

## Nickelodeon Cruise: Perspective From a Disney Cruise Line Fan

by Marley Braun, PassPorter Guest Contributor

We finally took the plunge, straight into green slime! After our fourth Disney cruise, we decided it was time to be adventurous and try something new. Our nine-year-old had been begging forever to go on the Nickelodeon cruise and once they dropped their price this summer to include a "parents sail free" promotion, we decided to surprise him and his thirteen-year-old sister for their birthdays.

On the East Coast, Nickelodeon chartered Royal Caribbean's Freedom of the Seas. It was rumored the ship was only 75% sold but that we were sailing with about 1,600 kids on board! The majority of them all seemed to be under the age of eight, running around in a sugar-induced high all week, dressed in some sort of Sponge Bob paraphernalia.

For the majority of our seven day cruise, Nickelodeon was in charge. Occasionally, Royal Caribbean provided their usual entertainment and we were able to catch a few of their standard nighttime shows. The remainder of the time, the kids ruled and mom and dad took a backseat. So that everyone on the ship was able to attend the main events, you were given assigned tickets to the must-see entertainment. Everyone had a specific "slime time." You had your own family time to meet the real voice of Sponge Bob, the delightful Tom Kenny, and then time to meet the characters themselves, Sponge Bob and Patrick, for a photo op. Quick photo times were also assigned for the teenage stars of True Jackson, as well as Dora and Diego. Tickets were also provided to an ice skating show, as well as Slime Time Live. It wasn't the normal goopy stuff but it was definitely cold and wet!

Throughout the week, meet and greets were set up with a variety of Nickelodeon characters including Wanda and Cosmo, Otis the cow, and those lovable penguins from Madagascar. Shows and games included Magic by Drew Thomas of America's Got Talent fame, "Nick Live!" poolside games, Nick Family Improv, a very raunchy adult comedy show given by the actor who voices Otis, and a Club Nick Deck Party. Unfortunately, there were so many activities going on for younger children, I think a lot of the normal activities for adults were not taking place. I found myself reading way more than usual on a cruise. Not that that is a bad thing but on a ship that big, you should never be without things to do regardless of your age. I do have to say the Nickelodeon staff had boundless energy and kept the younger children thoroughly entertained.

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Throughout my cruise, I wore my Castaway Cay lanyard, which caused several people to come up to me and ask me how Disney compared to Freedom of the Seas. Every time I gave the same answer: Hands down Disney won. The reasons could be written in a completely different article but I felt they should be included here because they may be more of a reflection of Nickelodeon taking over Freedom for a week and not how Freedom normally operates.

There are some things that Freedom of the Seas really excels at that I hope Disney considers for its future ships. The facilities are phenomenal: rock climbing wall, FlowRider surf pool, mini golf course, and ice skating rink. They have the best pools ever! The interactive pool area is so much fun for the kids, as well as for the adults. We loved the karaoke booths and I enjoyed having the small reading light at night that they offer by your bedside.

The teen program they offer for ages 12-17 is outstanding. The kids are entertained continuously and they are given special times to use each facility (i.e. FlowRider, ice skating rink), which is a huge perk for them.

Embarkation and disembarkation are much more efficient on Disney. We were the first group on and off the boat and it still took us forty five minutes each way. Disney's process usually takes us about 10 minutes. Our luggage was supposed to be waiting for us in the terminal between 7:15 and 7:45 a.m. No luggage had even been set out until 7:45 am.

It may sound silly but we all missed being announced when we got on the ship. No one even greeted us or pointed us in the direction of food!

Lines, lines, lines! That's all we seemed to do the first day or two on the ship. You have to sign releases for everything the kids do. Why not ONE release for everything?

Cococay is lovely but it is definitely not Castaway Cay. I am usually one of the first people on Castaway Cay and you have to pull me kicking and screaming off the island. We arrived on Cococay at 9:00 am and left at 11:15 am. Who decided it was a good idea not to provide umbrellas? After finding the snorkeling area covered in jellyfish (which of course is not Royal Caribbean's fault), we decided to head over to the Aquapark to sign up for a 1-hour slot. Sold out for the day at 10:30! Are they kidding me? I am a meticulous planner and I had never read about this park selling out.

Throughout the week, I think the ice skating rink was only open twice for actual skating. The rest of the time it was taken over for Nickelodeon activities, so beware.

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After two days of chasing children out of the adult's-only pool, the deck staff apparently gave up. The rest of our cruise my husband and I had to spend our quiet time at the adults-only pool surrounded by at least 15 to 25 children at a time.

I thought it was sail, sail, sail. Instead it was sell, sell, sell! Fresh squeezed orange juice for breakfast? Only \$4! A towel for you to lie on? \$20 deposit! Of course all of these things are normal in the cruise industry but they all seemed way more in your face on RCL.

The most insidious was the arcade charge. BEWARE parents! At check-in, when you tell them to take all charging privileges off your child's key card, they can remove everything except arcade privileges. Arcade charging can only be removed once you are on the ship and go to guest services. We learned this the hard way and now our wallets are \$90 lighter.

If Disney's food is a 10, Freedom's food is a 6. We did not try either of their specialty restaurants and we gave up on their buffet restaurant. I actually got food poisoning from their sushi buffet. Their Cafe Promenade and Sorrentos are excellent alternatives to the main dining room and I would rate them both a 10. Nickelodeon announced that this cruise would be casual attire every night. This was a bad idea in my opinion. What should have been a pleasant dining atmosphere somehow quickly turned into a Chuck E Cheese, complete with the table of kids next to us standing on their chairs and climbing under their table while their parents ate at a table by themselves.

As for the kid's club, they ended up having so many younger kids on the ship that the 9-11 year old group had to be shifted to the adult nightclub, the Crypt, for the entire cruise. At first, my son thought this was really cool but that wore off in about an hour when he realized he was just stuck in a dark, creepy bar with nothing to do. He spent the rest of the week playing walkie-talkie tag with friends and hanging out at the pool. Usually, I can't pry him away from the Disney's kid's club. By the way, the kid's club provides no pager system so be prepared.

Although I'm sure it is clear by now that we did not rebook with Royal Caribbean, maybe I am being a little unfair. Maybe Disney has just spoiled me. All I know is that from the moment I make my reservation with Disney to the moment I step off their ship, I am treated like royalty. From the very first day I called the Nickelodeon cruise line, it took days to be called back, countless e-mails, messages and to this day I've never received my cruise documents. As I was walking off the ship this morning, the last thing I heard was a man scream at the top of his lungs, "I will NEVER sail this cruise line EVER again." I was not surprised when

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the woman at Guest Services yelled equally as loud back, "Good, I hope you never do!" I think it is fair to say that exchange would have NEVER have happened on a Disney ship.

*About The Author: Marley is an avid Disney fan who has previously contributed articles on the [Anza-Borrego Desert](#) and [Hilton Head Island](#).*

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