

Our Disney Fantasy Preview Cruise: Exploring Disney Cruise Line's Newest Ship

by Dave Marx, PassPorter Guidebooks Author

The Disney Fantasy, Disney Cruise Line's newest ship, departs on her Maiden Voyage in just a couple of days (March 31, 2012).

□ However, before the cruising public gets its first crack at the Fantasy, the cruise line organized several preview cruises, both to show their new baby off to travel agents and the media, and to give the new crew a bit of practice (always a good thing). As you can imagine, we immediately accepted the invitation to sail on the Fantasy March 23-26. The three-night itinerary featured a day at sea, followed by a day at Castaway Cay, and we'd be able to experience all three of the ship's regular rotational dining rooms.

As we did for last year's Christening Cruise on the Disney Dream, we divided the PassPorter team in two. Jennifer and our son Alexander (who will be eight in August) concentrated on "the guest experience" -- enjoying the cruise the way a normal family might. Sara worked with Jennifer to create a [special video podcast of the Fantasy](#). My task was to do the "journalist-thing" -- the cruise line, as always, organized a busy schedule of briefings and presentations for the gathered media. During and between those opportunities, I set out to see, experience, and photograph as much of the ship as I could, focusing on the differences between the Disney Fantasy and Disney Dream. We had also asked the members of the PassPorter Message Board community to pose questions that we could research once on board. Much of what follows is based on those questions. Long before the cruise, Disney Cruise Line announced all the major changes to be expected, and a fair number of minor changes. Still, there's no substitute for first-hand experience, and a few changes and modifications managed to sail beneath the pre-cruise radar.

First Impressions? The Disney organization continues to out-do itself. I can't think of one significant "change for the worse," and there are many changes for the better.

How much better could the Fantasy be, considering she was built from the same plans as the Disney Dream? As it turns out, remarkably better! From the start, the cruise line intended the Fantasy to be the better of the pair. The reason is simple; the Fantasy sails longer itineraries than the Dream, and the more time guests spend on board,

the more the ship has to offer in the way of comforts and entertainments. The biggest changes in this regard are a second "show" in the Animator's Palate dining room, the addition of Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique/Pirate's League (the princess/pirate make-over salon), and three new water features on the ship's outdoor recreation decks. In other cases, the differences are there for the sake of variety, such as different themes for the clubs and lounges in the adult entertainment district, Europa, different decor for the atrium lobby, and new shows for the Walt Disney Theatre. Personally, I prefer the new themes and decor changes, and the new shows are fine additions to the cruise line's line-up, hence my enthusiasm.

What hasn't changed? The stateroom amenities and decor are identical, right down to the carpeting and framed pictures. Dining rooms and snack bars, with the exception of the decor of Royal Court (Royal Palace on the Dream), are also identical. The menus (from snack bars to room service to Palo and Remy) also have barely changed - a new item here or there, but nothing major (however, we couldn't experience all the special menus offered on 7-night cruises). The kids programming areas; It's a Small World Nursery, Oceaneer Club, Oceaneer Lab, Vibe, and Edge, are essentially unchanged - perhaps a different color of upholstery here or there, maybe a slightly newer-generation electronic game. One craft/activity alcove in Oceaneer Lab was re-themed, but the main areas, like Andy's Room and Pixie Hollow? Untouched. It's safe to say that, if we don't list something as changed, it's still the same.

□Water features: As cruises on the Fantasy will typically include 2-3 days at sea, DCL knew it had to offer more features on the recreation decks (11-13). While the main pool areas are unchanged, there are three new water features on decks 12 and 13 (both those decks have been under-utilized on the Dream). AquaLab is a really nice, kids-oriented water play zone tucked away on Deck 12 aft, below the entrance to AquaDuck. Donald's nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie have rigged all sorts of contraptions that spray and dump water in all directions. It's best suited for elementary school ages through tweens, and those who were using it were having a blast. On Deck 12 in front of the forward stack and overlooking the Quiet Cove Pool is a small, oval wading pool with a small fountain in the middle. The fountain includes a misting feature -- when the breeze doesn't break-up the fountain's flow, the mists are contained inside a curtain of water. It looks very neat, although there's no practical benefit to it. The wading pool has raised sides, so folks can sit around it and get their feet wet. They also added two structures near the wading pool to provide shade - about a dozen chaise lounges can fit under each. The nearby live performance stage, in front of the stack, is actually getting use for live performances - on

this cruise, a solo singer/guitarist performing tunes by Jimmy Buffett, Paul Simon, Cat Stevens, and similar folk/pop artists. While officially open to all ages, most of the folks in this area were adults - it doesn't offer a whole lot to kids that they can't find more of elsewhere. It was far busier than the area has been on the Dream, so I'd consider this change a significant success for DCL. I don't think it makes a negative impact on the Quiet Cove Pool area - perhaps the opposite - with no live music downstairs, and no significant kids activity above... I think it's a win-win. Satellite Falls is another wading pool with a more significant fountain on Deck 13 forward, in adults-only territory, right near the forward-most part of that deck. It's a ring-shaped pool about 12-15 feet in diameter, surrounding a satellite dish enclosure (the ship has about a half-dozen white, dome-shaped satellite dish enclosures). Right below the dish is a large, disk-shaped overhang that partially shades the pool, and a light curtain of water falls from that overhang into the pool. There were usually about 4-6 folks sitting around the edge of this pool, but as with the other water feature on Deck 12, its existence helps attract a whole lot more folks to the area than that, helping to distribute guests more evenly about the recreation decks. This area also has new shade canopies, another creature comfort that helps attract more guests. I'd consider both these new areas to be great additions - the area around the Quiet Cove Pool was far less crowded, and those previously empty expanses of deck are now very well used without being at all crowded. The Imagineers I spoke to said that these areas had been planned from the first, rather than added as a "tweak" after getting guests' feedback for the Dream. If so, I'm not sure why they didn't put them on both ships - there were certainly enough complaints about the Dream's shortage of water play space.

▣ Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique/Pirates League: All-new on the Disney Fantasy is Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, the Princess make-over salon that's proved to be so popular at Disney's parks. A long, narrow room on Deck 5 (used as conference space on the Dream) has been decked-out in glittering gold and mirrors, where up to a half-dozen princesses can be transformed into Princesses at once. Naturally, a wide variety of Princess gowns and accessories are displayed (and are on sale) about the room. I'll skip a report on the available makeover packages (don't worry Mom and Dad, none of this is more expensive than that couples spa villa treatment you've been saving up for). The afternoon prior to Pirates Night, the boutique transforms into Pirate's League, where wannabe buccaners of all ages and genders can be transformed into the scalawag of their dreams. The room's transformation is magically simple. They throw a light switch to cast a ruddy glow on the proceedings, swap-out the costumes and accessories, hang some Jolly Roger-themed drapes, and cover the furniture with pirate-themed slipcovers. The staff, of course, also changes their garb (and attitudes).

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Arrrrr!

□Europa, the Adult Entertainment District: As you probably know, the adult entertainment district on each Disney ship has a unique theme: Beat Street (Magic), Route 66 (Wonder), The District (Dream) and Europa (Fantasy). While Europa's basic floor plan is the same as The District on the Disney Dream, each of the clubs and lounges but one (Skyline Lounge) has a new theme. In this case, each lounge is dedicated to a different country of Europe. Without going into lots of detail, let me just say they pulled this off very nicely. O'Gill's Pub is a typical pub-style sports bar, although it's visited by some Irish "characters" from time to time. The pub's name is based on the Disney film, Darby O'Gill and the Little People, but you won't find any banshees lurking about. Ooh La La! is the champagne bar. Unlike Pink on the Dream, which was fairly bright, modernistic, and tries to make guests feel they're inside a glass of bubbly, my take on this space on the Fantasy is, "Ooh La La, boudoir." While there are very pretty blown glass "bubbles" above the bar, mostly this is a dark, quiet, cushy spot in 19th-century French style. At the risk of seeming "un-Disney," I can imagine a French courtesan or mistress entertaining her gentlemen callers in just such surroundings. Since it's so comfy and there's no entertainment, it been very popular with folks who want an intimate place to sit and chat. The Tube is, as far as I'm concerned, the most successful dance club/disco of all four Disney ships. It was by far the most hopping place anywhere on board. It also stays open the latest every night (usually 2:00 am), which keeps energy levels throughout Europa higher than typical for Disney's "districts." (On the other ships the night club usually closes before the quietest of the lounges.) I can't say exactly what makes The Tube as successful as it is - the general layout is little different than its sister-club on the Dream, but something has managed to "click," and I can't say it has much to do with the London Subway theme, which is fun. But outside of four, red London telephone booths near the small stage that can be used as go-go dancer "cages" by either crew or guests, I don't think the theme has much impact. While few of us want the Carnival Cruise Line experience on DCL, at last folks with higher late-night energy levels have someplace to call "home." While Skyline Lounge is my favorite adult spot on the Dream, on the Fantasy it has some really stiff competition. Overall, it has the same theme and decor - a penthouse with phenomenal views of great cities of the world that change about every 15 minutes. On the Fantasy they added an alcove to one side of the bar that allows for more "window" panels, for an even wider view. The nighttime cityscapes have changed, even though some of the cities are the same as they are on the Dream (London, Paris, Budapest, Barcelona, St. Petersburg, Athens, and Florence). The computer animation of these still panoramic photos has also improved dramatically. Not only will you see cars, trains, and the

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London Eye Ferris wheel in motion, but there's even some pedestrian traffic! There are also a few surprises in store - I spied Gusteau's Restaurant in Paris, and the Disney Magic berthed in Barcelona. There's probably even more hidden surprises for the eagle-eyed. The only negative is that they eliminated the piece of Enchanted Artwork over the fireplace, which displayed a poster celebrating the current city. A small detail, I know, and not something missed unless you know to look for it.

□ On With the Shows: Disney Cruise Line presented two new stage shows in the Walt Disney Theatre during the preview cruise, *Disney Wishes*, and *Disney's Aladdin - a Musical Spectacular*, and a third show that debuted last year on the *Disney Dream*, *Disney's Believe*. I'd been apprehensive about seeing *Disney's Wishes*. From the cruise line's description, I was afraid it would be a third go-round at the "somebody discovers that they're never too old for Disney magic" theme the cruise line already presents in its classic *Disney Dreams* (seen on the *Magic and Wonder*) and *Disney's Believe* (seen on the *Dream and Fantasy*). Though it certainly shows a certain family resemblance to the earlier shows, the approach is different enough that I could simply sit back and enjoy. This time the story focuses on teenaged high school grads enjoying one last fling together at Disneyland, while one stresses over her incomplete valedictory speech and a bit of romance lurks in the wings. The show's overall style borrows from teen-oriented musicals like *Glee*, the *High School Musical* series, and *Lemonade Mouth* (it even includes a tune from *Lemonade Mouth*) and the overall effect is far more charming than expected. Tweens and pre-tweens should find a lot to like here, and we old geezers can't help but enjoy a show that includes the theme from the Disney Parks fireworks show, *Wishes*, and music from over a dozen films, from *Pinocchio* to *Tangled*. I particularly enjoyed a *Splash Mountain*-inspired animation sequence combining *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Remy's "whitewater" ride in *Ratatouille*, *Up Around the River Bend* from *Pocahontas*, *Crush's antics* in the *East Australian Current* from *Finding Nemo*, and *Hawaiian Roller Coaster Ride* from *Finding Nemo*. *Disney's Aladdin - a Musical Spectacular* is a fairly straightforward, abbreviated version of the animated classic. It's essentially the same as the show that's had a long run at *Disney California Adventure* park (DCA), though some staging (such as the flying carpet ride) couldn't be duplicated. Also missing, for now, is *Genie's* standup comedy routine, one of the highlights of the show in *Anaheim*. I was told that the current *Genie* is being allowed to grow into the role before introducing that element into the show. For now, fans of the DCA edition may be disappointed, but regardless, the current cast is doing a fine job, and it's *Aladdin!* What can be bad? Alas, I can't report on the *Fantasy's* version of *Disney's Believe*. The cruise line's entertainment honcho, *Jim Urry*, tells me the show is somewhat

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different on the Fantasy than the Dream, but a last-minute opportunity to dine at Palo seemed more compelling than a fourth viewing of the same show within a 13-month span (sorry, Jim).

□ Animation Magic, the Meal: The biggest change to dining is the new show in Animator's Palate, Animation Magic, which comes with its own, new menu. When you first sit down to dinner you'll find a placemat-sized sheet of paper, and your server will encourage you to draw a full-body character (markers and crayons are provided). Your server then collects your drawings and takes your orders. To make the show and dinner service run smoother, everyone gets the same three-item appetizer sampler. This is followed by an optional soup course, but it's only offered to you if everyone arrives at your table in a timely manner, as you must be finished with your main courses by a particular point in the show. Otherwise, they skip the soup to make up for lost time, though you can still request it, if you know to ask. The soup is... unusual. In keeping with the movie theme, the creamy soup tastes like buttered popcorn - you may either love it or be puzzled. The soup arrives with a few pieces of caramel popcorn and corn bread on the side (no, Cracker Jack fans, no peanuts). Sweet, caramel corn between your appetizer and main course? I don't think it works well at this point in the meal, but the adventuresome should try it once, and the sweet-toothed may just like it. Then it's on to the main courses, which are available in the usual, wide selection (my pan-seared venison with port wine sauce was very good). Finally comes your choice of a three-item dessert sampler (good, but not nearly as sweet as that caramel corn), a chocolate lava cake, or a no-sugar-added chocolate cheese cake.

□ Animation Magic, the Show: As already mentioned, your first task when you sit down to dinner for Animation Magic is to create and draw a character on a special, supplied sheet of paper. The drawing area is divided into sections by broad, pale blue lines - you draw your character's head in one section, the torso below that, as well as arms, hands, legs, and feet. Don't draw on the blue borders - this is necessary so the computer can later auto-magically animate your drawing. Then your creations are collected, and you proceed with dinner. While you await your appetizers, Sorcerer Mickey appears for a brief introduction, and the video screens and loudspeakers around the room come alive with a montage of scenes from Disney animated features and short subjects. While the scenes haven't been modified (to my knowledge), there's a specially-arranged musical score accompanying them, remix-style. This means, for example, that melodies from Aladdin might also accompany scenes from other films (very much like the remix featurettes on the Disney Channel). The musical score is fairly slow and low-key, in keeping with dinnertime background music. However, that

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didn't prevent the show's director, Jerry Rees (The Brave Little Toaster, Disneyland Paris' Cinemagique, Epcot's Cranium Command, Magic Kingdom's ExtraTERRORestrial Alien Encounter, the old Back to Neverland film featuring Walter Cronkite and Robin Williams from The Art of Disney Animation at Disney's Hollywood Studios, the current 'O Canada film with Martin Short...), from coordinating the music and on-screen action to great effect. Whenever you look and/or listen you'll be entertained, but those who prefer to concentrate on dinner and/or dinnertime conversation won't be distracted.

□The show's finale comes between the main course and dessert, when our hand-drawn characters come alive on the screen. Not unlike the brooms in Fantasia, they march and dance along in scenes from classic Disney animated features and short subjects. Jennifer, Alexander, and I all had our characters selected for the show - it was quite a thrill to see them up on all thirty-something giant video screens around the restaurant. During this segment, the tempo and energy of the show gets kicked up several notches, as it deserves center stage. When the last note has been danced, every "animator" receives on-screen credit. Then, it's on to dessert! Finally, at meal's end, the apprentice animators' drawings were returned to us, with a gold seal attached to commemorate our achievement. Altogether, this is an enchanting show that manages to entertain without dominating the entire meal.

□As far as Tony, the cruise line's food and beverage manager, could remember, the Animation Magic show will be held the first three nights of the 7-night cruise, the fourth night will be the Pirates in the Caribbean dinner, and the last three nights will present the Talk to Crush show from the Disney Dream. On those nights, the special menus (Captain's Gala, etc.) will be served. Tony wasn't 100% positive that Pirates Night will always be fourth night on both the Eastern Caribbean and Western Caribbean itineraries, so stay tuned. However, it's clear that, if you've already experienced the Crush show on the Dream and want to experience Animation Magic, plan your Palo and/or Remy nights for later in the cruise.

□Dining Rooms: Of the restaurants, buffets, and snack spots, only one has changed noticeably - Royal Court has the same layout as Royal Palace on the Dream, but the color scheme is much lighter - with more whites and golds, and fewer reds and browns. Somewhat more subtly, there are more Art Nouveau touches, and fewer Art Deco, but in both cases, since the theme ties in with Disney's classic Princesses (whose images line the walls, this time as glass mosaics rather than paintings), the over-all feeling is still "grand dining room," with the dining staff in the same blue, Cinderella/Sleeping Beauty-style royal livery familiar from Royal Palace on the Dream. If you look at the chair backs and

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elsewhere, you'll still find Snow White's apple, Belle's rose, Cinderella's slipper, and Sleeping Beauty's crown. And if you're wondering how to be assigned to that grand, round banquet table in the dead center of the room? Purely the luck of the draw, says DCL. Considering the number of chairs at the table, I'll wager that it goes to large, multi-stateroom family groups. If you need a large table every night of the cruise, this one may just be "it" for your Royal Court evening.

□ **Nouveau Deco(r) Magic:** Leaving food behind (as if you can ever do that on a cruise)... The remaining significant, noticeable change has been to the ship's overall decorative theme. As with the Magic and Wonder, one of which has generally Art Deco decor, and the other Art Nouveau, the Dream and Fantasy also sport these two styles. In truth, both ships include examples of both styles, but each ship's lobby sets the tone - Deco for the Dream, and Nouveau for the Fantasy. What's the difference? Art Deco is 1920s-30s "Modern" style - lots of black, silver, and gold, with straight, parallel lines connected by strong diagonals. Curves, when they're used, are symmetrical. The Empire State Building is a prime example, as were Coco Chanel's fashions, a lot of Fred Astaire movie sets, etc.). Art Nouveau is 1890s European style, soft and romantic, with lots of nature-inspired curves and colors - stylized birds, flowers and leaves, peacock feathers, and the like - a lot of French wrought-iron work, including the Eiffel Tower, is Art Nouveau, as is the art of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. The Dream is predominantly Art Deco, and the Fantasy is mostly Art Nouveau. The difference is most dramatically seen in the ships' atrium lobbies (including the lobby chandelier, carpeting, Bon Voyage lobby bar, and Guest Services desk). I feel it's much easier to see the stylistic distinction on the Fantasy and Dream than the Magic and Wonder, at least here in the lobby (the Magic and Wonder's Dale Chihuly chandeliers, as beautiful as they are, are not really of either style). As you go elsewhere on the ships, many other spaces don't change at all - stateroom and hallway decor, no different, with the concierge areas and staterooms all strongly Deco-influenced. The theaters - no different (both are still Art Deco). Restaurants, as I mentioned, barely changed, though Remy and Enchanted Garden, both classically Art Nouveau, are right at home on the Fantasy. But, oh, that lobby! While I admire both styles of art, Art Nouveau wins out, so my preference strongly goes to the Fantasy over the Dream. The lobby's peacock-feather carpet in blues, greens, and golds pushes all my buttons. If you look closely at the lobby sculpture of Mademoiselle Minnie, you'll see the peacock motif picked up in the hems of her evening gown, as well as in the grand chandelier. Still, both lobbies share unifying features, including the gold frieze of classic Disney characters at play that circles the base of the deck 4 balcony, and the gold-tone metal railings that exhibit characteristics of both styles of art. No matter which of the four ships you board, there's no

mistaking the family resemblance in those lobbies.

□The Unheralded: We looked very carefully for unannounced differences between the ships, and found very few. Granted, we had only three nights and two full days on board (plus the afternoon of embarkation day). I came up with only two significant items. Shutters Photo Studio has been given 1/3 of the space dedicated to the Vista (art) Gallery, and that has been converted to futuristic Shutters Digital, where you can look up and purchase your photos. The other change is on the Deck 4 promenade. The adult entertainment district has its own entrance from the promenade - on the Dream there was a sheltered sitting area on the promenade, surrounding those doors. On the Fantasy, there's just a set of doors.

□Close Encounters of the Third Kind: During the course of the cruise, the Disney Fantasy had three "close encounters" with her older sister, the Disney Dream, who was in the same area on a 5-night Bahamas itinerary. We had our first encounter on the second night of the cruise, during Pirates Night. We enjoyed a "dueling fireworks" show (we battled to a tie), and a captivating view of the twinkling lights and illuminated red smokestacks of the Dream. The second encounter came around Noon the next day, while the Fantasy was berthed at Castaway Cay. Due to an earlier briefing session, I was in my stateroom at around 11:30 am, gathering my beach gear, when I spied a cruise ship sailing right at us. I didn't think a Royal Caribbean or Carnival ship would be anywhere within sight of Disney's private island (well, not without a battleship escort), so I made some quick inquiries. Even the Media Center staff didn't know what was up. After ferreting out the truth, I headed up to the best vantage point on board (the sun deck on Deck 13 Forward) with camera and tripod. If this was to be a Battle of the Ships' Horns, I was going to make the best of it! Although most folks were on the island, there was still a small crowd up on deck, including a Disney video crew. The Dream approached from the north and drew nearer and nearer, eventually sailing past the family beach at a comfortable distance from shore (no "Costa moments" for DCL!). After the ships' horns were loosed in battle, the Dream pivoted neatly and headed back to the north from whence she came. The third encounter was just as unheralded, around dinnertime that same evening, while the sunset was tinting the nearby clouds a pale orange. This time, the sister ships were traveling parallel to each other in the same direction, at fair speed, about a half-mile apart. We made our way from Enchanted Garden on Deck 2 to the Deck 4 promenade for our photo op. Although we didn't spy a helicopter, I wouldn't be surprised if this encounter had been arranged for the sake of an aerial photo. The Dream never quite came abreast of the Fantasy, and she soon reduced speed and dropped far astern.

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☐Overlooked Items: With only three nights aboard, perhaps the least-noticed feature was the Disney artwork on display throughout the ship - that's a spare-time kind of quest, and we had very little of that. Even so, I did notice more than a few items I'd be delighted to have on my walls at home, including a huge mural of the aerial view of London from Peter Pan. We also spent less time on the Enchanted Art than we could have. A favorite of ours from the Disney Dream, these "paintings" come to life with brief animated scenes when a guest comes by to admire them. Some of these artworks are new to the Fantasy, and others have been carried over from the Dream. I wish we'd been given a cheat sheet identifying all their locations, but that would be too easy, wouldn't it?

☐Fun and Games: Adults might choose to skip Mickey's Midship Detective Agency, but that could be a mistake. This activity utilizes the Enchanted Art (computer-animated "paintings") found around the ship. When a player waves his/her game card in front of the artwork, the scene changes from framed animation art to an interactive video game. First introduced on the Disney Dream, Midship Detective Agency now offers three different detective quests, two of which have been carried over from the older ship. The most heralded, of course, is the new Muppets caper, The Case of the Missing Show, featuring, well, the Muppets. Alexander and Jennifer took it upon themselves to pursue this interactive quest while I quested elsewhere, so I have little to report beyond the basics. Each player registers and receives a map and a special card imprinted with a QR code (bar code) which identifies each player and allows that player to manipulate on-screen events during the quest. New to the Fantasy, several non-electronic features have been added, including a pint-sized stateroom door tucked away on Deck 5 (you can even phone that stateroom using a Wave Phone and hear from the room's occupant).

☐Altogether, our 3-night cruise was way too short - now that I've seen all (or nearly all) the Disney Fantasy has to offer, I want to go back! Anyone out there have a spare berth for a guidebook author who snores?

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