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ROATAN, Honduras-Stow away the black socks and sandals. The new Texaribbean cruise aboard the Norwegian Sea is not your parents' cruise. Or their parents' cruise.

The only year-round sailing offered by a major cruise line from the Port of Houston mixes lively portions of Texas and Mexican culture and cuisine. The seven-day cruise debuted in mid-December, and it makes day stops in Cancun and Cozumel, Mexico, and Roatan, Honduras.

Along the way there are conga lines, Texas T-bone steaks and a medium-rare lounge singer who covers Jimmy Buffett and Harry Belafonte, along with the world's first tequila bar at sea, featuring 75 different tequilas, 10 mescals and four Mexican liqueurs.

Tequila and Tex-Mex food were the angles that encouraged me to sample my first cruise. The ship's adventurous dinner menu always offered something different, with highlights ranging from Tex-Mex barbecued pork chops with corn fritters, black beans and sweet pepper chili to the whole roasted lamb loin that we had with Capt. Odd Strom, a lifetime seafarer from coastal Norway.

The hip ship has been drawing passengers who range from their mid-20s to mid-70s, with a smattering of children. And there are passengers who defy categories, like Paul Siegal, a 56-year-old Teflon salesman from Wheeling. He was my hero.

One night I saw Siegal - who looks like a young Sebastian Cabot - closing down the ship's Boomer's Party Zone disco. Siegal is divorced. He was in the party zone dancing with four women between the ages of 33 and 50. "By the end of the trip we had developed sort of a Rat Pack," Siegal said from his Northbrook office after the cruise. "They were married ladies from Washington state who do a vacation once a year without their husbands."

Another night I saw Siegal sing along with the ship's saucy rhythm and blues vocalist, Jane L. Powell, in the Vegas-tinged Cabaret Lounge. A third night, Siegal was poolside in heavy eyeshadow and an ocean-blue turban, winning a Carmen Miranda-in-drag contest. I think Siegal singlehandedly skewed that mid-life crisis report that came out last month. And this was his first cruise.

"I had fun, and I'd do it again in a minute," said Siegal, who has three grown children and is active in community theater along the North Shore. "That's what life is all about. With the Carmen contest, I purchased some scarves in Cozumel. The

women who dressed me used them as the sarong, skirt and turban. They gave me two grapefruits (for breasts) and made a sling that they twisted around my chest and tied around my neck. They painted my toenails.

"The downside to it was that I couldn't find anyone with polish remover. I spent the entire next day on the beach at Roatan digging my toes in the sand. But what I loved about the trip is that you could do or not do whatever you wanted. There were days I was content to be at one with the deck chair, and there were a couple of nights where we closed the disco at 3 in the morning. Whatever mood you were in, there was something to satisfy that mood."

The Norwegian Sea is one of 11 mid-sized ships owned and/or operated by Miami-based Norwegian Cruise Line Limited. One reason the ship, which carries up to 1,500, is drawing a younger crowd is an affordable price that starts at \$637 per person, based on double occupancy. That includes meals, onboard entertainment and port charges. Incidentals such as telephone (\$5.95 per minute to shore), gift shop purchases and alcoholic beverages are not included.

Norwegian Sea hotel director Scott Hamby said the Texaribbean cruise draws 50 percent of its customers from Texas, with 6 percent to 7 percent consisting of international passengers, mostly from Canada. The average age of its passengers is 49.2 years. That is the youngest demographic of the cruise line's six weeklong or longer excursions currently being offered. Historically, older audiences are drawn more often to trips longer than three- or four-day cruises.

The ship, which entered service in 1988, includes four dining facilities, eight lounges and/or bars, two outdoor pools and a casino with seven blackjack tables, two stud poker tables, a roulette wheel and 178 slot machines. But gambling on the cruise's shore excursions was my best payoff.

After departing Houston around 6 p.m. on a Sunday, our ship arrived in Cancun at 1 p.m. on a Tuesday. We had to tender to shore because of shallow water around the hook-shaped island that is unnavigable for the 42,000-ton Norwegian Sea. To "tender" is a fancy cruise verb that means "to take a funky ferry to shore that has natives peddling cheap T-shirts, gold necklaces and warm bottles of Corona beer." The last tender back was at 9:30 p.m.

Cancun was developed in 1974 as little more than a tourist shakedown for sun-starving Americans. Miles of big hotels and chains like Planet Hollywood, Jack Tar Village and Hard Rock Cafe did little to float my boat. More compelling Cancun excursions include 18 holes of golf (\$115) and a visit to Xcaret, an eco-archeological attraction of Mayan history and culture (\$69). We took a pass.

Instead, we spent a sunny afternoon horseback riding (\$77) at Rancho Loma Bonita, along the Caribbean Sea, about a 45-minute van drive south of Cancun. Riders are matched to ability. My horse's name was Makiniki. I didn't understand

why the ranch hands were giggling until someone hipped me that me Makiniki meant "He can't ride a snail."

Young scouts led us along a 90-minute trip through winding trails and lagoons bordered by beautiful foliage. It sure looked nice from the back of the pack. The narrow trails emptied out into the Caribbean Sea, where one of the first things I saw on the shoreline was an abandoned wooden flotilla from Cuba, just 100 miles away.

The horseback riding excursion wound down with a rest stop on a beach where riders could tie up their horses and swim, get some sun or ride a couple of reluctant horses into the sea. Back at the ranch, the staff served us complimentary beers along with an opportunity to purchase a color picture of yourself sitting on a horse in the sea. Of course I bought one (\$10).

We were back on the boat in time to catch some of the poolside "Texaribbean Night" activities, which included an engaging performance from the mariachi band Los Gallitos, accompanied by Mexican dancers from Cancun. And later on in the evening it was "Honky Tonk Heaven" in Oscar's Pub, where one-man-band Derek Lewis was hacking up Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried." Oscar's was one place I never saw Siegal.

The beat slowed a bit for Cozumel. We spent the afternoon walking along the waterfront and browsing the shops. Overrated Cuban cigars were in ample supply, as Cuban-oriented cigar stores were denoted by goofy life-size figurines of Fidel Castro. We toured the Museo de la Isla de Cozumel (a well-spent \$3 for local history) and had a fine lunch of hearty tortilla soup and roasted fish in mustard sauce at La Choza Restaurant, 10 Av. Cozumel Q. In 1992 La Choza was named best restaurant on the island by Food and Wine magazine. Some locals recommended La Choza to us.

We would need the rest for Roatan, the largest and most popular of the Bay Islands, 30 miles off the coast of Honduras. Roatan was our third land stop in three days. It was our best visit because of the banana-shaped island's remote nature and the unadulterated sincerity of the natives.

Most of Roatan's 30,000 residents are of Afro-Antillian descent, and they make their living in commercial fishing. (All of the Honduras banana crops were destroyed by Hurricane Mitch.) The mostly impoverished residents live in clapboard houses in New Orleans-styled port towns on the south side of island, which is only 29 miles long and 2 miles wide. The island passed into British hands in the 17th century and became part of Honduras in 1859.

We rented mountain bikes (\$2 an hour) to explore the barren north side of the island, quite unintentionally. The bike rental shack was within walking distance from port. We began pedaling north, initially riding through tiny fishing villages and

along pristine bays. The trail soon evaporated into a jungle where we were among lean, lima bean-colored Jesus lizards, geckos and even a couple of wild bulls.

We were lost.

I had been asking directions for both West Bay (a beach on the north tip of the island) and West End (a seafront town full of dive shops and restaurants). The north side of the island was only recently made accessible by car, and there is only one road between the port and West End. We missed it.

After three hours of riding and/or carrying our bikes up hills and down steep ravines, a real estate speculator from Texas gave us a ride to West End. We slapped the bikes in the back of his pickup truck. He reaffirmed our missteps by growling, "Man, you guys were in the brrrrush."

We crashed with a superb meal of conch fritters, a zesty grouper sandwich and a cold green bottle of Honduran Port Royal beer at Half Moon Bay Cabins in a cozy bay off the Caribbean Sea in West End. (The restaurant-bar is surrounded by 14 rustic cabins, with rates starting at \$55 for a double with a fan, \$74 with air conditioning, call 800-989-9970).

Less painstaking excursions in Roatan include a 2 1/4-hour dolphin encounter in waist-deep water (\$59) and West Bay sea kayaking, where a novice can learn how to glide solo over the Caribbean Sea (\$75 for a 6 1/2-hour session).

After Roatan, the Norwegian Sea turned around for the nonstop trip back to Houston. Traveling at 20 knots or roughly 23 m.p.h., we left Honduras around 5 p.m. on a Thursday and arrived in Houston at 6 a.m. Sunday.

The cruise back gave us ample time to reflect on all that is good about travel: adventure, self discovery and meeting new friends like Paul Siegal. The easygoing and vibrant nature of the Texaribbean cruise exceeded our anticipatory thoughts. Sometimes your ship comes in when you least expect it.