone explores by themselves for a few hours.

- The Baths National Park is absolutely amazing. I can't remember ever seeing anything so beautiful.
- To get to the first beach from the parking lot where you are let off, you head down a rocky path. This is a very easy route to follow, and I had no problems walking it in loose, backless sandals, even though we had been told we'd need good shoes for the journey.
- The first beach, which has some amenities, is a fine spot to relax. But for better views and less crowds, head on over to the second beach. To get there, you have to navigate the caves, where there are puddles of water (presumably, these are the namesake baths) and great rocks all around. There are some very tight squeezes, and anyone who is larger or claustrophobic probably would want to avoid this.
- There is a shortcut path down to the second beach at the Baths. Christopher and I took it to come back, on the advice on one of our guides who was anxious to get everyone to the buses on time. The path would still be tricky for some, but it doesn't meander through tight, rocky passages. So this would be a nice alternative for folks who are uneasy about that.
- We had been told that you needed good shoes for the journey, but in fact, my sandals were fine for the trip down to the first beach, and from then on, my bare feet did the trick.

Ports - St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands:

- We arranged our own day-long tour of the island with Godfrey Renal, one of two popular tour operators (the other is Sunny Liston). Both have websites advertising their services, and both offer tours of St. Thomas that include up to three hours of shopping downtown, a trip around the island, a visit to Mountaintop and several hours at one of three beaches on the island. Godfrey's tour costs \$25 per person. This was a great way to see the island, especially for first-time visitors. And, it was far cheaper than any of the official NCL excursions.
- Wear your swimsuit under your clothes if you plan on visiting a beach during part of your time at St. Thomas. Coki was beautiful, but all of the public bathrooms were out of order, and I suspect this happens often enough that it's a hassle.
- Coki Beach offered great snorkeling and lockers are available for rent from vendors.
- In the downtown area, there's a post office located in a bright yellow building across from the market and a public park. Of course, this is a handy place to mail your postcards -- after all, you simply pay U.S. postal rates.
- Overall, I was disappointed with the shopping (though shopping for jewelry isn't really my thing, so this isn't a big surprise). There's a little market next to the stores downtown, but I found jewelry sellers there started out their prices way too high (even good haggling didn't break the prices down as low as I thought they should have gone).
- The banana daquiris at Mountaintop are tasty. They're probably not worth their price, but, then again, they're still a couple bucks cheaper than similar drinks on the Sun.

Ports - Great Stirrup Cay:

- Fill bottles with ice and water for Great Stirrup Cay. You'll want to have it handy, and treks to the water/tea station on GSC are not always convenient. Plus, it's invaluable if you're exploring other parts of the island, where NCL doesn't have bar or food service. Also, who wants to buy bottled Evian water?
- There are no lockers on Great Stirrup Cay. If you bring cameras or other valuables, you'll have to keep track of them.
- Great Stirrup Cay used to be home to an Air Force satellite tracking station, and there are remnants of the military infrastructure beyond NCL's portion of the island.
- If you want to get away from the crowds on GSC, take the trail to the lighthouse and spend some time on the vacant military installation. But be warned: there's essentially no shade on the path out to the lighthouse. You'll want to cover up and carry some water with you.
- There are some nice reclining deck chairs at the far side of the beach, near the rock that juts out into the water (and on your left side, as you tender in).
- You are required to wear life vests (don't worry, they're not the big orange kind) when snorkeling at Great Stirrup Cay. The vests are free; just sign them out at the dive shop.
- Lunch was an NCL-provided barbecue, with pizza, hot dogs, burgers, and lots of sides. There were plenty of dessert options: mostly baked goods and a fresh fruit salad. Iced tea and water were available, too.
- We heard folks complaining about the soda they got on the island. Apparently, it came in warm cans; they had to ask for cups of ice (and didn't always get them).