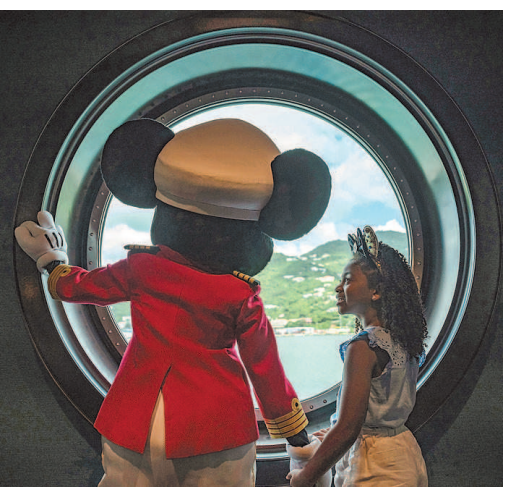
CRUISE SPECIAL



Disney's Treasure cruise is an homage to adventure and offers fun for the whole family, including rides, an old-Hollywood-themed restaurant, character appearances and countless activities. It sails for seven nights through the eastern and western Caribbean. DISNEY (TOP LEFT); MATT STROSHANE (BOTTOM LEFT); KENT PHILLIPS/DISNEY

Cruises: Kids and parents are spoiled with choice and attentive staff

FROM P1

And unlike the princess-themed Wish, the Treasure is an homage to "adventure" – inspired by *Jungle Cruise*, *Aladdin* and *Peter Pan*. The ship is decorated with Moroccan lamps and deep jewel tones – flying magic carpets, tiger-themed mosaics and brass genie lamps. It also features several new restaurants: Plaza de Coco, a Mexican-themed dinner-theatre spot; the Skipper Society, a *Jungle Cruise*-decorated lounge with parrot-shaped chandeliers; and most popularly, at least on our sailing, the Haunted Mansion Parlor bar – based on the popular long-time Disney attraction, where the chandeliers flicker, the paintings come to life and the walls have (literal) eyes.

Like any other passengers on a Disney cruise, a list of suggested onboard activities had been preloaded onto our itineraries for the trip (including a karaoke night, which, to the delight of fellow passengers on our trip, included a brief duet between the aforementioned NSYNC member and his son). All of our meals, too, had been prebooked. So we spent our first afternoon alternating between the itinerary and wandering the ship on our own.

We followed our daughter as she hopped from swimming pool to splash park, then back to swimming pool. It sounds repetitive, except there were 10 pools and she couldn't get enough. And – this is key – several of them were shallow, meant for little kids. She could splash and play without us having to hover.

We played air hockey. Rode the AquaMouse, the "water coaster" you ride suspended through water tunnels built above the ship's top decks (an experience that even my painfully nonchalant husband declared "excellent"). Dropped into a Mickey Mouse drawing class. Took part in a "Guess the Disney Song" competition. Checked out the kids' club, which had a slide for an entrance, and a design-your-own-roller-coaster simulator.

Other times, Goofy, Donald or Minnie made appearances, hanging out with guests, nary a crowd in sight. They became so common that by the time Mickey made his appearance on Day 3, my daughter simply shrugged.

Whenever we tired of one activity, we'd only walk a few feet before finding another. Unlike the busy Disney parks, the ship felt contained. Manageable.

DINING OUT AS A FAMILY

On Night 2, we arrived at 1923, an old-Hollywood-themed restaurant, for dinner. We walked through the art-deco dining room, past the white tablecloths and gold-framed Disney memorabilia displayed along the walls to find that our server, Edwin, had prepared the table for our arrival. There was a high chair for our daughter. He'd also placed at her seat a glass of milk (with a lid and straw, for her clumsy little fingers), a glass of water and crayons.

This was our second night in a row that Edwin had been our waiter (servers follow guests from restaurant to restaurant each night on Disney cruises – a system they call "rotational dining"). He had already become familiar the night before with our daughter's unfortunate dietary preferences. So he'd prepared for her in advance a plate of plain butter spaghetti, French fries and steamed vegetables – all of it off-menu.

(The job of feeding upward of 6,000 passengers onboard the Treasure is a mammoth endeavour, I learned – one that Disney has turned into a staggeringly efficient operation. The supplies are stored, *Tetris*-like, in a cavernous storage area in the lower decks. And the cooks and supplies travel between the five restaurants, buffet and cafés using a series of elevators and hidden passageways).

I'll admit that, going into the trip, my expectations for the food weren't high. My assumption was that "cruise food" meant quantity, as opposed to quality. Yet almost everything I ate on the ship was pretty good. One morning at the buffet, I had chicken congee which – notwithstanding the fact that the server tried to serve it to me on a plate – was fluffy, comforting and excellent. And my meal at 1923 was very good (baked oysters to start – salty and crispy with pancetta; oven-baked lobster tail – perfectly cooked, though underseasoned; and raspberry crème brûlée – perfect, with a crispy shell that broke with a satisfying thwack).

The most memorable part of that meal? It was the first time since my daughter was born that we were able to have a sit-down, three-course dinner in a restaurant together.

By the end of the trip, our daughter had learned a new phrase: "Disney magic."

Towels folded in the shape of elephants? "Disney magic."

A Mickey-shaped ice cream bar that appeared after her dinner, without having to ask? "Disney magic."

The guest-services attendant who tracked down superglue to fix her mouse ears, despite the fact that they were clearly unlicensed knock-offs from the dollar store? "Disney magic."

Of course, it wasn't magic, but rather the labour of the hundreds of men and women who work on the ship. (On the first day, I made the mistake of opening a door for one of the busboys at the buffet – he was holding a tray, and I insisted he go first. His reaction was so uncomfortable that I immediately regretted it.)

Across our three-day trip, the staff were, without exception, unfailingly gracious and unnervingly competent. They knew what we needed often before we even knew to ask. And it was this that allowed my husband and me to finally switch off and enjoy a little bit of relaxation.

And that, as any parent can attest, is a very special kind of magic.

IF YOU GO

Disney Treasure sails from Port Canaveral, Fla., on seven-night trips through the eastern and western Caribbean. Itineraries start at $6,284 based on double occupancy. For more details, visit disneycruise.disney-.go.com.

The writer was a guest of Disney Parks and Resorts. It did not review or approve the story before publication.

Why cruising floats my boat

Whether it's on a megaship or intimate yacht, sailing takes us to places we otherwise can't visit, **Tim Johnson** writes

A Ponant cruise took Tim Johnson to the east coast of Greenland in 2023. TIM JOHNSON/ THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Every cruise is a bit of a maritime miracle. Like magic, a ship can spirit travellers to amazing places. Often through the night. Open the curtains in the morning, and a whole new destination awaits.

That slight euphoria you feel when the ship casts its lines and steers for open water. The joy of unpacking, just once. The happy realization that – whether you've booked passage on a megaship or an intimate yacht – this will be your floating home for a while. This is what I love about cruising.

Once, I was a young, hard-core backpacker. I slept on hard seats on overnight trains or in dorms packed with bunk beds. I told people that I didn't like cruises. That they were too easy, not real travel.

And then, one day, I took a cruise. You never forget your first, and mine was a simple seven-night Caribbean voyage. I loved everything about it. Now, a significant amount of my work as a travel writer focuses on cruises.

I've sailed on 75 voyages in the past 20 years or so. Across the High Arctic and down to Antarctica, crossing both Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Sailing rivers in Europe and Asia, the Rhine and the Danube, the Mekong and the Irrawaddy. Around Japan, down the Amazon and along Australia's remote Kimberley coast and the shores of India. And lots more.

What is it about cruises that captures my imagination? Maybe it's the endless horizons, in all directions. Ships take me to places that I couldn't otherwise visit. In 2023, I sailed to the Tuamotu Islands. Part of French Polynesia in the South Pacific, these 76 atolls are spread across a vast expanse, 3.1 million square kilometres of blue water. Each small island is a world unto itself, a unique ecosystem under swaying palms, by white sand beaches bordered by coral reefs.

I visited aboard Aranui 5, a Tahitian-owned freighter and cruise ship. Purpose-built, she delivers cargo to remote places, while also carrying up to 230 guests. Staffed almost entirely by local Polynesians, even the experience on board was a journey into the culture of this paradisal part of world.

Every night, crew would gather on the breezy stern deck for a guitar-and-ukulele jam session. Guests were waved into the circle. Some passengers opted to get tattoos on board. You told a waiter your life story, and, based on that, he came up with the design. (I declined, but honestly wish I hadn't.)

Visits to the islands were embarked on small barges that also carried the shipping containers. One stop: the island of Amanu, home to about 220 people. There's no airstrip and Aranui calls there twice a year, at the time the only passenger vessel to do so.

But cruising has its problems, too, especially since it is more popular than ever. According to its 2024 annual report, the Cruise Line Industry Association noted that 31.7 million people took a cruise in 2023 – a 7-per-cent increase over the previous record year, in 2019. Cruising's contributions to overtourism are problematic, as well as the environmental impact of all those ships.

I've seen the impact firsthand. In Mediterranean ports such as Dubrovnik, Croatia, the ancient cobblestone streets are jammed with cruisers. And in Alaska thousands of passengers flood tiny towns. (Juneau, the capital and a popular port-of-call on the Inside Passage, just officially capped the number of ships and passengers for the coming season.) Some destinations such as Venice have banned big ships in their harbours.

When things get a little too thick on the streets, I just head back to the ship and take a dip in the pool (exactly what I did in Dubrovnik). But I do try to contribute to local economies whenever possible. In Juneau, I booked a culinary tour that stopped at several small restaurants and merchants. I made sure to purchase something from each. At other ports on other cruises, I've hired local drivers to show me around their hometown – a fun way to get real-world insights. These included a memorable tuk-tuk tour around the historic port city of Cochin in Kerala, India, and a tour in a lovably beat-up Lada to citadels and catacombs in Alexandria, Egypt.

Solutions to cruising's problems are elusive. But I am supportive of moves to make the industry more sustainable. While big ships are fun, they've grown now to almost unimaginable proportions. Limiting their size could be a good idea. In sensitive ecosystems such as Antarctica, operators have implemented a number of restrictions, including requiring ships to use cleaner fuel and to limit the number of guests on shore at one time. Changes such as this across the industry and around the world should be helpful.

One of cruising's central dichotomies, and perhaps the reason I love it so much, is the way a voyage brings together big and small. On one hand, an enormous sea, worldwide voyages and endless possibilities. On the other, the small communities and fast friendships that form on board. This happens on big ships but especially on small ones, and friends form around the goofiest things crew concoct to keep you busy – pickleball tournaments and putt-putt competitions and scavenger hunts with dubious prizes (a free round of drinks, when they're already included).

During a 17-day sail on Seabourn, I joined a trivia team. We competed every evening and the cruise director kept a tally. In the end, there would be one champion, based on the accumulation of individual games won.

It was an amazing voyage around New Zealand, the shore excursions were filled with wild jet boat rides and volcanic geothermal wonders and close-up experiences with Maori culture. Then I would come back on board and share stories of the day with my team at trivia night.

On the last evening of the trip, my team won the whole tournament. In celebration, one of my trivia mates made us all paper bow ties, to mimic the cruise director's meticulous style. And make us all feel spiffy. It was a silly thing. But exactly the kind of fun that can happen on board.

On disembarkation day, there's always some melancholy. I often feel a tiny amount of triumph for completing the voyage but also wonder if these new friendships are ending. But once I step back on shore, I'm already thinking: Where will I cruise, next time?

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