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Sailing the Caribbean on the world's largest tall ship



With 42 sails and five masts, the Royal Clipper is the world's largest full-rigged passenger sailing vessel.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Royal Clipper passengers may climb on the rigging to the crow's nest at the first yardarm.
Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Some members of the crew climb out on the bow to wave farewell to passengers on the last night of the voyage.
Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Beaches, including a popular stretch of sand in Martinique, are the focus of the Royal Clipper's voyages in the Caribbean.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

**By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent**

"This isn't cruising, this is sailing," says fellow passenger Paul from Toronto. After three voyages on [Star Clippers'](#) fleet of three sailing vessels, he's hooked. And he's not alone. Nearly 60 percent of the cruise line's passengers return after their first voyage. "It's almost a cult," he says.

He explains the difference between a voyage on an ocean liner and our ship, the Royal Clipper, largest in Star Clippers' fleet. There are no casinos or fancy floor shows, he says, and no dressing up for dinner. Rather, passengers experience truly being at sea under the power of wind filling the sails.

The Royal Clipper delivers that experience in a big way. The largest square-rigged passenger sailing ship in the world, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, has five masts and 42 sails. It measures 439 feet in length and can carry up to 227 passengers and 106 crew.

And those sails aren't just for show. Some other passenger sailing vessels primarily cruise under engine power and use the sails a few times during a cruise. On the Royal Clipper, twin Caterpillar diesel engines fire up only when weather and sea conditions make them necessary. Twenty deck hands pull and winch a coordinated system of ropes and rigging to unfurl each ivory canvas. The entertaining display never fails to bring passengers up to the sun deck to watch, often with a glass of champagne or a cocktail in hand.

The question most frequently asked: Is there much movement of the ship when under sail? My answer: not really. The crew maneuvers the sails to minimize heeling, or tilting, so it's usually less than 6 percent. Speed varies with wind conditions, of course, ranging from 8 knots to 20 knots under sail, 13.5 or higher under engine power. During a week of sailing between islands in the southern Caribbean, the only time I felt a gentle roll was late at night when I was tucked safely in bed. It actually was soothing, like being rocked to sleep.

The ship's Edwardian décor, with its warm wood paneling, has the look and feel of an 18th-century ship. In reality, the timing is off by more than a century. Launched in 2000, its amenities are up to date, including Wi-Fi via satellite in public spaces and most cabins.

For all of its attractive features as a sailing vessel, the Royal Clipper still falls in the small-ship category, which has pros and cons when compared to a big ocean liner.

Clever public spaces

A three-story atrium links three of the Royal Clipper's four passenger decks, flooding the interior with light, a plus the smaller Star Clippers don't have. You won't find an elevator, though, posing a challenge to passengers with mobility issues.

Inside spaces include the dining room, a lounge, a library, a reception desk and piano bar, plus a small gift shop that sells mostly logo merchandise. The Capt. Nemo spa has a sauna/steam room, massage rooms and a gym with fitness equipment. Cleverly located one deck below the water line, portholes provide an underwater view.

Outside, the Tropical Bar serves as a gathering point for morning gymnastics, shore excursions and nightly entertainment organized by the ship's musician and cruise director. The sun deck, where the crew works the sails, has a bar, chaise lounges and three pools, though you won't be swimming laps in any of them. Two are small plunge pools, circular like a hot tub, but without the hot. The third serves as a circular water-filled skylight above the atrium.

Balcony staterooms scarce

Of the eight categories of cabins, only 14 deluxe suites come with verandas, along with a minibar, whirlpool bath and access to room service. Savvy passengers snap these up first. Star Clippers has taken note of the demand and will add more cabins with balconies on its next ship scheduled to launch in January 2017.

Categories two through five have portholes, twin/double beds and marble bathrooms. They can be a tight fit for two adults, though you'll find plenty of niches and closet space to stow clothes and gear. All cabins have flat screens and DVD players with movies available from reception.

Twenty-seven cabins convert to triples with a pull-down berth above the head of the bed, but even when stowed, the closed berth protrudes enough to make it difficult to sit up in bed to read or watch TV.

Activities for would-be sailors

Feel like playing pirate? With the aid of safety harnesses and the supervision of the sports staff, you can climb 60 feet up a rope and cable ladder to a crow's nest at the first yardarm to enjoy a panoramic view. You get another view lying on rope netting that stretches from the prow, the sea churning below.

A marina platform lowers off the ship's stern. When the ship anchors, guests go here for water sports: snorkeling (free use of equipment throughout the cruise), water skiing, banana boating, kayaking, sunfish sailing, windsurfing.

The Royal Clipper's open-bridge policy means passengers may tour the bridge in small numbers except when the ship prepares to arrive and depart ports. You also can join an organized tour of the bridge and the engine room.

No skimping on food

Just as on most cruises, you won't go hungry here. Michelin three-star chef Jean Marie Meulien consulted in the creation of the ship's menus with Jamaican executive chef Devon Hodges overseeing on board.

Breakfast and lunch are buffet affairs with a good selection of hot and cold dishes. You'll find an egg/omelet station during the main breakfast and a meat-carving station at lunch.

Dinner service starts at 7 p.m. with open seating in the dining room; there are no specialty restaurants. Multicourse menus, each complemented by fine wines, include at least two main dishes, one vegetarian dish, starters, soups, sorbet, salad, cheese course and dessert. Some examples: lobster bisque, Bajan-style stuffed veal, baked Alaska. Don't like what you see? The kitchen will whip up a pasta dish or prepare a sirloin steak with fries any night you wish.

Activities on shore

The Royal Clipper sells two to four shore excursions on each Caribbean island it visits. Some are physically challenging hikes, others small bus trips to local attractions. For passengers who prefer to go their own way, tenders run frequently to the dock and on some islands two tenders run, one to the dock, a second to a beach.

The Caribbean itinerary puts the emphasis on beaches, including some remote, uncrowded spots that a big vessel could never access (one downside: no toilets on shore). Here the crew pulls tenders close to shore and lowers a platform from the stern to allow passengers to jump or climb down to the sand. The sports team sets up on the beach offering free use of kayaks and organizes water gymnastics. On one occasion, the kitchen staff set up a barbecue lunch on the beach.

• *Katherine Rodeghier is a contributor to AllThingsCruise.com. Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by Star Clippers.*

Star Clippers

The Royal Clipper spends winter in the Caribbean and summer in the Mediterranean.

Cost: Rates for seven nights in the Caribbean range from \$2,150 to \$7,405 depending on dates and stateroom

Info: (800) 442-0551 or starclippers.com/us-dom/

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