

Travel Tales

Islands As Easy as ABC Part 1

by

Lew Toulmin

The ABC islands of the southern Caribbean are often visited by cruise ships, but very few ships visit all three – Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao – in one voyage. When I found out that the *Noordam* of Holland America Line (HAL) was sailing to all three, and also to the remote Turks and Caicos and the Dominican Republic, my wife Susan and I had to go.

The *Noordam* was built in 2006 at the Fincantieri shipyard near Venice, Italy at a cost of \$400 million. She is 935 feet long, 106 feet wide (just able to fit into the current Panama Canal locks), draws 26 feet, carries 1848 passengers and 800 crew, has a gross tonnage of 81,769, and a maximum speed of 24 knots. She has a bulbous underwater bow to increase her waterline length and thus her speed by about fifteen percent. Instead of old-style fixed propellers, she has two modern “azipods” which can rotate 360 degrees and increase engine efficiency by about six percent. These also improve maneuverability dramatically. The azipods and the large, 7500 horsepower bow thrusters mean that the ship rarely needs help from tugs. All in all, this is a very efficient and “green” design.



The Noordam at Grand Turk island, off the beach where Columbus likely landed.

The *Noordam* and her Captain Hans Mateboer are well known in nautical circles for spotting and rescuing 22 ship-wrecked Somali refugees who were drifting in life jackets off Kusadasi, Turkey in 2006, after their tiny, overloaded motorboat sank. The ship and crew were commended by her passengers (some of whom assisted in the rescue by

spotting victims in the water), and were officially thanked by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for the valiant and very competent action.

We boarded the famous ship in Ft. Lauderdale and inspected the public spaces. We were immediately struck by the attractive décor, dramatic chandelier in the main atrium, and excellent sight lines in the large Vista Lounge theater. Later we went on a backstage tour of the Vista Lounge, and were impressed with the professional setup of the theater, with very complex lighting, effects, and a stage that has nine parts that can be rapidly lowered or raised.

Next we went to our cabin, number 6162, which I had been a bit worried about. It was located right at the stern, overlooking the wake. I was afraid that we would feel some engine vibration or some pitching motion, and I usually advise getting a cabin near the middle of the ship to avoid these problems. But as we pulled away from Ft. Lauderdale in the sunset, we felt virtually no vibration, even at maximum revolutions. And later in the voyage, when we encountered twenty-foot seas for a day, we felt very little pitching or rolling. Modern ship stabilizers are a true wonder.



The author's cabin aboard Noordam.

Our 10x20 foot cabin had a king-sized bed, three small closets, safe, small refrigerator, desk, flat screen TV, sitting area, en-suite bathroom with tub and shower, excellent view out the large glass double doors, and a substantial balcony. The walls were covered with an attractive golden cloth, and the lighting was well designed for relaxing in the cabin or reading in bed.

Our fellow passengers were a pleasant mixture of Americans (about 60%), Canadians (26%), Dutch (8%) and other Europeans drawn by the unusual itinerary. There were a few children aboard, and these were kept quietly amused in the special children's play area and teenagers' lounge. This was a rare and delightful instance of children being not seen and not heard!

At every opportunity on board, we took the excellent computer classes offered by John Roberts of MicroSoft in the Digital Workshop training room. John offers free and informative classes in computer security, Windows 7, camera basics, buying a computer, introduction to “the cloud,” file sharing, social networking, and photo editing. We took every one of the 45 minute classes, thus getting for free training what would have cost more than \$1000 each ashore. Every HAL ship is now equipped with a Digital Workshop, a terrific resource. Be sure to come early, every session is packed.



John Roberts offers an excellent “Digital Workshop” on board.

Other offerings on board included swimming in the two pools, tai chi, dance classes, health assessments, bicycle spinning, full spa services, acupuncture, cooking demonstrations with master chef Thomas Schumann, champagne and wine tastings, bingo, casino gambling, Broadway-style shows (including the fabulous Polish violinist Michael Bakala), lectures on the history of rum in the Caribbean immediately followed by a meeting of “The Friends of Bill W.,” etc., etc. Plenty to do!

The Vista Dining Room aft was attractive and had excellent food. Typical dishes included a terrific salad of arugula and frisée with pistachios and pine nuts, a mille-feuille of forest mushrooms (rated by my very knowledgeable wife as an A+), and a brioche toast with caramelized apricots and vanilla bean ice cream. This latter dish sounds odd but was developed by Michelin-starred chef Johnnie Boer in Holland, and it was very tasty.

Our drink of choice is soft drinks, and these were a bit expensive on board, at \$2.15 each plus tax. But you can buy a \$25 card which gets you \$50 worth of soft drinks, thus making the unit cost much more reasonable. Other similar value cards for wine and spirits are available, and all cards allow a refund of unused funds.

One night per cruise the *Noordam* puts on a special treat: it re-creates at sea the remarkable New York restaurant Le Cirque. The modest extra cost of \$39 per person is well worth it, because eating at the real NYC restaurant, a favorite of Jackie Kennedy,

kings and presidents, could easily set you back hundreds of dollars. The restaurant was founded and is still run by the legendary Sirio Maccioni, who began his career working as a waiter on the cruise liner S.S. *Atlantic*. So it was appropriate that as a capstone of his career, he designed and installed a seagoing version of his restaurant in all the HAL ships.

According to Fabien Weichert, who worked extensively on HAL's rollout of the Le Cirque on *Noordam* and the rest of the fleet, "The concept is taken very seriously by Sirio and all the HAL staff. A number of the HAL chefs studied at Le Cirque in New York, learning the ingredients, the recipes and exactly how each recipe was made. The food preparation focuses on classic taste, not on molecular science and extreme presentations. Sirio himself and other Le Cirque staff visit the ships regularly to check on quality control."



Ice carving is an art on board Noordam.

Passengers praised the "wonderful" Chateaubriand steak, which can be prepared for one or two persons. And we enjoyed the very smooth and flavorful butternut soup, tasty rack of lamb and goat cheese panisse, and excellent chocolate soufflé.

Next month I will describe the islands we visited on this unique cruise.

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