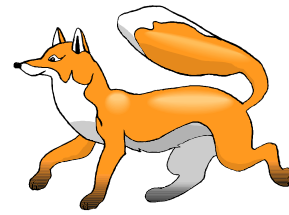


Cruise Report



Ship: Rhapsody of Seas
Dates: 30 September – 17 October 2009
Itinerary: Hawaii – Tahiti [Papeete, Moorea, Raiatea, Bora Bora] - Sydney
Duration: 16 nights
Add-ons: 2 nights at the Outrigger Hotel, Waikiki, prior to the cruise

Introduction ..

I usually look forward to drafting the Cruise Report.

After we get home and I recover from the PCB [post cruise blues], wait for a week or two in order to digest the experience, to remember the events, to enjoy one last savouring of the cruising experience, I sit down and download my thoughts.

This time is different .. This time the cruise was okay BUT it wasn't great .. and it's the first time we've experienced a cruise that wasn't simply wonderful.

Now don't get me wrong, there were some great moments and we always have a good time with each other BUT overwhelmingly it was just *okay*

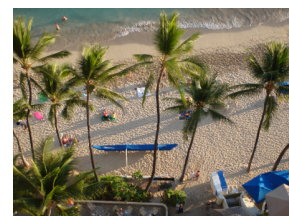
Travelling ..

I like to think that we've mastered the art of *getting there* in a reasonable condition;

- Collected at 5.45am by 'Hughes' and delivered painlessly to the airport. Hughes driver told us he has started cruising, after meeting us previously
- Check in with Qantas, no over-weight issues
- Can't check bags all the way through to Hawaii because we're changing from Qantas to JetStar [Qantas cut price arm] in Sydney
 - Any other airline in the world and it wouldn't have been a problem, crazy!
- Collect bags in Sydney, cab to international airport
- Check in with JetStar, after an hour of pushing the baggage cart around
- Fly to Hawaii, 9 hours, arrive at 7.45am

Note: JetStar gets some awful reports from travellers and we heard people who were on the very same flight complaining about the service [or lack of]. All I can say is that from where we were sitting in Row 1, we had no complaints. Perhaps the portable entertainment unit was a little cumbersome ?

- Met in Hawaii by 'Platinum' who whisked us to the hotel
- In our room by 9.30am and ready to go and explore Hawaii



Hawaii ..

The hotel was as good as we hoped. We had an ocean fronting room on the 15th floor, directly above 'Dukes' beach bar. Located in central Waikiki it was great to walk up and down the strip or to catch one of the trams that circulated, stopping at various hotels and the huge Ala Moana shopping centre.

Before leaving home I booked an excursion to the Kualoa [pron Ku-a Lo-a] Ranch. This is a real 4000 acre ranch which is famous for its film locations and just has a lot to do, actually a choice of 8 activities –you have time to participate in 4 of these in a day.



We chose shooting .. a quick sail .. a visit to the film sets .. and quad biking [not horse riding]. It was an excellent day and we had a great time.

That evening we met in Dukes for the Cruise Critic pre-cruise get together – there were about 16 of us and it was just as well because when it came to the actual Cruise Critic get together, well we never received our invite and missed it.

Going Cruisin ..

'Platinum' did the honours and collected us at 12.30 for the short trip to the ship. From then on it went downhill pretty fast.

- Instead of boarding at Aloha Tower, complete with shopping and cafes etc, we were in the shed adjacent, complete with nothing but a bench and a water fountain for those folks who weren't up to the impending marathon
- The queue was enormous and you had to keep your bags with you [no curbside drop off here] It took 15-20 mins to get inside the building where we waited, avec luggage and about 2000 other pax, for 90 mins for luggage tags
- After we received tags, we then got in the queue to hand them in, then got in the queue to check in, add another 90-100 minutes

We had left the hotel at 12.30pm expecting to board and have a bit of lunch, we eventually got there too late for afternoon tea.

- RCCI stated that because they didn't visit Hawaii very often they had no control. They also said;
 - They had no idea why we hadn't received luggage tags with our papers [so who would know ?]
 - Embarkation was supposed to start at 11.00am but everyone was told 1.00pm
- We received our bags at 7.30pm [partly my fault because I had a bottle of bourbon in each bag and they put them aside until the end. Thereafter, you have to collect luggage yourself and hand in the illicit booze. It's like a punishment for breaking the rules].

All in all it was not a good start to the cruise

The Ship ..

For a 12 year old ship she was in good condition. The theme was 'music' so much of the art work and accoutrement reflected this.



- The Centrum is the main atrium – about 4 floors in height – and this space is used to stage a lot of activities.
 - Surprisingly the small [marble] dance floor on the 4th floor was featured far more often than the big [timber] dance floor in the cabaret lounge
 - They have Ben & Jerry's ice cream and Seattle's Best coffee available
 - The art display is also here, as are the 4 shops and the photographers area
- Rhapsody has no specialty restaurants [they do have a self serve buffet at night] and they operate a combination of fixed dining and 'any-time' dining.
 - The main seating dinner was at 6.00pm and the second seating was at 8.30pm
 - The evening show for second seating diners was at 7.00pm followed by a 9.00pm show for the main seating diners
- They had a lot of good, live, entertainment.
 - A different show every night, including 3 full production shows, Tahitian dancers, and a variety of artists including singers, jugglers, and a Beatles tribute band
 - 3 bands playing every night, plus a karaoke host [entertaining for a couple of nights]
- The staff was overwhelmingly friendly [almost compulsively so]. I was waiting outside the Medical Centre one day, adjacent to the entry to the crew deck and every single person that passed me wished me a happy day.
 - There were a couple of the entertainment staff that I thought should have spent less time talking and more time thinking BUT apart from that.
- Food standards were pretty good BUT were limited in some areas.
 - Breakfast was identical every day – it never changed. However unlike other ships
 1. Fresh orange juice could be purchased
 2. No shakes or smoothies available
 - Lunch in the dining room featured a specialty salad and pasta bar – very good – and what I'd describe as a fast food diner menu – which was also very good
 - Main Buffet lunch was on a cycle of about 10 days because we were seeing the second round before we got off
 - Dinner menus were okay but not stunning
 1. Smoked salmon offered twice
 2. No lobster served at all
 3. The menu was written as starter and main course [entre] and subliminally encouraged you to order only a starter and a main. On other ships this would be shown as several courses and you might order a soup a starter and a main – not that it affected what I ordered
 4. Cheese biscuits were limited to crackers in plastic sachets
- Bar service was generally very good however in most bars they did not serve any peanuts or nibbles with your drink.
- Deck furniture – plastic banana chairs do not impress BUT I knew about this before we sailed
- The Cabin
 - The bed was uncomfortable and we woke up every day feeling stiff and sore
 - The pillows were flat and dead [took a complaint to get an alive one]

The Passengers ..

The ship carried 2000+ passengers, the majority of whom turned out to be Australian, which was a first for us. We are usually the Aussie minority.

- Australians at play are ‘boisterous’ and to have over a 1000 of them at play, day after day, was like attending a groundhog day beach BBQ.
 - I like to be comfortable on deck and to enjoy a bit of peace and quiet [don’t mind a few people snoring] on this occasion I was uncomfortable and oft crowded
- This was the first time we have cruised and never exchanged addresses and contacts with anyone, we simply didn’t connect.
 - Our dinner companions were pleasant and we chatted but this never evolved to anything more
- Dress standards [makes me sound like a snob].
 - There were 3 formal nights and about 50% had the proper gear and 35% who had a decent alternative BUT I am of the opinion that the Head Waiters should direct those passengers who make no attempt to dress, towards the buffet
 - In general I don’t think shorts are appropriate attire for dinner, on any day of the week, unless you’re cruising with Ocean Village or Thompson
 - There’s a big difference between ‘country club casual’ and every day ‘casual’

The Tahitian Islands ..

Bora Bora is what you think of when you talk about Tahiti, with Moorea running a close second. Papeete and Raiatea on the other hand are a bit ‘ordinary’ and not dissimilar to any of the third world tourist locations, even if the ocean is turquoise.

Bora Bora

Following the trend that had been set, we booked a quad bike / jet ski combo for our day of adventure, only to discover that quad bikes [all of them ? a local thing ?] were out of service. So we opted for a jet ski tour that circumnavigated the island.

We stopped to have fresh coconut and bananas [try this at home: split the banana length ways, fill with freshly shredded coconut, voila a Tahitian Hot Dog]



You know that picture in the travel brochures, the one that shows the thatched hotel rooms sitting above the aqua blue ocean. Where you can step out of your room and dive into the ocean for your morning swim. Well I’ve been there and I’ve seen it.

[What people don’t know is that there are 15 of these hotels in Bora Bora – all of them extended over the ocean with thatched roofs]

PS: We were picked up in a speed boat and returned in a similar fashion. Cool !

Moorea

I booked a half day quad bike tour for Moorea. We caught one of the first tenders ashore which [conveniently] left Robyn just enough time to do a bit of 'black pearl' shopping before we were collected.

Note: Now I'm no expert on the value of black pearls, and the Pacific franc [local currency] has a frightening number of zeros on the end when you go pearl shopping, but Robyn found a very unusual set of coloured pearls which make a very appropriate souvenir from Tahiti.



This was a great way to spend the day. After we saw the sights we attacked 'Magic Mountain' a private property that had a track built for quad bikes to race to the summit, very exciting.

Heading for Sydney [and home] ..

On the last leg home Robyn caught bronchitis which was treated with 3 rounds of intravenous antibiotics, 4 sessions on the nebulizer, and various pills and potions.

Being sick whilst on holiday is not a lot of fun accordingly this did put a bit of a damper on those final few days and yes, we were ready to go home by the time we reached Sydney.

Against all the advice from RCCI, I had booked a 10.00am flight from Sydney to Perth and therefore needed to be off the ship by 8.00am and in a car to the airport. It was either going to work like a dream and we'd be home by 1.30pm or I was going to be looking for a later flight.

Thanks to my friends at 'Hughes' [Sydney] we made the flight with plenty of time [Qantas commented we were the first from the ship to check in] and 'Hughes' [Perth], we were unpacking by 2.00pm.

In Conclusion ..

We had a good holiday. We really enjoyed Hawaii and Tahiti. And the cruise experience was *okay*.

There were some parts that were very good and some that simply weren't as good as we had become used to, which both surprised and disappointed us. After all, we thoroughly enjoyed both Celebrity and Azamara, the other RCCI brands.

Maybe it is all just a function of money and you simply get what you pay for ?

Not to be deterred however, our next cruise is Sean's 4 Day Cruise to Nowhere. Guaranteed to be very different to anything that we have done before !!

Carry on cruising folks !!

