

Travel Tales

by

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Caribbean Cruise Line: Cruise Line or Hassle Line?

There is a famous saying that you “shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” meaning you shouldn’t check the free horse’s age and condition by looking at its teeth.

When it comes to cruising, however, that isn’t always true.

Consider the case of Caribbean Cruise Line, which offers free or low-cost two-day cruises from Florida to the Bahamas on the ex-Baltic ferry *Bahamas Celebration*. (By the way, this cruise line is *not* connected with the well-known Royal Caribbean International.) Marylanders visiting Florida might be tempted by offers from this line.

These offers come to potential passengers via phone solicitations, mobile phone texts and mass mailings across the US and Canada. The offers usually promise a “free two-night cruise for two” from Palm Beach to Grand Bahama Island, with a great time for first-time and budget cruise travelers.

But “free” doesn’t really mean “free.” And a great time isn’t always that great.

First, there are other certain or potential charges: \$59 per person for government taxes and fees (nonrefundable), a \$25-per-person administration fee, a reported gratuity fee of \$10 per person per day, \$25 per bag for excess or overweight luggage, a parking fee and (my favorite) a \$12-per-person-per-day fee for fuel oil, if the cost of a “light sweet” barrel of crude oil exceeds \$40. According

to www.oilenergy.com, the last time the price of oil was that low was in 2004 — 10 years ago!

Second, the Better Business Bureau (BBB) has given Caribbean Cruise Line (CCL) an “F” grade, on a scale of A+ to F, citing six reasons including “business has failed to resolve underlying causes of a pattern of complaints” and “1418 complaints filed against the company.”

The BBB complaints for CCL cover 267 pages! Typical complaints include a respondent on 6 February 2014 who stated, “I have been receiving calls in the middle of the night for months” from the cruise line and “they refuse to stop.”

Another respondent said on 23 December 2013 that she paid for the extended-stay package upgrade but was unable to go. The line initially refused to give back the money but eventually gave back only a portion, which did not satisfy the customer. Complaints on the BBB site and at Yelp.com also indicate that phone solicitors may try to “upsell” customers to higher-price cabins without revealing the full facts or new price.

To be fair to the company, it does seem to clear BBB complaints, often giving back some or all of the funds involved after the respondent files a formal BBB complaint.

Third, there is the schedule. According to the website www.bahamascelebration.com, the ship departs every other day from Palm Beach, sailing at 6 p.m., arriving at 8 a.m. in the Bahamas “for a full day of fun activities” and then departing that same day at 6 p.m. for arrival back in Palm Beach at 7 a.m. the next day. In other words, you will be asleep most of the time during your “two-day cruise,” unless you are a night owl and stay up all night.

The ship holds 1,250 passengers in 502 cabins, many of which are rather small inside cabins. This is typical of a vessel built in 1981, quite old for a cruise ship.



A bow view of the Bahamas Celebration.

Fourth, there is the question of ownership. Although Caribbean Cruise Line of 2419 East Commercial Blvd., Ft. Lauderdale, FL, states on its website (www.caribbeancl.com) that their "flagship" is the *Bahamas Celebration*, in fact the vessel is owned by a different entity, namely Celebration Cruise Operator (www.bahamascelebration.com), according to clause 36 of the eight page cruise contract and ticket, a copy of which I obtained and analyzed.

Why does this matter? Because most of the consumer complaints are directed at Caribbean Cruise Line, which solicits the potential passengers. The Celebration entity apparently claims that the two companies (Celebration and Caribbean) are completely separate and that the Caribbean entity is a "wholesaler" which has nothing to do with the ship operator.

If that is true, isn't it interesting that the Celebration entity just happens to be located at the same street address as the Caribbean company. Hmmm. . . .

Fifth, there is the timeshare connection. On www.yelp.com, the complainant "spoo k" of Emeryville, California, gave the line "negative stars" and stated that she was pestered by unwanted calls three or four times per day for a month. The solicitors were trying to get her to pay for the "free" cruise, which actually had charges totaling \$977, and were attempting to get her credit card number. This, even though the respondent told the solicitors that she had little money and could not afford the cruise and that she "had had cancer and had lots of medical bills" to pay.

So why would phone solicitors pester people, even sick, poor people, in order to give away a free product? Because, according to an anonymous BBB complainant on 7 December 2013, complainant “Kaaren D” on Yelp, and other sources, the entire enterprise is really about pushing timeshare presentations. The BBB complainant stated that “the original solicitation” said “nothing about a timeshare” but that later a timeshare tour and presentation were insisted upon as a condition of getting the “free” cruise. Kaaren D stated that the timeshare presentation was promised to be 60 to 90 minutes but in reality was four hours long, plus about an hour of travel time away from the port.

Still keen to go? You may wish to carefully read the 8-page, small-type “cruise ticket contract,” which states clearly that it is a contract between the cruise line and the passenger and that it “supersedes all ... representations ... contained in carrier’s advertisements... [or] brochures...”

This contract (clause 4) provides “no undertaking or warranty” of the “seaworthiness of the vessel.”

Also under this clause, “all arrangements made” for the passengers for “shoreside excursions, transportation or activities” are at the “passenger’s risk... even if the Carrier” is “entitled to charge a fee and earn a profit” on such services. Thus, apparently, the Celebration entity can earn a fee on extensions and excursions sold by the Caribbean entity, but Celebration is not liable if the activity is canceled or goes wrong.



Bahamas Celebration – *cool or crummy?*

And all medical personnel on board are “independent contractors,” and the Carrier is not liable for their errors or any malpractice.

On Yelp.com, Gregory W. of New York City was very negative about the cruise line. He stated, “I was called, even though my number is on the ‘do not call’ lists... they wanted my credit card [number] so they could charge me for the port charges.” Gregory told the supervisory phone solicitor that the cruise line had a poor rating by the Better Business Bureau, and “The supervisor immediately hung up on me.”

If you don’t want to hang up on this cruise line, and still want to go, the number for Caribbean Cruise Line is 800/221-8200 and the number for Celebration Cruise Line is 800/314-7735. Good luck!

Lew Toulmin has sailed on cruise ships and tall ships on every ocean. He lives in Silver Spring, Fairhope, Alabama, and Port Vila, Vanuatu.

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