

Holly Jolly Holidays

AT SEA

By Katherine Rodeghier

Christmas and New Year's cruising sparkles with luxury line Oceania.



Trading the magic of Santa's sleigh for the enchantment of a ship at sea

has become a popular choice for cruisers looking to pamper themselves at holiday time. Caribbean itineraries that include December 25 rank among the most heavily booked in North America.

I felt fortunate to be aboard luxury line Oceania Cruises not only for Christmas but New Year's, too. My fellow passengers and I escaped the often-too-hectic holidays for a relaxing voyage through the West Indies. We could forget about putting up decorations, cooking fancy meals and planning holiday gatherings—with the associated cleanup, of course—because Oceania took care of it all.

This year, Oceania is positioning three of its six ships in the Caribbean on five holiday itineraries: two for Christmas, two for New Year's and one 14-day voyage, much like mine, stretching over both holidays on a round-trip from Miami.

Country Club at Sea Classified in the luxury midsize category, Oceania ships accommodate 684 or 1,250 passengers, depending on the vessel. Each has the ambience of a country club—casual but elegant, intimate enough to form friendships yet roomy enough for upscale amenities such as an English-inspired library, a Canyon Ranch SpaClub and a Monte Carlo-style casino. Master Chef Jacques Pepin serves as executive culinary director, overseeing Grand Dining Room and specialty restaurant menus. Those menus might include Beef Wellington,

Duck à l'orange, lobster and a Grand Marnier soufflé, but they always include healthy spa cuisine.

Oceania's reputation for the best cuisine at sea serves passengers especially well with over-the-top holiday meals. Our chef, who prepared Christmas goose and Buche de Noel (aka Yule log) on Dec. 25, outdid himself with a three-and-a-half-hour New Year's brunch. Multiple buffet tables remained loaded with hot and cold dishes, ice carvings, a tower of ornamental breads, meat-carving stations and a long table of chocolate desserts highlighted with three tall chocolate sculptures.

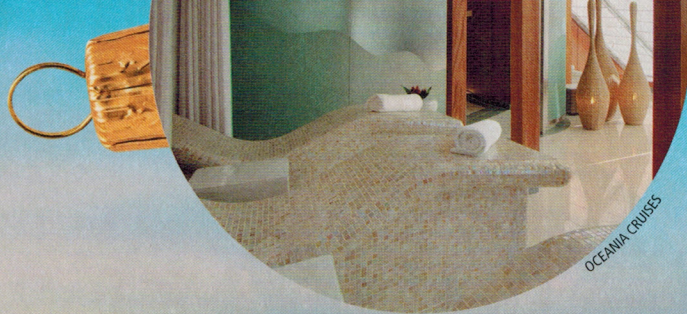
Oceania ships have no facilities or programs for children, so their holiday cruises tend to attract adults and families with older teens or young adults. Only a handful of children were aboard my cruise. Still, on Christmas morning, Santa had wrapped gifts for all the little ones. The Jolly Old Elf positioned himself on a throne in the Great Hall's stairway and invited children to sit on his lap while parents snapped photos. After the kids had their turn, a few lighthearted adults posed on Santa's knee, too.

One level up in the atrium, servers poured creamy cups of eggnog—plain or spiked with rum—as a string quartet played Christmas carols.

Oceania ships sport plenty of holiday finery, tasteful and not overdone. Expertly decorated trees stand majestically in atriums and brighten halls and lobbies. Garlands twist around stairway railings. Some passengers get into the spirit by decorating their stateroom doors, making a walk down otherwise ordinary corridors a delight.



KATHERINE ROEGCHER



OCEANIA CRUISES



OCEANIA CRUISES



No Work, All Play Leaving home without spending hours hanging lights and trimming a tree are just a couple of vacation perks at this time of year. A holiday cruise offers all the ambience without the muss and fuss—no poring over holiday recipes, sweating over a stove, clearing the table and laboring over a sink full of dirty dishes.

And no dark winter nights driving home sated from a feast. On New Year's Eve, a designated driver isn't necessary. Captain and crew navigate safely across black seas while revelers count down and the calendar flips.

Balmy Caribbean weather is another benefit, too. Those who live in northern climates happily avoid below-zero windchills to spend mornings sitting in the sun rather than straining their backs shoveling snow. Duty-free shops in Caribbean ports offer a pleasing alternative to crowded malls back in the States. Shore excursions might mean spending a day at the beach, strolling through tropical gardens, snorkeling with stingrays, and touring historical sites and rum distilleries.



KATHERINE RODEGHIER



KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Any guilt about leaving family behind remains at the dock. My fellow passengers gave plenty of reasons for choosing to spend the holidays away from home. Some said their families live too far away or their married children will be with in-laws. Some children of divorced parents were spending the holidays with the other parent. Some passengers' elderly parents had passed, leaving behind memories—they booked the cruise to add new ones.

Holy Services, Festive Parties Oceania's cruises don't overlook the religious aspect of the holidays. Before midnight on Christmas Eve, a nondenominational Christian service brings passengers to the ship's lounge. In place of an ordained minister on my cruise, the cruise director and a few passengers and crew read Bible passages and gave spiritual talks. The ship's band and string quartet provided music, and performers led the singing of *Joy to the World*, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* and other traditional carols during an hour-long service. On Christmas morning, a shorter service was held.

Hanukkah coincided with Christmas on my voyage and was observed in informal services each evening to light candles and sing traditional songs. A menorah took pride of place in the ship's main lobby. This year, Hanukkah falls earlier on the calendar: Dec. 2-10.

Plenty of secular activities keep the festive spirit rolling throughout the cruise. Carols echo around the ship as madrigal singers in Victorian dress stroll the decks. Gingerbread houses 2 feet high stand at the entrance to the ship's Grand Dining Room and specialty restaurants. I was enchanted by scenes reminiscent of Dr. Seuss in an entire gingerbread village in a main

hall corner. The pastry staff spread icing on tiny paths to represent snow and planted meringue mushrooms to stand in for snowmen.

In Martini's Lounge, the pianist leads holiday sing-alongs, and bartenders organize events such as a White Christmas Martini Tasting. Holiday films play in the auditorium and on stateroom flat-screens. I looked forward to the square of Belgian chocolate my cabin steward placed on my bed each evening and was surprised on Christmas Eve by a wrapped gift from Oceania, a lovely glass ornament in a velveteen box.

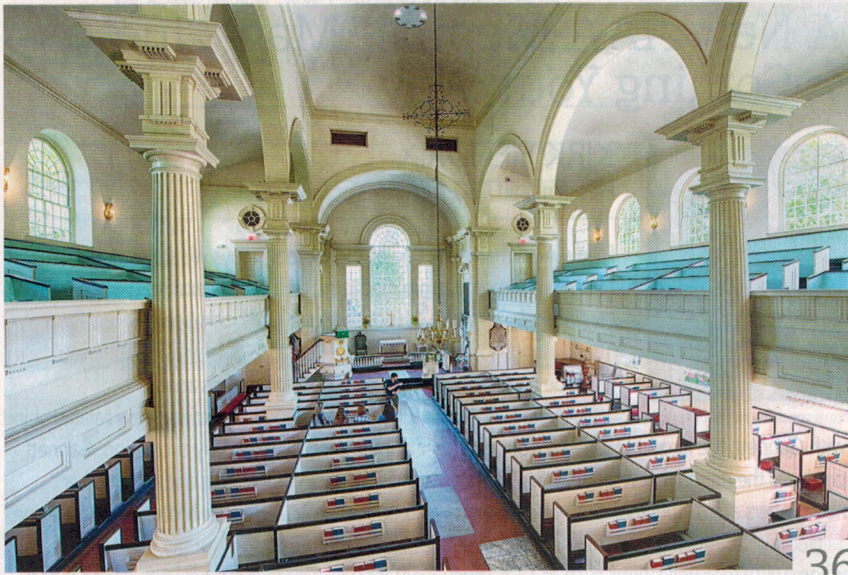
Passengers may put Oceania's country-club casual dress code aside in favor of beaded cocktail dresses and jaunty bow ties on New Year's Eve. Horizon's Lounge, normally the setting for sedate afternoon teas, and Martini's fill with passengers in party hats as the waitstaff circulates with flutes of free champagne. Passengers join in the countdown to the New Year and sing *Auld Lang Syne*.

Old acquaintances aren't forgotten, but new ones often are made aboard a holiday cruise. **H&A**

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance writer from the Chicago area.

Planning Your Trip

For more information, call (855) 623-2642 or visit oceaniacruises.com. Book your trip with a local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel to use member benefits.



36



40

Features

Song of Heavenly Peace 8

By Rich Warren
Austria commemorates *Silent Night's* 200th birthday with celebrations countrywide.

Holly Jolly Holidays at Sea 14

By Katherine Rodeghier
Christmas and New Year's cruising means indulging in truly hassle-free holidays.

Frugal in Florida 20

By Barbara and Jim Twardowski
Pensacola offers an off-season getaway just perfect for the budget-minded.

Museum Magnet 28

By Geri Bain
New York's Central Park features stellar museums that lure art aficionados, history buffs and science nerds.

A Patriotic Christmas Eve 36

By Michelle Newman
Love of country blends with the holiday spirit at Philadelphia's Christ Church.

The Future Looks Bright(line) 40

By Chelle Koster Walton
Florida embraces fast-train travel between its most popular cities.

Departments

President's Message 2

Here & There 6

Travel Store 18

Insurance News 24

Travel News 30

Financial Services 34

Vacation Sweepstakes 38

Readers Free Information 43

Home & Away Farewell 44



24



30

About the Cover

Oberndorf, Austria's, Silent Night Chapel personifies its starry night namesake.

EVA TRIFFT/SALZBURGERLAND TOURISMUS