

## Ship Review: Norwegian Cruise Lines Breakaway and Encore

I wrote two articles back in 2013 and 2017 as Norwegian Cruise Line debuted their two newest classes of ships, the Breakaway and the Breakaway Plus. I wrote the articles as a deck-by-deck



rundown before either ship set sail based on NCL's marketing materials. The articles were detailed and accurate, but somewhat sterile since I hadn't been aboard either class of ship. Janet and I were able to correct that this past year by getting aboard the NCL Breakaway herself and NCL's newest Breakaway Plus ship the NCL Encore. With this firsthand experience, I thought it would be a good time to freshen up both reviews. The layout of the two ship classes is very similar, the Breakaway Plus class

being a bit larger in overall size and passenger capacity. In fact they are so similar I decided to review both in a single article.

I am obliged to share that we got a travel agent rate for both ships, but as usual I won't pull any punches with my review. Since I previously reviewed the ships deck-by-deck, I decided to focus this article more on my impressions of the cruising experience...the good, the bad, and the ugly. There is more good than anything else, and in this case the not so good is more because of my own cruising style preferences than anything else, but I didn't want to ignore the imperfections.

### The Good

#### **Accommodations**

A common complaint about cruise ships is that the staterooms are too small. Cruise ship comedians love to poke fun at cabin size, including graphic descriptions of doing battle with the shower curtain in the woefully undersized showers. We found Breakaway and Encore's cabins and bathrooms to be comfortably appointed with a more spacious feeling than other mass market cruise ships. Whether they are actually bigger or just more efficiently laid out, the net effect is the same. What we really appreciated were the bathrooms. There is ample storage space in the bathrooms, and they have an actual shower door rather than that bothersome curtain.



Each stateroom comes with a coffee/tea maker which is so nice when you want to have that jolt of caffeine to get you going in the morning, or that soothing cup of chamomile tea to settle you down at night. Other cruise lines offer this amenity but only on higher end cabins and suites, so kudos to NCL for including it in all stateroom categories. Another nice touch is the ship's approach to letting your cabin steward know when you don't want to be disturbed. Rather than using a door tag that can be accidentally flipped or removed (or intentionally if someone wants to

prank you), NCL's newest ships use a set of lights on the exterior of the cabin that you activate from within by flipping a toggle switch. There are two toggles, one for do not disturb and one to indicate when you are out of the cabin. You can have both toggles off, but you can't accidentally have both toggles activated...you have to flip one toggle off before you can flip the other on.

Janet likes to arrive early when we cruise so we have time to explore the ship before the hustle and bustle of embarkation day gets too bothersome. Usually that practice entails lugging our carry-on bags everywhere we go for several hours as we wait for our cabin to be ready, but not on NCL ships. On both the Breakaway and the Encore, NCL allowed us to leave our carry-on bags in our cabin as soon as we boarded, even though our cabins weren't yet ready for us to occupy. That is a nice touch that the other mass market cruise lines don't offer, the exception being Royal Caribbean...they bundle it with a few other conveniences like early boarding but then charge a fee.

NCL was one of the first cruise lines to offer studio cabins so single cruisers don't have to pay a single supplement, and they continue to improve on the concept as each new ship is delivered. Most cruise lines that offer studio cabins scatter a handful throughout the ship, almost as an afterthought. On NCL's Breakaway and Breakaway plus class ships the studio cabins are numerous and they are clustered together in a private enclave only accessible to guests that book a studio cabin. The studio cabins are small but utilitarian and come with the increasingly popular virtual window...a monitor built into the bulkhead displaying live video from outside of the ship. It has the effect of making your interior cabin seem like an ocean view stateroom. In another move catering to singles, NCL has included a spacious lounge in the studio enclave to give single cruisers a spot of their own to relax or enjoy the company of fellow single passengers.

One final point on the accommodations. If you've ever been aboard a cruise ship, you'll appreciate how easy it is to get disoriented going from point to point. NCL came up with a



brilliantly simple way of helping passengers keep their bearings and it involves the carpeting in the hallways. In addition to a tastefully understated design, the carpet pattern features silhouettes of schools of fish all swimming in the same direction, toward the bow of the ship. If you happen to get disoriented and can't tell whether you're heading toward the bow or stern just look down and let the fish guide you.

### **The Haven**

NCL has led the cruise industry in many areas over the years by pioneering innovation in their cruise experience. The ship-within-a-ship concept embodied by the Haven is one that is now being copied by other mass market and premium cruise lines. As with the studio cabins, NCL's Haven is a private enclave with keycard-controlled access. Once inside the enclave guests have access to their own restaurant, pool, sundeck, and lounge. This gives guests booking a Haven suite a small ship luxury cruise experience with the advantage of all the activities, attractions, and entertainment that you can only get aboard a big ship.

## Dining

The sheer variety of dining options is another highlight of these ships. They feature a novel three-deck restaurant and lounge hub called 678 Ocean Place, located on...wait for it...decks 6, 7, and 8, where else? An impressive 17 dining venues make up 678 Ocean Place, though to be fair many are specialty restaurants that require an additional cover charge. When I wrote the first two articles before the ships sailed, I was intrigued by the concept of 678 Ocean Place. Most cruise ships do tend to cluster their public lounges on one or two decks, but the layout NCL used to make up 678 Ocean Place sounded interesting and unique. It was a bit of both.

NCL Breakaway and Breakaway Plus ships offer three complimentary main dining rooms, and on both Breakaway and Encore our favorite of the three was the Manhattan Room. This dining room is set up like a ballroom, complete with live band and hardwood dance floor. Dinner with music and the possibility of dancing is a great combination for us, and we took full advantage during our time on Breakaway. I

was disappointed to note that on the Encore NCL replaced the dancefloor with carpeting to make room for more tables, though they did retain a small stage for live music. Our favorite part of 678 Ocean Place was an area called The Waterfront. Located on deck 8, The



Waterfront is designed to look and feel like a waterfront restaurant, bar, lounge, and boardwalk complex. Can I just say it succeeds famously? The restaurants on The Waterfront are all fresco extensions of specialty restaurants located on the interior of the ship along its port and starboard sides, and we found the food to be among the best we have enjoyed on a cruise ship.

The design of 678 Ocean Place puts most of the ships' eating establishments squarely in the center of the ship, but you can also grab a bite to eat if you are up on the top decks. On Breakaway the venue was a Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville which served what you would expect from a beach themed bar and grill. NCL hit it out of the park on Encore when they replaced Margaritaville with an Americana-themed diner. The menu is simple and the food preparation basic, but the execution flawless. I ordered the Southern fried chicken and let me say it was about the best southern fried chicken I have eaten. And though I didn't partake, dessert options included the biggest slices of cheesecake and carrot cake I have seen, the latter topped with slabs of cream cheese icing.

## Lounges

Without question, deck 8 was the highlight of 678 Ocean Place for us. In addition to the restaurants, the space houses 12 bars and lounges. Starting in The Waterfront area, there is an outdoor bar with adjacent seating areas that offer ample chairs and tables, setting the space up as a nice place to sip a cocktail or just watch the sea pass by. And even with the proximity of the restaurants, the atmosphere was surprisingly casual and quiet.

There are two lounges on the interior of deck 8 that quickly became my favorite. The first was Maltings Beer and Whiskey Bar. The bar features a wider array of premium whiskey than any other bar on the ship. As an added plus if you like a good cigar every now and then to go along with your whiskey, it has an adjacent cigar lounge called Humidor. The Humidor is an enclosed, well-sealed and well-ventilated space with powerful air scrubbers to keep the air inside breathable. The entrance is actually outside on the Promenade deck, ensuring cigarette and cigar smoke doesn't escape to pollute the rest of the ship's interior as people come and go.

The lounge that both Janet and I appreciated most was the Skyy Vodka Ice Bar. Most mass market cruise ships that tout having an ice bar simply take a regular bar and design the counter



with chillers so they can create a thin sheet of ice on the bar top. On NCL Breakaway the Skyy Vodka Ice Bar is essentially a walk-in blast freezer outfitted as a bar and chilled to a frigid 17 degrees Fahrenheit. Yes...it is gimmicky, but we loved it and went back several times. Just about everything in the Ice Bar is made from ice,

including the drink glasses, and even a full-sized ice throne. In keeping with Breakaway's inaugural season sailing out of New York City, the Ice Bar features ice sculptures of the Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge, and the menu features a half-dozen New York inspired vodka-based cocktails.

The Ice Bar is one venue where you can't just belly up to the bar at your convenience. Capacity is limited to 25 guests and you sign up for a specific time slot. The bar staff rotates in and out with each group so they can warm up...did I say it is cold in there?

It is. Really cold. They meet guests at the door, brief you on what to expect, then outfit you with a hooded parka and warm gloves which you will need. Because it is cold in there. Once you are ready, the bartender for your group will escort you into the bar and you'll get between 45 minutes to an hour to enjoy the venue and sip a couple of Skyy vodka-based cocktails. The modest cover fee is a bargain as it is less than the cost of the two included cocktails were you to order them at another bar onboard. If our cruise was any measure, the bartenders in the Ice Bar are liberal with the vodka, and two of



the three times we went they offered to pour a third bonus drink. As you can imagine it is easy to get tipsy during a trip to this bar. Not that I'm speaking from first-hand experience in this case! NCL ditched the Ice Bar on their Breakaway Plus class ships and repurposed that space into a more trendy Mojito bar with a traditional bar layout.

## **Entertainment and Activities**

The entertainment aboard both the NCL Breakaway and NCL Encore was amazing, with one notable exception that I'll hit in the ugly section...because the exception was really ugly. Breakaway's entertainment was top notch and creative. The major shows like Burn the Floor, Cirque Dreams Jungle Fantasy, Wine the Musical, and the Three Tenors of Rock were quality productions with highly talented performers. What I really enjoyed was the novel dinner and a

show opportunity that both Cirques Dreams and Wine the Musical presented. Cirques Dreams is a Cirque de Soleil show that you watch while enjoying a scrumptious dinner. Wine the Musical is an interactive, whimsical and humorous show with lunch and a guided wine tasting built into the story line. There is a cover fee for both shows, but they were well worth it.

Breakaway and Encore offered several smaller shows to complement their major production shows. I'm not a big fan of tribute bands but the Beatles show on Encore is not to be missed. The



band members were competent musicians and presented reasonably good performances. What makes the show so entertaining is not the talent so much as the extent to which the band goes to look and act like the originals. OK sure, Ringo looked like John Goodman with a mop-top wig, but after watching them nail the classic Beatles head shake throughout the first number, you just don't care.

Recreational facilities consisted of typical mass market venues and there seemed to be something for all ages....a sports court, jogging track, pool, escape room, extreme water slide, laser tag...you get the point. Breakaway Plus class ships also offer two unique venues that set them apart from the other mass market cruise lines, a race car track and a virtual reality center.

I was particularly intrigued by the race car track. My first impression from the Breakaway Plus design description was that it is a go-cart track, but in person you see that it is much more sophisticated than that. It is quite popular so be prepared to bring along plenty of patience. Aside from having to wait in line, the ride's level of sophistication requires a lengthy pre-race safety briefing and prep session that takes almost as long as the amount of time you get on the track. The real highlight for me was seeing the virtual reality center. It was amazing. One of the VR experiences allows guests to use a touch screen to design their own roller coaster, and through the magic of virtual reality you can experience a ride on the coaster you designed.

## **The Bad**

### **Accommodations**

There is no doubt the good outweighs the bad on both Breakaway and Breakaway Plus class ships. It isn't even close, but I would be remiss if I ignored the not so good. For starters, both Breakaway and Encore have some issues with their stateroom decks. I can't remember the hallway width on Breakaway, but on Encore the halls on the stateroom decks are narrow, much narrower than other mass market cruise ships of similar size. I didn't get a ruler but using the length of my shoe as a measure, I put the width at a barely ADA compliant 48 inches, possibly even a bit narrower. During the day the cabin steward service carts eat into that space which leaves even less room. Two people can't walk past each other with the carts in the hall, that's how narrow they were. Even without the carts in the hall, to walk past another guest one would have to turn sideways to avoid a collision. As inconvenient and awkward as that is, I can't imagine what someone with mobility problems would do. With the service carts in the hall I don't see how a wheelchair or larger scooter could pass, leaving them to wait for a cabin steward to come into the hall and move the cart so they could pass through.

That brings me to the next bad...cabin numbers and signage. On most cruise ships cabins are numbered sequentially, typically with odd numbered cabins being on one side of the ship and even numbered cabins on the opposite site. This helps passengers stay oriented and makes it easier to navigate from place to place. Cabins onboard NCL Encore mostly follow that practice...except when they don't, which is often enough to be incredibly confusing and annoying. Janet eventually determined that there is a logic to Encore's cabin numbering scheme, but to me it seems twisted and not very helpful. Also, the directional signage is at best misleading, and at times flat out wrong. It was a minor annoyance, but it made getting from point A to point B an exercise in frustration.

One final note about the cabins aboard Breakaway and Encore...although their bathrooms offer ample storage, the cabins themselves do not. And we had an upgraded cabin. It wasn't an issue for us...Breakaway was a Caribbean itinerary and with NCL's relaxed dress code we brought mostly beach wear. On the Encore we had just two nights and were limited to carry-on luggage. I dare say if we were taking a week-long cruise to a cold weather destination or traveling with 3 or 4 people in the same cabin, it would be a challenge to find a place to store things.

## **Dining**

I noted how much we enjoyed dining in the Manhattan Room, one of the three complimentary restaurants on both Breakaway and Breakaway Plus class ships. The Manhattan Room is on a different deck from the other two complimentary restaurants, Savor and Taste, and is served by its own galley. Which probably explains why the experience there vs dining in Savor and Taste was so different. In fact, the food in Savor and Taste was anything but savory or tasty...it was downright bad at times. This is the point where I say I am a food snob, and I am. But I also make allowances for that when I write these reviews. When I'm served a dish that is so over seasoned and over cooked that even Janet agrees it is unpalatable, it has to be bad. Aside from that, the dining rooms were noisy. I'm used to that on cruise ships with multi-deck dining rooms, but Savor and Taste are single deck rooms so I was expecting something much quieter. After a couple of disappointing meals we avoided Savor and Taste altogether and ate in either the Manhattan Room or one of the specialty restaurants.

I raved about the specialty restaurants in the good section, but they have also earned a spot in the bad section. Why? Ala carte pricing. This is one of those preference things for me. Mass market cruise lines have long charged a flat cover fee for dining in their specialty restaurants, their justification being twofold. First it allows them to offer an elevated dining experience to those wanting it without raising the overall cruise fare for everyone. The other justification is they are smaller venues and having to pay a cover charge limits demand, giving those guests that want an elevated dining experience more of an opportunity to get one. I get that, but NCL has taken the practice a step further by introducing ala carte pricing in many of their specialty restaurants, and the prices are steep enough that you are practically paying what you would in a land-based restaurant. I can't stomach having to spend that much for food on a cruise ship where my fare should already include a quality dining experience rather than a bad meal at Red Lobster.

The next bad for me was overall service, at least on the Breakaway. It was more of a mixed bag than actually bad, but even on a mass market cruise ship I'm used to the service being excellent. The staff throughout the ship appeared to genuinely care about guests, but they didn't seem to know what they were doing. Our cruise appeared to have taken on an unusually high amount of new staff which probably accounts for it. Cruise lines usually do a good job of managing turnover, but for whatever reason that didn't seem to be the case on our Breakaway cruise.

I will say our experience aboard the NCL Encore was the exact opposite. Cruise lines generally build the staff on their newest ships from the most senior and experienced personnel aboard other ships in the fleet...the best of the best. Still, even experienced crew members on a new ship need time to learn that ship, and to learn how to work with each other. One of the purposes of these travel agent and media inaugural events is to provide the crew with a "soft opening" opportunity to identify and work out the service kinks before they sail with passengers paying full fare for their cruise. We've attended several inaugural sailings and experienced the uneven service associated with the lack of rhythm a new crew experiences for the first few months, so we were pleasantly surprised to find NCL Encore doing so well from the outset.

## **Lounges**

As much as Janet and I enjoyed the feel of the lounges on deck 8, and we really did, we disliked the lounges on decks 6 and 7. I chalk it up to the design layout of the ships. The interior layout for the public space aboard most of the larger cruise ships we have sailed aboard tends to minimize the feeling that you are sailing with 4,000 or more fellow passengers. Those ships have a promenade in the center and public venues situated on the port and starboard sides of the ship. Foot traffic is designed to flow through the center of the ship and away from the lounges. Ship designers also use walls and enclosed spaces to form sound baffles and deadeners, the result being the noise generated by guests passing through on their way from place to place doesn't make it into the lounges. While there are usually one or two lounges where there always seems to be a party going on, the majority offer a more intimate feel where you can sip a cocktail, listen to live music, and enjoy a conversation without having to shout.

NCL takes the opposite approach for their mega-ships. They describe 678 Ocean Place as a restaurant and lounge hub, and that is an accurate description. The restaurants and lounges on Breakaway and Encore are large open-air affairs that flow outward from the bar at the hub to the sides of the ship. There is nothing to deaden the noise and in the case of the Atrium Bar, the open horizontal space is compounded by open vertical space formed by the three-deck high atrium. The net effect of all the open space is to amplify noise rather than deaden it. To compound the problem, the placement of bars in the middle of what on other ships is a promenade means foot traffic gets routed around the bar and smack dab through the middle of the lounge. I think that also contributed to the noise level in the two complimentary dining rooms which are at the ends of the spokes from the centrally positioned MIXX bar on deck 6.



## **Entertainment and Activities**

Recreational facilities aboard both the Breakaway and Encore were mostly good as noted. Except the main pool. It is grossly undersized for a ship carrying 4,000 plus passengers. The main pool is more a glorified hot tub than a pool, that is how small it is. I may be exaggerating a bit...but not much. We opted to purchase access to the therapy pool in the spa and spent most of our time during sea days there to avoid the crowds, another example of having to pay extra to get the cruise experience we prefer.

### **The Haven**

The Haven has also earned a spot in the bad section. Not for guests who book into the Haven, but for everyone else on the ship. The exclusivity the Haven offers comes at a price, and that price is space taken away from the rest of the ship. It is a challenge to dedicate the chunk of space the Haven occupies without reducing the number of cabins throughout the rest of the ship, or making trade-offs in space in the public spaces. It appears NCL decided to take the latter approach, and for me those trade-offs were unwelcome. Some, like the narrow hallways, were subtle...others, like the pool, were obvious. Of course I can't blame the Haven for all of it...the decision to dedicate a fair chunk of deck space to a race car track didn't help.

### **The Ugly**

#### **Lounges**

I go back and forth on the value of purchasing a drink package...for our cruise on Breakaway I decided to skip it. Mistake. BIG mistake! NCL's drink prices are much higher than other cruise lines. How high are they? At home, I can get a 1.75 liter bottle of a premium bourbon for under \$50. On NCL Breakaway that bought me two shots. I'm not even kidding about that...I wish I was. As soon as I realized how expensive drinks were, I went to the purser's desk to ask about a beverage package, only to discover that NCL's drink packages are also more expensive than other cruise lines. The premium drink package on NCL ships costs about twice what you pay on other mass market cruise ships. Also, their mandatory gratuity is higher, and like most mass market cruise lines, all passengers in the same cabin have to buy the drink package. Our many Instagram photos with drink in hand aside, neither of us drinks enough to get the full value out of NCL's drink package. We did find NCL's wines and wine packages to be reasonably priced, so needless to say we drank more wine than liquor on that cruise.

One of the marketing approaches NCL uses is to offer a free drink package if you book early, and I would highly recommend that. You still have to pay the 20% gratuity, and if you like premium beer, wine, or liquor you have to pay to upgrade. But if you have more than a drink or two per day it is far less expensive than buying ala carte. Lesson learned!

#### **Entertainment**

As noted, I enjoyed most of the entertainment on both Breakaway and Encore, with one ugly exception... NCL's rendition of the Broadway show "Rock of Ages." I had never seen "Rock of Ages" before, but I've cruised with Royal Caribbean and have seen their Broadway show "We



Will Rock You” so I was expecting something similar. Not even close. “We Will Rock You” is a clever mash up of tunes by one of my favorite rock bands, Queen, stitched together with dialog into an engaging storyline. “Rock of Ages” was a train wreck.

Let me say from the outset, this isn’t a criticism of the performers...they were quite talented. I didn’t care for the show itself. There were several things that made “Rock of Ages” ugly for me. First, it wasn’t entertaining. It is a real stretch to say that there was a story line stitching the songs together, and what was there was anything but clever. The entire show is a seemingly unrelated collection of 1980s tunes by bands like Poison and White Snake. How it got 5 Tony Award nominations is a mystery to me...the fact that it didn’t win any, not so much. If that were the only complaint I had this would be in the “Bad” section of this review. Where it got ugly was the content. It was vulgar. I’m not talking a tad risqué like the show “Chicago.” I’m talking the “I wouldn’t take a 16-year old to see it” type of vulgar. And the vulgarity was gratuitous. It didn’t add to the story, but of course since there no story line how could it? And though it seemed that the vulgarity was intended to be funny, it wasn’t. I am not easily offended, but Janet and I ended up walking out on the show, and we weren’t the only ones.

### **It’s a Wrap**

Overall both the Breakaway and Breakaway Plus classes of ships were a great experience. Even though NCL’s style of cruising isn’t to my taste, we still enjoyed our time on their ships. I can see how their product appeals to cruisers who are tired of the traditional style of cruising, or who prefer the freedom that comes with cruising on an NCL ship. They bring a fresh approach to cruising with competitive pricing. Except for the drinks...I’m still smarting from that experience!