

TRAVEL

Cruise you can use

Royal Caribbean's revamped Navigator of the Seas offers easy delights for Houstonians

By Jody Schmal

After a monthlong dry-dock, Royal Caribbean's revitalized Navigator of the Seas is back in action at its home port in Galveston.

And much like the carpet, furniture and several other splashy new amenities on the ship, I was about to find my sea legs.

Do cruise veterans — there were more than 1,200 of them on our sailing in mid-February, the first of the Navigator's seven-day Western Caribbean trips planned for this year — remember their first time?

Mine was memorable from the start. The arrival to port, subsequent luggage hand-off and joining the crush of 3,000 vacationers eager to embark for sunnier shores — coupled with the novelty of not having to take your shoes off for security, plus all the bright lights, shiny surfaces and employees dressed in matching uniforms politely welcoming everyone on board — added to the excitement.

The 138,000-ton, 15-story floating city is a lot to absorb for a newcomer. There's a slick promenade with shops and bars, multiple hot tubs and pools, a casino, an ice skating rink and restaurants peppered throughout — not to mention seemingly endless long halls of rooms housing a mostly Texan crowd wearing slogan T-shirts, all ready to pop bottles of Bud Light and settle in for a good time. There even is a daily newsletter, printed on-board, highlighting the full schedule of what's-happening-where (from seminars to nightly theater performances) at any given time. We'd stop, after two days at sea, in Roatán, Honduras; Belize City, Belize; and Cozumel, Mexico.

According to Royal Caribbean, the Navigator of the Seas is not only the largest ship to dock year-round in Galveston, but also the most advanced. In that vein, the most buzzed-about addition to the refreshed ship are the "virtual balcony" rooms. These are interior rooms with a door-size, high-definition screen streaming live video and audio of the sea via cameras mounted outside the ship. The innovative concept will roll out in grand fashion on Royal Caribbean's much-anticipated Quantum of the Seas this fall (for more on Quantum, see "What's next" at right), but for now 81 rooms on the Navigator have them.

The real-time footage that appears on-screen is surprisingly crisp and authentic. There is a remote with which you can turn both audio and visual elements off and on, as well as a curtain to cover the whole thing if you so choose; one could imagine falling asleep to the lulling (and volume adjustable) sound of the water, curtain closed, and waking up and to see what the weather's like without stepping out of the room. Virtual balcony rooms cost a little more than a standard interior cabin, but cost less than an ocean view stateroom and quite a bit less than a real balcony stateroom.

New technology continues near elevator banks, where touch-screen digital signage has been added, allowing cruisers



Royal Caribbean's Navigator of the Seas in Cozumel, Mexico, docks next to the cruise line's Allure of the Seas ship. Cozumel is a popular port of call among Caribbean cruisers.



Royal Caribbean

Navigator of the Seas now offers virtual balcony rooms, with a floor-to-ceiling screen offering real-time footage of the sea.



The FlowRider surfing simulator has been added to the Navigator of the Seas.

to check the daily schedule (and find the location of the nearest bathroom). A FlowRider surfing and boogie board simulator — which shoots out some 35,000 gallons of water per minute over a padded incline — now fills out the sports area above the pool's main deck, past the rock climbing wall and mini golf course.

Several of the specialty restaurants on board are either brand-new or have been updated, too. Texans will appreciate Sabor (\$25 dining fee per person), which touts a menu of Mexican dishes such as empanadas, various tacos and quesadillas, entrees including pan-seared red snapper, and

guacamole and margaritas made table-side. Tequila flights also are available.

Meanwhile, a dry-aged New York strip or porterhouse steak can now be had in the clubby environs of Chops Grille, the Navigator's steakhouse (\$35 dining fee per person). Giovanni's Table offers family-style Italian food (\$20 dining fee per person for dinner, \$15 for lunch) and Japanese restaurant Izumi (à la carte pricing) serves popular sushi rolls in a magenta-and-black-hued environment. Johnny Rockets (\$5 fee) remains popular for burgers, fries and shakes.

The ship's complimentary Adventure Ocean program for

kids is impressive in its size and scope, with play space dedicated to various age groups. There's a new nursery for babies (6-36 months), with a toy-filled play room, as well as areas for those ages 3-17 with supervised activities offered daily. Parents can drop off their children before they go in for a shore excursion.

Off the ship, Royal Caribbean-arranged excursion options are plentiful for each port of call, ranging from easy-breezy beach days to light adventures in the jungle.

In Roatán, a short boat ride delivers passengers to Maya Key, an 11.5-acre private island that's geared entirely toward cruisers/day trippers and doubles as a rescued animal sanctuary of sorts. Hours are easily passed here, by stretching out on a lounge along the island's white-sand beach or by the pool with a frozen rum concoction, snorkeling off the picturesque pier (for an extra fee), or climbing up to see a display of mock Mayan ruins. Take time to explore the cages of exotic wildlife on-site, including monkeys, a jaguar, a toucan, parrots and sea lions — just bring bug spray.

For the slightly more active, crystal cave tubing and zip-lining in Belize fits the bill. Tour operator Chukka (booked through Royal Caribbean) picked up our group from the port in Belize City, and ferried us on a bus to a camp ensconced in the jungle. There we harnessed up to zip around the trees, before grabbing an inner tube, helmets and head lamps to float inside a dark, sculpted Mayan cave.

It's easy to see why Cozumel is a favorite port among seasoned cruisers; even if you decide to forego pre-arranged excursions, delights are within close reach on the island. A five minute cab ride away, Paradise Beach was a welcome respite with a clean beach, pool and plenty of other diversions including water slides and trampolines, stand-up paddleboards, kayaks, hammocks and ice-cold buckets of beer.

Back on the Navigator of the

If you go

CRUISE DETAILS

Navigator of the Seas now departs on Sundays from the Port of Galveston year-round. Prices for a 7-day Western Caribbean cruise start at \$574 per person (interior room, based on double occupancy). Alcoholic beverages, soft drinks, specialty dining, excursions, taxes and tips are not included. Ports of call alternate; one itinerary includes stops in Roatán, Belize City and Cozumel, while another calls in Cozumel, Grand Cayman and Falmouth, Jamaica. See the full schedule of upcoming sailings and book online at royalcaribbean.com, or call 866-562-7625.

EXCURSIONS

The Maya Key Private Island Retreat, Roatán: Includes short water shuttle ride and lunch. \$67 for adults, \$34 for children.

Zipline & Crystal Cave Tubing, Belize: Includes hour-long bus ride to Jaguar Paw in the Belize rainforest, several zip lines, a guided tubing tour through a Mayan cave, lunch and all equipment. Beginners welcome. \$159 for adults, \$119 for children.

Paradise Beach, Cozumel: Five minute cab ride from the port. It's \$3 per person to hang out at the beach or pool all day, with a \$10 minimum food and drink spend. Unlimited use of water slides, kayaks, snorkeling gear and more costs \$15 extra; paradise-beach-cozumel.com. Note: Not affiliated with official Royal Caribbean excursions.

What's next

Cruise fans are eagerly awaiting the launch of Royal Caribbean's **Quantum of the Seas**, which launches in November. It will have 16 decks and space for 4,180 passengers. New features on the ship include the North Star, a glass-enclosed capsule that can lift guests more than 300 feet above the ship and ocean for panoramic views; the RipCord by iFly, a skydiving simulator; a two-story music hall; larger staterooms, including 373 with virtual balconies; and SeaPlex, a massive active space that will include bumper cars, roller skating, a floating DJ booth and a circus school with a flying trapeze. Seven- to 10-night itineraries will be offered on Quantum, which will sail out of Cape Liberty, New Jersey starting this winter. For more information and to book, visit royalcaribbean.com/quantum.

Seas, where there was always something to do (and always someone willing to have a ridiculously named fruity cocktail with you), time runs out quickly, even after spending the better part of a week exploring what felt like every inch of the ship.

I sat in on the art auction (free champagne!), giggled during a towel-folding demonstration, received a free foot analysis, voted in the belly flop contest, snapped a selfie on the bow's helipad, met the captain, played slots in the casino and took in performances of Broadway show tunes, ballroom dancing and ice skating.

Next time, I hope it feels like the first time all over again.

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