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TRAVEL

A fantasy cruise far, far away

Disney offers an experience that will take guests further than any human has ever gone before. **Amber Nasrulla** boards their fantasy ship to stand toe to toe with Stormtroopers in another galaxy



Stormtroopers patrol near Mickey Mouse-shaped pools as activities and games keep guests fully immersed in the Star Wars theme.

AMBER NASRULLA

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
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0 Comments

I am going to let you in on a secret. Darth Vader is not a badass. I know this because I asked the dark lord to strangle me using the Force. Instead, he vigorously waved his hands and said, "No!" Then he stepped away as if I had scared him. All 5-foot-1 of me. I have witnesses.

Okay, so it wasn't a fight-to-the-death with a lightsaber situation, he wasn't the bona fide Darth Vader, and ... well, I was in a nightclub on the Disney Fantasy ship waiting in line for a professional family photo with Vader. Still. No harm in putting me in a fake death grip for a memento, right?

It all went down recently on an unusual family trip aboard the Disney Star Wars Day at Sea cruise from Port Canaveral through the Caribbean.

Darth Vader's presence and the cruise itself is a dream for diehard fans like me and my nine-year-old son, but at first glance, not an obvious draw for folks like my mom and dad. These Pakistani-Canadian retirees worked non-stop for 45 years and are only now beginning to get a taste of the phenomenon of the space fantasy series.

Then there's the issue of aquaphobia. My sweet mummy can't swim and turns avocado green from nausea if she finds herself on the Toronto ferry. A landlubber of the highest order, she is an ocean cruise virgin. It was the first cruise for Dad, too, but he set swim records; at Punjab University and in competition at the Dhaka National Swimming Championships. Now 76, his backstroke and butterfly remain strong – as does his dislike of crowds.

They really are the most adorable pair to travel with. Both regard holidays as an indulgence. So why torture them? Because I love them. Yes, the Disney Fantasy was the most unlikely of places for a multigenerational immigrant family holiday; yet I was surprised and delighted the elders, in particular, end up having fun. With a few blips.

For the uninitiated, one day of the week-long cruise is jam packed with activities, games, and crafts celebrating all things Star Wars; picture a posse of Stormtroopers swarming toddlers in swim diapers around a Mickey Mouse-shaped pool.



Fireworks are the grand finale to the 'Summon the Force' deck party, part of Star Wars Day at Sea.

(Well, not exactly, but wouldn't you love to see moms swarm the First Order?)

Darth Vader, Kylo Ren, Captain Phasma and Boba Fett also work the crowd; and Jedi training is offered on board. Naturally there's trivia, a massive fireworks show and a fan costume contest, for which I donned a Princess Leia hair-bun headband. You'll also find exclusive merchandise such as adorable droid BB-8 smoothie tumblers. (To mix things up there's also a Pirates of the Caribbean night.)

So far, so good – for me and my son. On day two, however, it became apparent that my 69-year-old mother would never ever have sea legs. As we reclined mid-ship on the Lido deck, I was thrilled to spot Cuba's fallen-leaf silhouette on the horizon. Meanwhile, Mom's face had drooped into the ravine of a motion sickness bag. I dashed off to find ginger ale and non-drowsy Dramamine.

When I returned, Mom was talking to Michigan resident Laura Vanluvender. I now regard Laura as a motion sickness angel. "Oh honey," she said, "I've cruised seven times and I'm telling you, I've never seen the seas this rough." She carried a number of transdermal motion-sickness patches. "They work wonders," she whispered as she handed me a patch. "Put it behind your mom's ear." And then Vanluvender slipped into a glass elevator.

Travelling on a ship, even a luxury liner, can be dreadful if the seas are broiling and you become seasick. Or cruising can be magic. Disney Cruise Line strives to create magic of intergalactic proportions. Hence, even a person who feels like a fish out of water will find something that intrigues and surprises.

For my folks, there were several such moments; the first occurred during the theatrical productions. Mom and Dad watched DCL's stage performances of Aladdin, and Disney Wishes. The former is best known as an animated feature film starring Robin Williams voicing the cheeky blue Genie. During the stage show, the ship's Genie danced the Whip Nae Nae and cracked Taylor Swift jokes. The actor playing the magic carpet charmed my parents with his acrobatic skills; he tumbled and somersaulted in spite of the ship's heaving and swaying. All the performers soldiered on and nobody – not even Mom – barfed.

For me, a highlight was (dragging my parents to) the Star Wars 101 class, where they learned how to tell the difference between Chewbacca and other Wookies and we discussed whether or not Lando Calrissian is a good or bad guy. Conclusion: He starts off bad and redeems himself. Dad hadn't seen the Star Wars series so the lecture helped with storylines and characters. After the class we compared the First Order to the Trump administration.



The Star Wars-themed cruise features pyrotechnics, special effects and stunts including appearances by characters such as Chewbacca.

MATT STROSHANE

My parents also talked politics and food with an Indo-Canadian couple, Krishna and Romesh from Edmonton, who were holidaying with their daughter, son-in-law, and grandkids. After spending an afternoon in the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique (a salon where little girls can have makeovers), their granddaughter's hair glittered with multicoloured sparkles and she was resplendent in a seafoam-green Ariel mermaid dress.

Krishna was enjoying the cruise, but she and her husband hankered for spicy food. This was their third cruise and they couldn't help but compare the multiethnic meals they'd enjoyed on Celebrity and Norwegian ships to the DCL cuisine.

My parents nodded sympathetically. There are more than 15 places to eat on the Disney Fantasy, and while they loved the array of desserts, they also pined for a hefty dose of spice.

Midway through the cruise, my parents mentioned this to wait staff, who were sympathetic. They pointed out more savoury items on the menu. Ultimately, with quiet tenacity, they did much more than that.

Cruise lines are increasingly offering pop-culture-themed vacations – Disney just announced a [Marvel Day at Sea cruise from Miami](#), and The Walking Dead cruise, [Walker Stalker](#), left that city for the Bahamas on Feb. 3 – but our experience as first-timers was that cruising is also about culturally aware and diverse staff who notice little things and customize an experience based on passenger preferences.

On-board the Disney Fantasy, assistant cruise director Christine Danet told me 40 nationalities are represented among the 1,500 staff serving the 3,000 people on-board. We met crew from Turkey, Bosnia, and South Asia, primarily India. We had no idea they would accommodate our desire for South Asian cuisine. On our fourth evening, the head server brought us spicy lentils, rice and curried vegetables and, on the final evening we enjoyed chicken biryani. He assured us the meat in the rice dish was halal. He also pampered us by leaving a bowl of chili flakes and chutneys on our table every day.

The comfort extended to our ocean-view stateroom, spacious enough for four. My parents slept in a queen and my son and I took the bunk beds. Nightly, the housekeeper pulled the Murphy-style berth from the ceiling. My son loved the lodgings as well as the Ghirardelli chocolates scattered on the pillows. The Mickey Mouse cartoons that looped 24/7 on TV, such as the “Mumbai Madness” episode, mesmerized him. The famous rodent spoke and sang in Hindi while whipping around India in a rickshaw with an elephant passenger.

We spent our last day at Castaway Cay in the Bahamas. Disney's private island has a crescent-shaped beach with soft sand and endless palm trees. At breakfast we were surprised to bump into Vanluvender. She gave another transdermal

patch to my mom. Her husband, Scott, recommended we snorkel out to the buoys, where we'd discover Mickey figurines underwater.

As they said goodbye, my parents told the Vanluynders what they'd most enjoyed on the cruise: meeting new people. For me, it was hanging out with C-3PO and R2D2 (his bleeps and bloops are so cute). Then I had a cheesy thought: It's a small world after all.

If you go

This year, between January and April, the Star Wars cruise sails 14 times. And, for 2018, Disney Cruise Line recently announced 15 Star Wars sailings.

Prices vary based on week of travel; however, as an example, a Feb. 24, 2016, departure – with an inside stateroom for a family of four – for a seven-night round trip on an Eastern Caribbean cruise from Port Canaveral, with ports of call, Cozumel, Grand Cayman, Falmouth and Castaway Cay, started at: \$6083.72 (U.S.), including taxes, fees and port expenses (Prices subject to change. Visit disneycruise.com.)


What to do

Once your cruise is paid in full, explore the variety of port excursions at disneycruise.com. (They fill up quickly.) If you decide not to seek adventure ashore there's also plenty to do on-board including arts, crafts and movies.

In Mexico, we went on the Cozumel Highlights, Ruins and Discover Mexico Cultural Park tour, visiting a centuries-old pre-Columbian Mayan site. The massive stone structures were built to honour Ixchel, the goddess of fertility. We learned to make spicy chocolate – and ate it – at the Mayan Cacao Company. In Grand Cayman, overcast weather prevented us from visiting the Stingray City Sandbar, renowned for swarms of the giant ravioli-shaped fish; instead we went on an excursion to see dolphins at a rehab institute.

At Disney's Castaway Cay in the Bahamas, my son and I joined a stingray-feeding session. We stood waist-deep in the western Atlantic, 15 feet from shore as dozens of stingrays flapped past. We held our hands flat on a Mickey Mouse-shaped target, holding raw shrimp between our fingers, and the stingrays slurped up their meal with mouths like minivacuum cleaners.

The stateroom and on-board meals for Amber Nasrulla and her family were provided by Disney Parks Canada.

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