

Cruising with a Conscience

Saving the world, one tropical port at a time.
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IN A BLUSTERY fall Sunday, Norwegian Cruise Line's Spirit set sail out of the port of New Orleans with 1,200 lesbians and their friends on the inaugural Western Caribbean cruise from lesbian travel company Sweet. Though the first 24 hours or so were challenging, thanks to Hurricane Ida, the rest of the seven-day adventure would prove to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience filled with top-notch entertainment, wild parties, endless on-board activities, many tasty piña colodas, four beautiful tropical ports to explore, and daily opportunities to give back to the communities we were visiting.

Both my partner and I were cruise virgins. We'd heard about other LGBT cruises, but Sweet promised a new kind of travel experience, one that married a fun vacation with a chance to make a difference. On top of that, Sweet had picked one of the most eco-conscious cruise companies in the world—Norwegian Cruise Lines—and had also arranged via Carbonfund.org to offset the carbon emissions of the entire trip by planting 65,000 trees in Louisiana, my home state. We were impressed—and excited.

Before we set sail, Sweet had been in our hometown of New Orleans for two days, offering Sweeties—as cruisers were called—a pre-cruise package to enjoy everything the city has to offer, as well as get a jump start on volunteering. These early participants helped restore some of the battered wetlands by planting 600 native grasses in a marsh devastated by Hurricane Katrina, and later enjoyed a huge street party on

the Toulouse Street Wharf in the French Quarter.

At the end of the weekend, we joined women (and a handful of men) ranging in age from 20 to 91 from all over the U.S. and 10 different countries in boarding the massive cruise liner, which hurried out of port early in hopes of getting out of the path of Hurricane Ida. That first evening, we gathered in the main theater for a rousing welcome from Sweet's founders, Jen Rainin and Shannon Wentworth, two long-time friends who brainstormed their "travel with a conscience" vision while walking their dogs. Greeted like rock stars by the eager-to-have-fun-while-doing-good crowd, they were followed by a brief set by lesbian comic Suzanne Westenhoefer. It was a great kickoff.

Meanwhile, the ship was beginning to really experience what our captain jokingly referred to as "rockin' and rollin'" from Hurricane Ida. As the night went on, the ship was tossed back and forth on 10 to 15 foot waves, leaving fully one-third of the ship's passengers and crew seasick. Thankfully, most of us were recovered enough by later that second night to enjoy a very cathartic evening of comedy from Erin Foley of *Last Comic Standing*. For the rest of the week at sea, all the comedians would follow her lead and incorporate jokes about our collective sailing-through-a-hurricane experience, with hilarious results. Nothing like a little trauma to bond folks!

With the bad weather behind us, the next day found us arriving just a few hours late to our first port destination, Costa Maya, Mexico. It would be the first of many opportunities for

Sweeties to participate in a “voluntour” excursion. Here it was a beach clean-up project, followed by cocktails and a Mexican buffet. We joined 150 women who collectively filled over 200 giant contractor trash bags with an array of trash in just 45 minutes. There were contests to see who could pick up the most flip-flops (the winner found 24), the item that came from the farthest away (China beat Greece), and the most bizarre item (a vacuum cleaner nozzle won, though the toilet seat, lawn chair, kitchen sink and Buddha statue were all strong contenders).

This excursion may have had a small impact on Mexico’s coast, but it had a huge impact on those of us who participated, with many of us vowing to never buy disposable water bottles again. As Wentworth pointed out, “People saw where their trash goes—85 percent of this trash is not from Mexico. Things don’t disappear just because they disappear from our view.”

At our next port, Belize City, Belize, there were two different voluntour excursions. The first was at a children’s hospital ward, where Sweet partnered with Lifeline, a philanthropic organization run by the first lady of Belize, Kim Simplis

Barrow. Sweeties painted in cartoon character drawings on the walls of the formerly drab pediatric hospital, and donated toys and clothes. “Having spent time in pediatric wards with my own kids, it’s good to have something to look at,” Rainin said, pointing out the positive impact of the colorful pictures.

The other community project in Belize City was at an underprivileged school across town where Sweet teamed up with non-profit Hand Wash Hand. Sweeties painted the walls and decorated with stencils, and then filled the bookshelves with thousands of books that Sweet cruisers had donated. Afterwards, Sweeties read the kids stories. It was heartwarming to see how happy the kids were to see their school transformed in the course of a day.

In Roatan, Honduras, Sweeties repainted a children’s e-learning center and donated two new computers as well as \$600 from their own pockets to sponsor four kids’ access to the center for a year. And in Cozumel, Mexico there was another beach clean-up project where Sweeties also replanted mangroves and beautified a park by cleaning up, painting and replanting community gardens.

Although it might seem that this seven-day cruise was all work and no play, that couldn’t be further from the truth. Each community project was paired with a party of some kind. And each day, Sweeties still had time to

discover each port on their own or take other excursions. Each port swarmed with bikini-clad lesbians scuba diving, touring the local sights or relaxing on the beautiful Caribbean beaches. We, for instance, didn’t participate in the latter two voluntour opportunities, instead choosing to spend those days exploring Roatan Island via a driving tour and taking a glass-bottomed boat snorkeling tour in Cozumel.

However, a full third of the women on the ship did participate in at least one of the voluntours, giving Sweeties a shared sense of accomplishment. One couple described their experience in Belize as “the most meaningful, wonderful thing” they’d ever done, a sentiment reiterated throughout the week.

Meanwhile, back on the boat, there was so much going on it was often hard keeping up with it all. Throughout the week there were poolside parties, wet T-shirt contests, **curve** contributor Jennifer Corday and her rockin’ cover band making the gals go wild and hot tub mania going on on the upper decks. There were mixers, meet and greets, karaoke, networking, and happy hour events, including several hosted by **curve**’s own Lipstick and Dipstick.

Every evening there were amazing musical performances from the likes of dyke favorites Edie Carey, Natalia Zukerman, Adrienne, Jen Foster and many others, as well as comedy from Gloria Bigelow, Kate McKinnon and Sandra Valls. And every night, there were different theme parties hosted by the ten DJs brought on board by Sweet. The ’80s Party had the best costumes (Ghostbusters jumpsuits and inflatable backpacks), but the Lingerie Party and Champagne and Bubbles dress up night were also great for fashion—and girl-watching.

The ship was a virtual who’s who of the lesbian nation, too. Aside from all the billed entertainers, there were super-secret celebs aboard (we now know that recently-out Meredith Baxter was on board, though we never ran into her); less-secret but no less interesting stars including Dani Campbell, actors Cathy DeBuono and Jill Bennett, dyke culture movers and shakers like Club Skirts’ Mariah Hanson, Babeland’s Rachel Venning and Laura Weide, superstar trainer Shawnee Harkins, Wolfe Video’s Kathy Wolfe, and, of course, reps from every major lesbian publication, website, podcast, web series and blog.

A book could be written about all the sights, sounds and scenes on this cruise. And, in fact, there were several films and web series being shot on board. There truly was something for everyone.

But through all of it, Sweet’s biggest accomplishment may have been that of building community amongst those onboard. As Wentworth pointed out, on the final day of the cruise, “When you put good out into the world, you get it back, and that’s what we’ve been feeling all week.”

Fun with a conscience—it’s the wave of the future, and Sweet puts lesbians right at the forefront of this soon-to-be travel trend. ■



Giving Back (far left to right): Sweet voluntouristas collect trash on the beach of the Parque Punta Sur Ecological Reserve in Cozumel, Mexico; Sweet CEO Shannon Wentworth plays with kids as visitors install computers at a Roatan, Honduras e-learning center; women, including Elizabeth Birch (middle) painting a children’s ward at a Belize City hospital. Left: Dailia Ali Rajah, from SheWired’s hit lesbo talk show *Cherry Bomb*, helps clean up Uvero Beach in Costa Maya, Mexico