

## **Two Redheads & A Blonde Tour - Part Two**

*by Dave VanAken*

The last cruise was perfect, but maybe we should have been forewarned, as we left on the Ides of March. All kidding aside, this cruise scored an 8 to 8.5. We just had a few minor bumps in the road.

We left Richmond very early (probably a bit too early for a couple in our troupe). The flight left on time, but we experienced our first bump in the air somewhere around Charlotte, North Carolina. The Captain came on the speakers and warned us about the ground fog in Charlotte. We could possibly be diverted to Greensboro, and we wondered about the flights to San Juan from there. Not to worry, it was early in the morning; the ship did not leave until 10:00 that night, so plenty of time to make the sailing.

We did land in Charlotte and scooted to the next gate. We rented travel scooters in Richmond to use on the ship and in the five (5) ports we were scheduled to see. The plane left on time and we were that much closer to blue skies, warm breezes and blue seas. We stumbled a bit in San Juan airport. After the ground crew delivered our two scooters to the gate area, we discovered one of them had issues and would not run. I worked feverously trying to get it working in the middle of the departure gate area with hundreds of people watching and some trying to be helpful. Frustrated, I eventually gave up and dragged it to the baggage and transportation area.

I let the baggage handlers at the ship terminal cart the dead scooter to our room. I figured I could call on the legendary maintenance teams on the ships. But gone are the days when the industrious ship maintenance team would swarm over your assistive device, take it apart and repair it. One of the maintenance guys did come up to our cabin, and he assisted me in trying to repair the scooter. Alas, it was not meant to be. So, rather than the burial at sea the dang thing deserved, we parked it on the balcony for the week. A couple of days later, we eventually got a manual wheelchair from the ship, which we used on board and in port for the remainder of the cruise.

We were scheduled to visit St. Thomas, St. Martin, Antigua, St. Lucia, and Barbados. Five islands in as many days might be a bit much for able bodied travelers. The ladies decided to skip St. Martin, but shop in St Thomas. St. Thomas is the most accessible island. We didn't have any problem getting around in town; cutouts and ramps were prevalent. However, some shops in the downtown area were not what we would consider accessible. The thresholds were about 3-4 inches high, which did restrict wandering into the shops for those on wheels. Interestingly, the shops at the cruise ship piers were accessible and the deals were almost identical to those downtown. So the ladies got their shopping therapy session completed.

There are many cruise land excursions to choose from. However, St. Thomas has the only truly accessible tour. A handicap bus, which accommodates your scooter or power chair, tours you around this beautiful island. Other island tours may indicate they are accessible, but none would carry or stow an electric scooter. We used the manual wheelchair from the ship on Antigua and

St. Lucia, folding it and carry it on the bus. Our tour companions were generally very accommodating on this. The steps into the bus can be steep and the guides are willing to offer a helping hand or a boost up. It is best to ask questions before booking. We found the tour information on-line and in brochures was not informative enough to make a decision. We requested additional accessibility information from the cruise line and received some more information, but nothing beats the experience of a knowledgeable cruise staff.

So, what did we learn from this Caribbean adventure?

1. A good plan can be trashed within minutes of executing it. But, it is good to have a plan; otherwise you can become a frenzied and crazed traveler.
2. Do not, repeat **do not**, book your relaxing cruise during Spring Break. We had 400 children with us on the cruise (20% of the passengers). We "enjoyed" stopping at each floor on our elevator rides and dodging running children in the eating areas.
3. A little alcohol goes a long way with Polios (and others). Watch your intake if you are experiencing turbulent seas. However, a three-point head stance can help you get into your room.
4. On some of the new ships, the doors to your (accessible) room may be automatic. Insert your card key and the door opens, sometimes. Do not get in its way as it closes, for it is heavy and can leave a mark (if it doesn't knock you aside). If you are sharing a room, be sure to knock before barging in, as the door does stay open for about 20 seconds.
5. Be patient with the cruise staff. They are here to help you, but may not fully understand you or your needs. Keep trying and one of them will finally get it.
6. Order as many desserts as you want. It is all inclusive; same goes for lobster, steaks or any portion of the meal.
7. We should attach some form of instructions on how to maneuver your scooter or power chair. Airline folks do not understand how they work and left to their own devices will make up instructions that will truly amaze you and hopefully not break your ride. I'm thinking of a brightly colored holder with bold large type indicating how best to handle your equipment. Even then, it may be ignored.

One final learning - Travel with people who make you laugh and can make you laugh at yourself. The three I traveled with did make me laugh and helped me enjoy my vacation even with the bumps in the road. All I can say is where are we going next time?

*Editor note: As I was one of the Redheads in this article, I have to add: There were many aspects of this Royal Caribbean cruise that were better than the first. Many of our staff were exceptional and a pleasure to work with. We had charming dinner companions (we love having a large table to share with others for dinner). Traveling with a disability isn't easy, takes planning, patience and fortitude, but the joys of creating memories with friends is certainly worth the effort!*

-C. T.R.