

Cruise Ship Review: Norwegian Bliss

There are so many new cruise ships chock-a-block full of features that I decided to write about another one under construction, the Norwegian Bliss. Although it isn't sailing yet, I was able to take a virtual reality tour of NCL Bliss that Norwegian Cruise Lines offered at the travel convention we attended last month. After that tour I have to tell you this is one ship I MUST cruise aboard. For a number of reasons that I'll spell out in this article. NCL's Bliss is slated to set sail in June of 2018 out of Seattle on weeklong roundtrip Alaska itineraries with port calls at Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway, scenic cruising, and Victoria B.C. After the Alaska cruising season, Bliss will reposition to Miami and sail a 7 day Eastern Caribbean itinerary that includes St. Thomas, Tortola, and Nassau.



NCL Bliss is in Norwegian's Breakaway Plus class of ships which offer most of the same features as the Breakaway and Getaway. Plus new features. See what they did there? Breakaway...Plus. Clever. OK so Bliss was designed with features tailored to their Alaska itinerary. It has an observation lounge that NCL describes as revolutionary. Initially a skeptic, after taking the virtual reality tour I have to agree. For the Alaska itinerary it is nothing short of amazing.

NCL's Bliss has a number of new features designed to appeal to families. The most visible attraction is the competitive race track. This was another feature I was able to enjoy through the magic of virtual reality at our travel conference. The track concept is pretty slick and the execution even more slick. Or slickerer. It features what NCL describes as the longest competitive race track at sea, which is a pretty safe claim to make since the only other cruise ship to have a competitive race track is sister ship NCL Joy (deployed to China to serve the Asian market). The track is a two-level affair that seems to run the length of the ship in NCL's marketing video, but is actually just 1000 total feet looped around the middle of the top deck just aft of the funnel. Essentially where other ships would position a basketball/multi-purpose activity area, which is the one feature NCL Bliss does not offer. Considering how popular this attraction will be, I think it was a wise trade-off in space. The track will feature electric cars (go-carts) that can reach a top speed of 30 MPH. Another unique venue on NCL Bliss is their laser tag course, themed after the inside of an abandoned space station. I saw the movie Alien. I'm not going anywhere near that place! Seriously though, it looks pretty cool. The laser tag course will feature different experiences for day and night activities, and this is another attraction sure to be a hit with families.



When it comes to water activities, NCL Bliss offers a large sundeck complete with two pools, one open and one with a retractable roof, and six infinity hot tubs along the sides of the ship. Bliss appears to be raising the bar for mass market lines with an Aqua Park that offers some uniquely thrilling activities. Like the Ocean Loops water slide. I mean a free fall water slide that

comes with two loops, one of which extends over the side of the ship, pretty much has every other water slide at sea looking tame by comparison. In the virtual reality tour I felt like I was going to fly out over the side of the ship and land in the ocean. If that doesn't get the adrenaline pumping I don't know what will. Bliss also features the Aqua Racer tandem race slide, where you can go head to head with family and friends to see who makes it to the bottom first. For the younger cruisers Bliss has a Kid's Aqua Park and for babies and their parents, the Splash Academy. If you are a kid and water isn't your thing, Bliss offers Entourage which is a space for teens, and Guppies which is a playroom for babies and their parents.

Norwegian has been a pioneer in the industry when it comes to the dining experience they offer cruisers, and Bliss continues the trend. NCL was the first to abandon the traditional fixed seating approach to dining, replacing it with their freestyle dining concept. It allows passengers to dine when, where, and with whom they want. NCL Bliss offers two complimentary main dining rooms plus the usual buffet. They took their dining options a step farther with a neat looking concept called The Manhattan Room. This venue is a spacious dining room with a large dance floor in the middle. Norwegian's concept is for passengers to come for dinner and stay for dancing. What's not to like about that? The final complimentary dining venue is The Haven, restricted for guests who book suites in The Haven, Norwegian's exclusive ship-within-a-ship.



NCL Bliss follows in the footsteps of NCL Breakaway and Getaway with the number and variety of specialty dining venues. Bliss will carry a whopping nine specialty restaurants, offering a range of cuisine. If you can't find something to eat on this ship, you are in trouble. You can start at the Texas Smokehouse, a Texas styled barbecue that offers...what else? Barbecue. But wait...there's more. They also offer live country music while you eat. I guess if you don't care for country music you might want to dine elsewhere. Like at Cagney's Steakhouse or Teppanyaki, a Japanese hibachi steakhouse where you always get dinner with a show. NCL Bliss also offers something to satisfy traditional palates with French cuisine served in Le Bistro, Tuscan fare in La Cucina, seafood in Ocean Blue, and Mexican food in Los Lobos. Rounding out the ranks of the specialty restaurants are the Food Republic where you can get global dishes ranging from Chinese noodles to Peruvian ceviche, and Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville where you can enjoy...you guessed it...a cheeseburger in paradise! If you prefer to skip dinner and go straight to desert, try Coco's which specializes in everything chocolate, or The Bake Shop...I think you can figure out what they serve.

Location, location, location. NCL has placed three of their signature restaurants...La Cucina, Cagneys and Ocean Blue...in a boardwalk-themed space aptly named The Waterfront. These venues offer open air dining where you can gaze out over the ocean and watch non-diners walking by on the outer boardwalk promenade. In addition to the restaurants, The Waterfront offers something for your sweet tooth at Dolce Gelato which serves....gelato, what else? There are lounges if an adult beverage is what you want, Maltings Whiskey Bar, and the Beatle's themed Cavern Club.

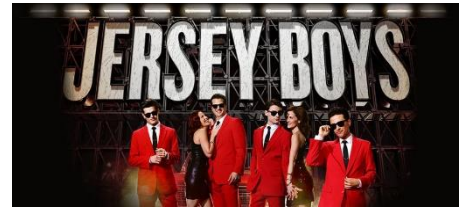
Those aren't the only lounges and bars on Bliss. Oh no, no no. Lounges abound! Most are located at the center of the ship in the space NCL has labeled 678 Ocean Place. Because it occupies the 6th, 7th, and 8th deck. It is also home to the ship's casino which has nothing to do with the name. Cigar lovers will want to spend some time in Humidor, a cigar lounge complete with leather chairs, world class cigars, and...wait for it...a humidor. If you enjoy wine you might want to stop at The Cellars, a Michael Mondavi



family-branded wine bar. Not a fan of wine? Spend some time in The District Brew House where you can try one of 24 craft beers on tap, or one of over 50 bottled beers while listening to live music. There is also a photo-booth in the event you feel like cutting loose. I'm still scratching my head at what NCL's design team was thinking with the photo booth thing.

If you are in search of action along with some adult beverages, you can visit the Skyline Bar which offers high-definition digital landscapes and bar-top electronic poker. And then there is the aptly named Sugarcane mojito bar, The Local which is a pub where you can enjoy complimentary classic pub food 24/7 along with your beer, Mixx which is the obligatory martini bar, and rounding it all out is the A-List Bar featuring hand-crafted margaritas. NCL is taking a page out of Disney Cruise Line's playbook with two adults-only lounges which is a welcome addition. The first lounge, Spice H2O, is styled after "the renowned summer beach parties on the island of Ibiza." And then there is the Vibe beach club. Whew...that's a lot of booze!

I'm sure you've heard the question "what keeps you up at night?" On NCL Bliss there is plenty to keep you up at night. If you are a fan of award winning Broadway shows you can catch The Jersey Boys in the ship's main theater. Or...if you are waxing nostalgic you might want to try Happy Hour Prohibition – The Musical. This interactive show is set on the eve of prohibition in a venue patterned after the world famous Madam Lulu's New Orleans speakeasy. Did I say it was an interactive show? That pretty much means guests will be part of the show along with Miss Lulu and the girls. There will be drinking. There will be singing. There will be dancing. But I'm quite sure there won't be any hanky-panky in this speakeasy. It is after all still a family oriented ship. And if that doesn't tickle your funny bone, try Social. It is a venue that Norwegian describes as where Comedy Club meets Night Club. Hmm...sounds interesting.



With all that much fun, your body will be in need of some wellness treatments, and the Mandarin Spa is only too happy to accommodate those needs. It offers a full service spa and salon, barber shop, fitness center and thermal suites. Just what you will need after a long night of hard partying. You can also get a salt rub treatment in the Salt Room, or chill out...literally...in the Snow Room. To complete your spa day take a dip in Mandarin Spa's vitality pool.

At some point you will need a break from the fun if only just to sleep. Cabins are one area where NCL Bliss runs hot and cold. The hot includes a wide range of suites which offer a decent amount of space and high end amenities. As I noted in my review of NCL's Breakway, the rest of the accommodations pay the price for NCL's concept of offering a ship-within-a-ship with exclusive venues for the highest end cruisers in The Haven. Space in the ocean view cabins are about average for mainstream cruise ships. Inside cabins average a meager 135 square feet which is on par with Royal Caribbean but smaller than Carnival. Norwegian also offers studio cabins for single cruisers. At just 99 square feet, these cabins are more like closets, but they do include a private bathroom with shower. The studio cabins are located in a key-card controlled enclave that includes a common lounge area allowing single cruisers to socialize without having to deal with kids and family groups. Room décor is themed in Norwegian's typically understated Nordic style. Overall it looks like Norwegian will have a hit on their hands with NCL Bliss, and I can't wait to cruise aboard her.