

Disney Cruise Line - The Year in Review (and Preview): New Ships, New Ports, New Itineraries

by Dave Marx, PassPorter Guidebooks Author

Fortunately for all of us, 2011 has been one of the Disney Cruise Line's most newsworthy ever, and 2012 is shaping up to be another busy year down at the Disney Cruise Line press office.

Fabulous new ships, a torrent of new itineraries, and, not so fabulously, the continuing collapse of the Mexican Riviera cruise market ... who could ask for anything more?

The year began when Mickey set aside a bottle of New Year's Eve champagne (Taittinger Disney Dream 2011 Brut, no doubt) for the January 19th christening of the Disney Dream, the cruise line's first new ship since 1999. Despite all the anticipatory hype, the Dream managed to exceed expectations. So much so that the folks at CruiseCritic.com voted the Dream Best New Ship of 2011, and she made a fair number of similar lists at Conde Nast Traveler, Travel and Leisure, and the Telegraph of London. It seems only Frommer's found the Dream unworthy of mention. Not only did the Dream receive high marks from cruisers and the travel media, but she also pulled down a perfect 100 on her first two Centers for Disease Control sanitation inspections (February and July 2011)! Sure, it's a lot easier to pull an 'A' when the shrink-wrap has just recently been removed, but new-ship smell hasn't been as helpful to some other recently-launched vessels.

Here at PassPorter we went all-out to report on the new ship, sailing three times on the Dream during her first 3 official weeks in service, generating a veritable tsunami of [articles, reports, photos, and YouTube videos](#). I trust you'll excuse me for not repeating it all here, but feel free to re-explore our archives!

And then in April, just when it seemed safe to take a long soak in the Jacuzzi, we were off to New York City for the cruise line's next big announcement, the line's 2012 special itineraries. 2012 would bring us three new temporary home ports - Seattle, Galveston, and New York City - new ports of call in the Canadian Atlantic Provinces (Halifax and Saint John), a one-time, 15-night cruise to Hawaii and back from Los Angeles, and a bold new twist on a familiar old port (depart New York City to visit the cruise line's home, Port Canaveral, on an itinerary that includes a visit to Disney's original 'private island,' Walt Disney World). We've been having a great time visiting and exploring the pleasures of

these ports so that the next edition of PassPorter's Disney Cruise Line guidebook will have them all covered for you.

But back to 2011! To make room for the Dream in the Bahamas trade, Disney brought Wonder back to Disneyland (well, the Port of Los Angeles), for what seemed to be a permanent West Coast assignment. From the start, cruisers weren't exactly thrilled by the prospect of more Mexican Riviera itineraries. After all, been there, done that on earlier temporary visits out West, and Mexico's hardly been a source of happy news. But the really good news was that finally, DCL would be off to Alaska! Disney's 2011 Alaska season has been an overwhelming success for DCL, and those who cruised there this past summer are still speaking warmly of their experiences in the glaciated North. but then, the Inside Passage itinerary has been wowing pleasure cruisers for nearly 125 years.

Unfortunately for DCL, the long-planned reassignment of the Wonder brought her to Los Angeles just as nearly every other cruise ship based there was saying hasta la vista, due to the tragic drug war in Mexico. And while there was hope that Disney might still succeed in that market thanks to its unexpected near-monopoly, success proves elusive. Almost immediately, the line started canceling the Wonder's weekly visits to Mazatlan, adding a second day in Cabo San Lucas instead. Mazatlan remained on the long-range schedule, but as the year went on the situation in Mexico did not improve, and Mazatlan finally dropped off the schedule altogether. Then, entire Mexican Riviera cruises began to evaporate. When DCL announced its 2012 special itineraries, we learned that a month of the Wonder's 2012 fall season would consist of cruises visiting San Francisco, San Diego, and Ensenada, Mexico. This made some sense, considering the shape of the Mexican Riviera business, but it's not like folks have been clamoring for those ports ("Heck, I can do that by driving I-5!"). Then, in September, DCL announced a second Hawaii cruise for 2012! Deduct another two weeks from the Mexican Riviera schedule. And then, just two weeks ago, a real jaw-dropper... DCL announced the cancellation of all four December 2012 Mexican Riviera cruises, including the Christmas and New Year's Holiday cruises! Cancel two of the most lucrative cruises of a ship's year? As I write, we're waiting to hear just where DCL plans to send the Wonder instead. Wherever it will be, DCL has to be confident folks will bid-up the fares beyond the level of the cancelled cruises. Easiest guess? Two more jaunts to Hawaii. Would they go back to the Caribbean, where the Fantasy and Magic are already offering more than twice as many staterooms on the Eastern and Western Caribbean itineraries than ever before? Back to the Bahamas, to supplement the Dream? neither seems likely. Europe? Considering the state of Europe's economy and that December is deep off-season in the Mediterranean,

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we think not. But if they are off to Hawaii, DCL runs the risk of exhausting demand for 14-night cruises, which are always harder to sell in the U.S. cruise market. We may know in a few more days or weeks.

Maybe we'll find out on New Year's Eve, as Walt Disney Parks and Resorts is promising an exciting announcement during Dick Clark's 40th New Year's Rockin' Eve broadcast from Times Square. There's a new "celebration" coming to Disney Parks in 2012, "The Year of More Magic" or "One More Disney Day." Will the Disney Wonder be part of it? Or do we wait until later in January, when I believe the line will announce its 2013 special itineraries? They have to announce something, soon. If they wait until April, as they did this past year, the announcement would fall right in the midst of the hoopla that will be the Disney Fantasy's inaugural voyages, and the months immediately preceding the March 31 Inaugural Voyage will also be spent Fantasizing. Releasing new itineraries in the midst of that media blitz seems counter-productive at best. With all this uncertainty, dare we we predict the 2013 special itineraries? No. While we think Alaska is a good bet for the summer of Wonder, we're hardly going to go out on a limb for the rest of the Wonder's year. We do think the Magic's schedule will resemble her 2012 schedule - the Western Caribbean out of Galveston in early and late 2013, drilling into a Texas Disney fan base that's been dreaming of a Disney presence in their great state for many a year. And we seriously doubt the New York City cruise market will be exhausted anytime soon, with over 45 million people living within a five-hour drive. Oh, they could mix things up with cruises from Boston or Baltimore, but the Northeast seems a better bet than Europe, at least until the financial situation over there settles down.

Returning to year-in-review mode, we can also look back upon DCL's announcements regarding the Disney Fantasy, the Disney Dream's sister-ship, which will enter service in March 2012 (like the Roman god, Janus, the Fantasy has us looking forward and backward at the same time). Most announcements were expected - the Disney Magic and Disney Wonder exhibit differences of decor, and the themes of several restaurants and lounges differ. We expected no less of the new ships, and we haven't been let down. We learned that Minnie Mouse will adorn the new ship's lobby, while Dumbo and Timothy Mouse will adorn her stern. We were told the "show" in Animator's Palate restaurant would be all-new "Animation Magic," featuring Mickey Mouse, and that cruisers will create drawings that will be displayed during the show's finale. Then, we learned that Crush, from Finding Nemo, who hosts the Animator's Palate show on the Disney Dream, would be on hand on the Fantasy as well. That makes the Fantasy the only DCL ship to have two different shows in Animator's Palate (and making the "which night do we do Palo" decision that much more complex). And, as if the Dream's

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extensive adults-only salon and teen spa weren't enough, the Fantasy will also house a Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique/Pirates League, offering princess and pirate make-overs for the young and young-at-heart.

One fascinating sidelight of the Disney Dream's first year is that cruisers have been willing to pay as much or more for an inside stateroom as for an outside stateroom, so long as that inside room includes a Virtual Porthole. How can a live, high-def video view of the outside world match or beat an actual picture window? Maybe it has to do with the animated Disney characters who pay occasional visits to the virtual world.

Cruise lines are in the habit of re-classifying non-standard staterooms on new ships once they receive some guest feedback, and the Disney Dream/Disney Fantasy are no exceptions, with a mid-year announcement of upgrades for rooms with over-sized verandahs or interiors, and downgrades for rooms with partially-obstructed views or under-sized verandahs. So, while the features of these unusual staterooms will always be coveted insider knowledge, they're no longer the bargains or bad deals they once were.

While cruisers have been incredibly enthusiastic about the Disney Dream, there are several valid complaints as well. Probably tops on the list is crowded swimming pools. While all pools on the Dream are larger than their counterparts on the Magic and Wonder, cruisers were hoping they would be much larger, as pool crowding was an issue on the older ships, too. DCL seems to have been listening. Just as landscape architects enhance gardens by adding water features, DCL has added three new water features to the Fantasy. This is a very good thing, as the Fantasy's week-long itineraries give cruisers two or three days at sea, and pools are high on the list of cruiser activities on at-sea days. Not only will there be more places to get wet, but they won't be on already-crowded deck 11. Two will be on deck 12 - AquaLab, a pop-jet fountain splash play area aft, near the entrance to AquaDuck, and a family-friendly wading pool forward, overlooking the adult pool in a spot already popular with extended families looking for quieter times on deck. The final addition will be to one of our favorite deck spaces on the Dream, the sun deck on 13 forward. That huge expanse is quiet (and under-used), and Satellite Falls, a splash pool with rain-curtain shower modeled on the ship's dome-shaped satellite dish enclosures, will undoubtedly make this adults-only area more popular.

The new ship will also bring the biggest lineup of new stage shows to DCL since the debut of the Magic and Wonder. Four of the five major shows will be new or revamped, starting with the welcome aboard show, and ending with the farewell show. In between, "Disney's Aladdin - A

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Musical Spectacular" and "Wishes" will be brand-new, and "Disney's Believe" is just a year old, having debuted on the Disney Dream. The two remaining nights on the seven-night cruises feature variety entertainers (magicians and jugglers are familiar themes) and/or major Disney feature films.

And no doubt, DCL will keep teasing us with revelations right up through the Fantasy's christening. Just weeks ago we learned that the Muppets will star in a self-paced, interactive detective quest utilizing the ship's Enchanted Art (the framed drawings that come to animated "life" when guests approach). "Mickey's Midship Detective Agency" debuted this activity on the Dream, with great success. The Muppets' debut gives veteran Disney cruisers yet another reason to experience both the Dream and Fantasy.

The net result for this cruise journalist? I've gone from thinking, "I've seen the Dream, I don't really need to see the Fantasy (at least, right away)," to, "I can't wait to see everything Disney's Imagineers have done to enhance Disney's newest ship!" I'm a bit more apprehensive about the 2013 itineraries, but the worst thing that can happen for me is another research trip or two. So who's complaining?

About The Author: Dave Marx is co-founder of PassPorter Travel Press and is co-author of PassPorter's Walt Disney World, PassPorter's Disneyland Resort and Southern California Attractions, and PassPorter's Disney Cruise Line guidebooks.

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