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Cruising without fuss from Baltimore to the Bahamas

By Margaret Engel

Okay, my mother and I are now converts.

We don't come from a family of cruise people. We grew up firmly in the church of Long Car Trips. Famously long, as in the annual family 27-hour drive (one-way) to the upper reaches of Canada with seven of us plus the bananas from home, now rotting, in the Chevy station wagon. "Cruise" to us meant bad floor shows, silly games by cruise directors and overeating.

But my mother is now 88 and recovering from a right knee replacement. She's using a walker. Logistics trump tradition.

This equation brought us to the Port of Baltimore. Specifically to its cruise terminal, to try out a sailing on its new year-round schedule.

The appeal of sailing to warm weather in winter, with no airport hassle and just a 40-minute car trip, was enticing. We wanted some mother-daughter time and didn't want to keep lugging suitcases, have to repack or constantly re-navigate the entrance to new attractions and restaurants. We just wanted to read and enjoy some warm weather without aggravation.

In the past, the rare times when we've vacationed (separately) on the water, we've left from Miami or Seattle. But in the past decade, ships have been brought to passengers, with more than 20 ports nationwide handling ocean liners. Baltimore is now Carnival Cruise Lines' most northern U.S. port offering year-round cruises; 92 voyages are scheduled for the coming year.

We chose the most popular cruise out of Charm City, a Sunday-to-Sunday excursion to Port Canaveral, Fla., and Freeport and Nassau, Bahamas.

We loaded the car in freezing rain in November. A short drive from Bethesda brought us to Baltimore's port. Fully visible from Interstate 95 was the massive 11-story liner of the Carnival Pride on which we -- and our 2,400 fellow passengers -- began a week of the royal treatment.

We bought the least expensive inside cabin (\$499) and packed as much as we felt like (a total of six items: suitcases, book satchels, garment bags). As soon as we drove into the massive surface lot, we popped the trunk and stevedores removed our (pre-tagged) luggage. We parked, walked to the door and used one of the terminal's plentiful wheelchairs for the simple check-in and transport over the gangplank.

My mom used her walker from then on, an easy adaption once we figured out how to maneuver the heavy stateroom doors while pulling a walker in sideways.

Unknowingly, we chose a week when New Jersey schools were out, so more than 500 children of all ages were on our cruise. Kids running on the decks, inattentive to my mom's slower pace and need for space, could have been disastrous.

That problem never developed. The ship had three separate kids' camps, with their own facilities for dances, exercise, video walls, iMac computer labs, scavenger hunts, slumber parties and arts and crafts. The heavily staffed camps, and the kids-only pool, worked. We rarely saw youngsters, except at meals with their parents or grandparents, or hitting (ecologically safe) golf balls off the bow.

Now that we're back, we miss the pampering on that floating resort. We want a do-over. We want the attentive waiters, the palm trees, the food, the whimsical towel animals left nightly on our beds, the best pedicures of our lives and the feeling of total relaxation.

Our biggest worries -- logistics and gaining weight -- weren't problems. We barely touched our luggage, and parking, embarking, customs and disembarking were smooth sailing. By mostly sticking to the inventive spa menus, we managed to lose weight even trying a dozen wines and ordering the ship's legendary melting chocolate cake (three times!).

We took any pressure off getting to mealtimes by a set time by signing up for a flexible plan that let us choose when we would eat. The ship's staff is adept at handling walkers, wheelchairs and mobility issues of all types.

Elevators and the ship's stability made nearly every deck and amenity possible. The food maven in us was delighted with a tour of the immense galleys. We met the Indian pastry chef whose artistry we had admired. The precision ballet of 190 servers working with a kitchen exploding with food production was better than watching "Top Chef."

When we docked in Nassau and Freeport, we were happy just to walk the tourist markets and have lunch in the outdoor warmth. We didn't much care when our glass-bottom boat tour got cancelled (too windy). Other guests made beelines for Walt Disney World, or swam with dolphins, took Jeep adventures, went fishing or snorkeling. We moved at a slower pace, just walking and enjoying the sunshine.

In Freeport, we ate fresh conch salad at Daddy Brown's Conch Shack, where we watched fishermen remove the meat from shells in boats tethered just feet away. Atlantis, the immense otherworldly resort in Nassau, was interesting to visit, mostly for the huge fish tanks throughout. But we were happiest on board, reading, sunning and catching up on sleep.

We saw only one evening show, and it was a fine diversion (we missed the ventriloquist singing with two dummies). We didn't visit any of the 20 lounges for exotic cocktails. We

did value the spa. When my mother's left hip started acting up, she got acupuncture from a Japanese specialist. Like nearly all spa services performed on in-port days, this pain-relieving treatment cost \$20 less than usual, or \$90.

We appreciated having facilities so close at hand. I rolled out to (free) exercise classes four of the seven days, a record I never accomplish on land.

The staff took our comfort and my mother's safety seriously. We were suckers for the attention, and the feeling seemed widespread. On the last night, when the waiters sing "We're Leaving on a Fun Ship," we weren't the only ones in the dining room getting a little misty.

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Cruise Maryland, <http://www.cruisemaryland.com>.

The terminal is at 2001 E. McComas St., Baltimore. From Interstate 95, take Exit 55. Adjoining parking lots charge \$15 daily.

If you book online, you should be mailed luggage tags. Attach them before you pull into the terminal. Preregister for your shipboard account online and bring that printout, your passport and credit card. There are free light refreshments before you start boarding at about 1 p.m.