

For Cruise Critic

Norwegian Cruise Line's Norwegian Dream : November 2007

We booked this cruise "last-minute" on-line, having received an offer too good to miss. Not having cruised with NCL since 1996 (on the pre-stretched Dream) we were not sure what to expect but, apart from a few niggles, this was an extraordinarily fine cruise and incredible value for money.

First, those niggles - overcrowding, chaotic embarkation and disembarkation and the all-pervading and intensely irritating background music in all the public areas.

The low prices on offer meant the ship was absolutely full with around 400 Chileans and another 200 Latin-Americans adding to the 500 Americans and another 500 mixed nationalities. The ship just can't cope with these numbers and the canteen (sorry - Sports Bar/Restaurant) and main Four Seasons restaurant were particularly overcrowded most of the time. This was not helped by this being a predominantly cool-weather cruise so dining on deck was not possible except on the first and last days out of Valparaiso. By judicious timing of ventures into our two preferred dining areas, the Terraces and the Trattoria, we were not troubled by long waits at all. But the Dream is totally unsuited to "Freestyle" cruising and NCL are sensibly taking it out of service in 2008.

First impression on arrival to board at Valparaiso was not good. We usually arrange to arrive well after embarkation begins and therefore have virtually no lines to contend with - but not this time. Even people arriving only an hour before departure still had to wait in a very long line. It took us over two hours to get through and I understand that this was far from the worst - many had taken three to four hours. However, at least our luggage had already reached our cabin. Apparently priority boarding was available for Latitudes members, and for the disabled, but this was not well displayed. In over 20 cruises, this was by far the worst organised embarkation that we have experienced. Similar problems were experienced when taking the ship's organised tours where it was not uncommon to have five full buses leaving and returning at the same time causing long lines in corridors and ashore at single gangways and tenders.

When we complained about the over-loud background music in all the public areas, including the library, restaurants and observation lounge, we were advised that it is NCL's policy to have music in all areas. However, it seems quite unnecessary to select the high-pitched female voices squawking songs which have no recognizable tune (or murdering those that have) and playing them at such high volume. On one memorable occasion, the observation lounge which was ideally located to observe the passing scenery and to indulge in quiet conversation had three different sounds playing at the same time - one from the ceiling speakers, one from the stage speakers and another from the "live" pianist!

Now for the good points. The food and service were generally excellent and right up with the best. Just occasionally some items on the buffet were not hot enough but this seems to be a common problem with buffets in general.

In addition to the usual contemporary and Italian cuisine, at lunch in the Sports Bar/Restaurant there were also excellent Indian dishes, Asian stir-fries or pasta dishes.

Our cabin was a good size for an inside and well maintained by the ever cheerful housekeeping staff. The bed was very hard though - it's probably worth asking for a mattress topper if this troubles you.

The itinerary was simply great and with so much in-shore cruising there was usually something to watch along the way and the Chilean fjords, Magellan Strait and, particularly, the Beagle Channel exceeded our expectations. Seeing the multiple glaciers of the Beagle Channel for a second time from a grandstand seat whilst enjoying an excellent dinner in the Trattoria was quite a highlight. The weather in mid-November was also excellent with no rain at all and the long light evenings were a bonus. Being early in the season, there was more snow on the mountains than seen later in mid-Summer. A stop was made early-morning to view the Amalie glacier. Here it actually snowed and the glacier disappeared in the fog but the captain sent a boat out to collect a (small) iceberg which was then displayed on deck.

Because so much time is spent in Chilean waters, the casino was closed for long periods. This didn't trouble us at all but it was the cause of complaint from many passengers. Fortunately, this is also the only area inside the ship where smoking is permitted.

As I don't speak Spanish at all, and my wife only has schoolgirl high-Castilian, we decided not to risk any privately-arranged tours and took more ship's tours than usual. Apart from the problems getting on and off the ship (you can see my picture of the line at Puerto Montt) these were generally well-arranged with excellent guides but, as usual, the price was much higher than if the tour had been booked ashore. The best value that we experienced was the tour from Puerto Montt to Lago Todos Los Santos and the Petrohue Falls. This included a catamaran trip on the lake with spectacular views of the Osorno volcano, the excellent and highly photogenic falls and probably the best included-lunch that I have ever experienced on a tour - three courses with soup, baked salmon as the main and a delicious dessert, with empanadas and Pisco Sours as appetizers and copious quantities of Chilean wine and coffee. All for US\$129.00.



Re-boarding line at Puerto Montt

In comparison, the \$99.00 tour to the Seno Otway penguin colony from Punta Arenas was extremely expensive although in mitigation it did leave very early in the morning so we saw the penguins at their best - plenty of them with the light just right for photography - and this was also an unforgettable experience. But a taxi trip would have achieved the same at a fraction of the cost provided that you have the Spanish.

At the, curiously-named Corral stop (the ship actually tendered in to Niebla on the other side of the river), we did take a public *colectivo* bus up to Valdivia and this was easy and very cheap - less than 70 cents. The one really must-see here is the fish market on the river bank where the stall-holders feed tidbits to the sea lions. We did hear that at least one of the ship's tours neglected to visit the fish market, much to the *chagrin* of the participants. Waiting for the tender back at Niebla, the early morning cloud had risen to reveal the perfect snow-covered cone of the Villarica volcano.

We were pleasantly surprised by the standard of entertainment on board. Apart from the usual Jean Ann Ryan dross, this was generally very good - especially the Latin-American entertainers.

Before the cruise we stayed at the Sheraton Hotel in Santiago. We booked this before we realized that NCL used it for their pre- and post- cruise packages. The hotel's extremely helpful concierge arranged their private car transfers for us from the airport to the hotel and to the ship from the hotel. Although a little more expensive than taxis, it worked out no more than NCL's bus transfers for the two of us and was well worth it. I have read that the hotel is not well located but we did not find this to be the case - it is under the San Cristobal hill, on the edge of Providencia and it was less than 10 minutes walk to a subway station.

At the end of the cruise, as our flight did not depart Santiago until 11 pm, we had booked a tour of Valparaiso and Santiago through latintrip.com and this also worked out very well. We had an excellent, fluent English-speaking guide, driver and comfortable car for the day and they dropped us off at the airport, exhausted, at 8 pm after a very comprehensive tour which included a number of 'extra' stops.

All in all, we would say this is a "must-do" cruise.