

Ship Review: Disney Dream

Taking a Disney cruise may be the last vacation option to pop into the minds of anyone who has finally gotten their children out of the house. It certainly hasn't been on the top of my vacation list. I mean, I've been to Disney World with the kids a couple of times and enjoyed the experience,



but now that the kids are on their own I really didn't want to give up an entire week of my already too-short summer break to join Mickey and friends on a cruise ship. Jeff said for him the idea conjured up images of spending a week at sea with the never-ending lilt of "It's a Small World" echoing through the ship's every nook and cranny with no way to escape it. Talk about an earworm! Still, we have a number of clients with kids at

home in the prime Disney vacation age demographic. There are perhaps just as many or more who have grandkids they might someday want to take on cruise vacation, or who are lifelong Disney addicts themselves. So...I tasked Jeff with doing some research into what a Disney cruise offers. He managed to suppress his "Small World" phobia long enough to do some digging, and you can imagine my surprise when he recommended that we experience a Disney cruise for ourselves. I was still reluctant to give up an entire week of my vacation, but this past fall Disney began to offer 3, 4 and 5 night cruises from Port Canaveral to the Bahamas on the Disney Dream. I was willing to "sacrifice" to learn how the Disney magic translates to cruising. Spoiler alert: WOW!

As you might expect, a Disney cruise is all about the kids. Yes, there are activities and areas of the ship that are for adults only as Disney advertises, and I'll talk about those a bit later on in this article. But let me repeat, a Disney cruise is all about the kids, and Disney shows their mastery of branding and entertaining throughout all aspects of their cruise experience. With that in mind, let me share a few thoughts about our experience.

Disney Dream's exterior sports two squat black-topped funnels and lines that give her the appearance of a classic turn of the century (20th century that is) luxury ocean liner. Once aboard the Dream, all connection with the past dissolves as you immediately run into the trademark touches that you would expect with any Disney vacation experience. While this included Disney show music piped into the public areas, Jeff was relieved to discover it wasn't limited to "It's a Small World." In fact, Disney used their complete songbook to present music thematically tied to the décor and function of each individual area on the ship. Of course the Dream also includes the ubiquitous mouse ears on rugs, mugs and bedspreads. And don't forget the character appearances. You haven't lived until you have joined Donald Duck on the basketball court for a game of HORSE.

There are so many little surprises on the Dream it is hard to know where to begin to describe them. I suppose the passenger entry atrium is as good a place as any. Checking in for the cruise at Disney's cruise terminal was pretty much what we have experienced from other cruise lines, nothing magic about that. But once we took the first step onboard the ship, any resemblance to other cruise lines quickly faded away as the Disney cruise experience makes everyone feel special. A crew member welcomes each family aboard the ship by announcing the new arrivals over the ship's sound system, and the assembled ship's officers applaud in welcome as you board. While many cruise ships feature soaring entryways with elaborate sculptures reaching up eight decks or more, Disney intentionally kept their entry atrium modest to set the tone for the rest of the onboard experience. That doesn't mean it is boring. The Dream's atrium is a surprisingly airy and open three deck high affair decorated with an ornate crystal chandelier that provides a focus for the room.



As you leave the entry atrium and begin to explore the ship you very quickly realize that being on a Disney ship isn't anything like being aboard any other cruise ship. Take the art work for example. Jeff and I just came off the QM2 this summer and one of the things I was impressed with was the quality of art work. At first glance the art work on Disney Dream hardly holds a candle to what we experienced aboard the QM2. But then you take a second glance and realize something isn't quite right. The art work isn't just a static display of landscapes or still life portraits of Disney characters. Instead, anything in a frame is likely to offer a special surprise in what Disney refers to as their "Enchanted Art" display. While some works of art are just works of art, others come alive as you stand in front of them. Disney has designed a clever interactive detective game featuring the Enchanted Art, which is scattered throughout the ship's 13 passenger decks, to help kids learn how to navigate the ship while having fun at the same time.

Dining is one of the best times for families to gather and discuss the events of the day, and Disney takes particular advantage of this with the Dream's varied restaurants, each of which offers its own Disney magic throughout the meal service. To start with, Dream offers the Enchanted Garden which is fashioned after the gardens of Versailles. Food offerings are fresh, seasonal and organic, and as the family dines the setting gradually transforms from day to night, regardless of the actual time of day. Adjacent to the Atrium, the Royal Palace restaurant features "lazy Susan" revolving-booth seating and opulent decor inspired by four Disney Princesses: Cinderella, Snow White, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, and Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*. Cuisine furthers the regal theme by offering dishes such as King salmon and Princess cakes. I should say at this point that Jeff and I were pleasantly surprised by the quality of the food. With so many kids onboard we weren't expecting much beyond spaghetti and macaroni and cheese. To be sure, each of the main restaurants offers these kid friendly dishes as part of their kids menu. But the sophistication and quality of food for older kids and adults was a pleasant surprise.

When we first looked into cruising with Disney, Jeff was most excited about eating in the Animator's Palate restaurant. Aboard Disney's older ships, the Animator's Palate décor starts as



a bland black and white motif. With the help of a little Disney magic, color creeps in almost unnoticed as dinner progresses. And they don't rely solely on colored lights or filters to do it either...it is truly magic, helped along by Mickey who makes a grand entrance in the middle of dinner, dressed as the Sorcerer's Apprentice. By the time dessert is served, the entire dining room is bathed in full Technicolor. On the Dream, dinner starts with Animator's Palate already in full color. At the beginning of dinner monitors that are situated throughout the dining room look like giant cork boards. As soon as service

begins the monitors transform into an underwater world straight out of the movie *Finding Nemo*. Characters come and go at times precisely choreographed with the dinner service, and they engage diners one-on-one with a live and interactive dialogue. Diners learn early on that they are in a "people tank" serving as the entertainment for Nemo and his friends. The crowd favorite character "Crush" appears at tableside monitors throughout the meal, instructing diners on the proper "lingo" of the turtle language and engaging kids in small talk. During our dinner in the Animators Palette, Crush hung out at a table where a young mother, oblivious to the fact that she had an audience, regaled her table with a description of her labor and subsequent maternity leave. We know this was the subject of her conversation because in the middle of the conversation Crush interrupted to ask her a question about something she said. The expression on the woman's face when she realized an animated character was actually listening in on her conversation, and asking questions directly to her, was priceless!

Disney doesn't lose any opportunity to set themselves apart from the rest of the pack when it comes to entertainment, and this extends to their cruise ship dining concept. As other cruise lines experiment with the right combination of flexible dining times and venues to go along with the traditional fixed dining, Disney offers the best of both experiences with their signature Rotational Dining. Disney assigns diners to the same time, table and service staff for the duration of the cruise. But...each night everyone assigned to that table, to include the service staff, rotates to a new dining venue. This avoids the "Small World" syndrome Jeff was so worried about and allows diners to enjoy the unique experience each dining room offers while still allowing a dedicated service staff to learn and cater to your specific likes and dislikes. A very Disney approach to getting the best of both worlds.

The Dream offers Disney Cruise Line's first French eatery, an adult only upscale restaurant called Remy. Arnaud Lallement, the French chef from a Michelin two-star restaurant just outside of Reims, France, collaborated with Scott Hunnel, executive chef of Victoria & Albert's in Florida's Walt Disney World Resort, to create Remy's concept and menu. The dining room has a look similar to the restaurant featured in the film *Ratatouille*, and of course takes its name from the lead character. With sunset as the backdrop, Remy is very romantic and seems otherworldly. Service is elegant and informed, but be warned...Remy carries a pricey \$75 per person cover charge (not including wine). If you are looking for an even more exclusive experience, Remy offers a private chef's table for 16 in a separate room off Remy's main dining room. Advance bookings for this

space are limited to groups of at least 8, but smaller groups can inquire into the availability of seats upon boarding. The restaurant offers competing tasting menus from Chefs Lallement and Hunnel, or you can order ala carte and get the best from both menus. Service was impeccable, the food was very good, and it was nice to have a night away from everyone else's kids. Disney is calling Remy its first premier dining option, but they have offered specialty adult-only dining on their older ships in the Palo restaurant, and they include a version of Palo on their new ships as well. Like Remy, you will have to pay a premium to dine in Palo but it is a much more affordable \$25 per person for dinner or brunch. Palo is a Northern Italian themed restaurant both in décor and cuisine, and reservations are required. Palo and Remy are the only two restaurants on the Dream that have a dress code, which is strictly enforced.



If you are in need of a break from all that Disney magic some evening you can try eating in the more casual Cabanas. This is a beach-themed venue that offers the same dinner selections as the main dining rooms but without the side show. You can also find fast-food type offerings throughout the day and well into the night at one of several snack bar type venues such as Flo's Diner, Preludes, and if you have a taste for frozen confection, you won't want to miss the Eye Scream and Flozone Treats, both located on Deck 11. As with most other cruise ships, a full room service menu is available 24 hours except the last night of the cruise when service is available until 1:30 AM.

Disney Dream offers a wealth of kids-only areas such as the ship's Oceaneer Club and Lab. The lab offers what Disney says is the first interactive, floor-based videogame on a cruise ship. The 250-sq-ft play-floors, which look like dance floors and enable players to control the action with their feet from the periphery, allow as many as 32 kids to play at once. The area was full of kids



each time we passed by in the hallway. Other public areas designed specifically with kids in mind include Nemo's Reef water-play area and Goofy's Sports Deck. Nemo's Reef takes its name from the Pixar film *Finding Nemo* and incorporates a number of characters from that movie in its features, including a small slide that is shaped like Mr. Ray. It also includes a water curtain that moves back and forth. Nemo's Reef is surrounded by a glass enclosure, with a main guest entrance and a separate wheelchair-accessible entrance. A member of the ship's staff attends Nemo's Reef when it is open.

Dream's main pool deck consists of two pools separated by a retractable floor giving the space maximum flexibility to adjust to scheduled activities. The pool deck was a very popular place for kids throughout our cruise. The space between the two pools was usually set up with lounge chairs for kids, parents and grandparents to watch whatever Disney feature film was playing on the oversized video screen positioned on the forward funnel.



The pool is staffed with a lifeguard during normal operating hours, and there is a rack of kid-sized life jackets for those cruisers not quite ready to swim on their own. The Dream also features the cruise industry's first onboard water coaster for all ages. AquaDuck is a 765-ft, acrylic-tube water coaster suspended above the football-field-size deck area. One of the ship's most popular features, it is capable of handling up to 250 people per hour. The minute-long ride employs "master blaster" water jet technology that whooshes guests at speeds of up to 14 feet per second through both funnels and, at one precipitous loop, out beyond the ship's structure 160 ft above the sea. On Goofy's Sports Deck, passengers can play a nine-hole mini-golf course where each hole offers special instructions with a "Goofy twist." Two digital sports simulators provide virtual game experiences for soccer, tennis, basketball and golf, and two small sports courts offer soccer and basketball for kids. Foosball tables and table tennis are also available. Goofy's Sports Deck is ringed with a walking track to allow you to work off your meals, or just stretch your legs, and lower down on deck 4 there is a promenade that is also suitable for walking or jogging.

Adults desiring a break from the kids can head for one of several venues dedicated to adults only. While the ship designers made some effort to route foot traffic away from these areas, they weren't



entirely successful as we noted a steady flow of people, to include kids, through the adult only areas. The ship's staff did a great job of keeping kids (or parents with kids in tow) from settling in to any of the adults-only areas as they passed through from one part of the ship to another. Quiet Cove Pool is one of the adult areas. It features a swim-up bar, a sunbathing pool with built-in loungers, a 4-ft-deep plunge pool and a hot tub. Also for the adults, an exclusive nighttime entertainment area called The District offers themed lounges, bars and nightclubs. The Skyline

Bar features a high-definition projection of a different cityscape every 15 minutes (Paris, New York, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, Chicago). Music, drinks and food are paired to each specific cityscape and the result is spectacularly harmonious. There is also a more exclusive semi-covered outdoor bar area adjacent to the Palo and Remy specialty restaurants named Meridien. This area was just about the quietest nook on the ship and we enjoyed impeccable service once we discovered it. The main nightclub, Evolution, boasts fog screens, butterfly-shaped banquettes and backlit ceilings emulating deep-orange Monarch and brilliant-blue Morpho butterfly wings. It is open to families during the day and early evening offering family dance parties and cruise ship versions of popular game shows. Once 9PM rolls around Evolution becomes an adult only venue where passengers can join crew members in a round of karaoke. Another venue in the District is Pink, a champagne bar named for the pink elephant in *Dumbo*. Pink is decorated with bubble-shaped Italian light fixtures and offers its own exclusive brand of Taittinger champagne. Disney also offers O'Gills, their unique interpretation of an Irish sports pub, and the 6-8-7 club where a duo performed to recorded background music each night.

Disney's attention to detail and catering to families doesn't end with the public areas. Of the ship's 1,250 guest cabins, 1,000 interconnect which is a great feature for families occupying multiple cabins. Additionally, 150 cabins are sold as inside cabins but they feature one of the coolest cruise ship innovations yet, "virtual portholes." The virtual porthole is a video screen mounted on the wall of inside cabins and fashioned to look like a porthole. It is fed by real-time LED projections from four outside positions around the ship, giving the illusion that you're inside cabin is actually an

outside cabin. And in typical Disney Imagineering fashion, they just had to make a great idea even better. As the cruise progresses Disney characters like Flo the starfish randomly make cameo appearances in the video view, to the delight of kids and adults alike. Good luck getting kids to take nap in these rooms! Cabin sizes are average for mainstream cruise ships, ranging from 169 sq feet for most to a generous 1,781 sq ft. for the largest suite. All cabins feature new "scan key" technology and yacht-inspired decor with a soothing deep blue, red and white palette. The cabins also take a utilitarian approach to bathrooms by offering a water closet with toilet and sink, as well as a separate tub/shower with another sink. Both rooms have their own doors to ensure privacy, providing families with maximum flexibility when preparing for meals or the evenings activities.



Entertainment aboard the Dream was quite good on our cruise. Again, it's all about the kids and the shows are most definitely designed to keep them entertained and engaged. As an adult without kids you have to be prepared to be in the minority in the Disney Theater, which means lots of squiggly and squirmy kids eager for the show to begin. But once the show does begin, the kids are mesmerized for a full hour. Their unquestioned belief in Disney's magic draws the adults in as well and both Jeff and I thoroughly enjoyed the productions. It was a real treat to see how Disney blended technology, a little slight-of-hand, and a few wires to bring magic into their live stage shows, and in particular to see how much the kids in the audience appreciated it. I have to share one observation about the overall scheduling. Disney crafts the ships activities with kids' attention spans and body rhythms in mind. That means the day starts and ends early. If you are used to the late night activities that are featured on most other cruise lines, you won't find much on a Disney cruise after 11PM. Given how much energy both kids and parents expend each day that seems pretty reasonable.

Both Jeff and I were impressed with the extent to which Disney goes to make their cruises an entertaining experience for kids, parents and grandparents. As adults with no kids, I have to say that while I enjoyed the cruise, I probably won't book another until I can bring my own grandkids along. And based on what Jeff and I experienced on this cruise, I so look forward to that!