

Sailing Away

Celebrating love—and saying farewell—on a straight cruise.

BY GILLIAN KENDALL

My partner's first cruise was our last date, at least for a while, because Nicole, an Australian, had to go back Down Under. Nic's visa had expired, and in March, to celebrate and mourn, we sailed to the Bahamas.

There wasn't an Olivia cruise handy, but we did find an attractive last-minute deal on a Norwegian Cruise Line ship. Although the ship's name—Norwegian Sky—sounded dark and forbidding, we booked a four-night cruise from Miami in the hope of sunny times.

On the last part of our four-hour drive to Miami, our Google Map lead us to an exit that took us careening off the highway and into the Everglades. Trying to renegotiate the route, I made more wrong turns, which soon had Nic shrieking, "Ignore the bloody directions! We're going to miss our ship!" and reaching for the steering wheel, while I drove determinedly the way the map said, trying to wrest the printout from her hands. Not a great start.

I kept my temper, though, and after Nic calmed down, we sheepishly made our way through Miami's tawdriest streets to the cheapo parking Nic had found online: \$12 a day instead of \$20 at the port. Despite

our contretemps, I thanked Nic for saving us the bucks. I wondered if every moment of the journey was going to seem like a comment on our partnership.

We checked in and walked up the gangway, our wheelie bags tip-tapping over the struts. Our stateroom was lovely, colorful and cozy, with faux Georgia O'Keefes on the bulkhead. The porthole let in blue sky and light, and we got a fruit basket from the captain and a card congratulating us on the special event we were celebrating. Everything was addressed to Mrs. Kendall and Mrs. Phillips, so apparently no one had paid attention to the fact that the special event was our 13th anniversary—the anniversary of our civil union, Mr. Cruise Director! Still, we enjoyed the grapes and looked forward to dining with the captain.

Before leaving the port we had a safety drill, signaled by a series of long, low blasts on an impressive horn. We had to go to our lifeboat station, which, promisingly, was L as in lesbian. As we were tracking down the right deck, Nic's face looked tight, and I knew she was nervous. She hadn't yet learned the 11-deck ship's layout, and she doesn't like not knowing where she is. To

reassure her, I took her hand, but after a quick squeeze she dropped mine, probably because she felt self-conscious in front of all the straight people.

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100 should have been women. So, we wondered, where were the lesbians? And then we realized—duh, they're on Olivia!

That evening, Nic and I explored the outer decks, working our way up to the top level by the pools. There, on the platform



by the hot tubs, several Spring Break girls were dancing, showing off their tans/figures/new bathing suits/loud laughter for the boys lounging like hippos in the water. It was a sexy show, and I wanted to watch, but Nic plodded off. "Some of them could be dykes," I said, but I didn't even convince myself, and Nic just snorted. Marching along to the basketball court, Nic said that those girls needed a good feed. I followed silently, glad that she prefers curvier women.

Our first port of call was Freeport, on a slightly rainy day. We escaped from the shops, shopping, and shoppers, and got a lift to Lucayan National Park, 25 miles from Freeport, on the south shoreline. The only tourists and almost the only visitors in the park, we crossed through the swampy, bird-filled mangroves on wooden walkways. Then we climbed some steps over a sand dune and suddenly saw a magnificent half-moon beach. The high-tide mark was lined with white-gray tree stumps with long curling roots, and the water was that sexy translucent turquoise, lightened by the white sand underneath.

We ditched our stuff and stepped into the water, which was just slightly cool.

Waist deep for a hundred yards out, the water seemed extra salty and extraordinarily clear, ideal for swimming. On my back, I kicked up a fountain of white water, exulting. We made it! After all the expense and hassle, the cruise was everything I'd hoped for: We were free, together and happy in a beautiful spot.

That evening, we attended the "LGBT gathering" listed on the Plan of the Day, but the gathering turned out to be just Nic and me. No one else in the room looked even faintly queer. It's great that Norwegian makes the space and time available, but too bad that there weren't enough LGBTs to make it happen.

On our dress-up night, we went to the captain's private reception in a beautiful, dark-wood bar. The first ones to enter the room, we saw a long reception line of officers in white, waiting to greet us, and at the head of the line a tall man rising from a bow. It was Captain Fredriksson, welcoming us to his ship. Sixty-something, Swedish, with quicksilver hair and a confident jaw, he was old-world handsome. In response to his bow, I for the first time in my life got to curtsy, and he greeted us with warm handshakes.

It was clear that the captain a) knew we were a couple and b) wished us to feel welcome. At dinner, we were seated at his central table, with just six other people. The arrangement was the traditional male/female/male all the way around the table, until it came to us: To my delight, Nic was seated next to the captain, a great honor on any ship, let alone one with 2,000 passengers. It turns out, the captain loves Australia and loves telling stories. He made sure that we had a perfect meal and an entertaining evening.

Another night, when we were dining at the Italian restaurant, the maitre d' saw us coming and said, "Are you Gillian and Nicole?" After our meal, he brought us a happy-anniversary cake complete with candle. Our server, Kenroy, took our hands and joined them, while the servers sang "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" in clear, lovely voices, singing as if they meant it. I joined in, and Nic laughed with embarrassment and pleasure as she was serenaded. For the first time in my life I was singing a love song to my partner with a chorus of backup singers. What better way could there be to say goodbye—and make sure she comes back? ●