



I'M THE KING OF THE CRUISE!

How one writer learned to stop worrying and love his seafaring butler

BY NICHOLAS HUNE-BROWN

My butler Karthik has seen me in my underwear. He's seen me slightly tipsy and brain-throbbingly hungover. He's seen me draped in the cruise line's plush waffled bathrobe first thing in the morning and then again late at night, guiltily answering the door to accept a "Guacamole Tumbler" just hours after gorging myself in the ship's restaurant.

He is, to be accurate, no longer my butler, but for 10 days aboard Silversea's Silver Spirit, as we sailed from Barbados to Fort Lauderdale with a half-dozen Caribbean ports in between, Karthik witnessed exactly what can happen when two self-conscious people unused to pampering are set adrift — at sea with near infinite luxuries.

Assigning a personal butler to every Silversea passenger is one of the latest innovations in the luxury cruise business — butlers are shared between a handful of passengers, and their job is to manage your voyage, booking tables for you at the various onboard restaurants, taking care of your laundry, bringing you room service.

Above all, they are there to use their powers of observation and intuition to anticipate any possible need you might have on your voyage.

My girlfriend Lorna and I meet ours on the first day of our cruise. After boarding the ship in Bridgetown, Barbados, and inspecting our 11th-deck suite, a marvel of comfort, the buzzer sounded and Karthik appeared — a clean-cut, Sri-Lankan-born 30-year-old who politely batted away our attempts at small talk.

"Can I unpack your luggage for you Mr. Brown?" he asked.

The question caught us off guard. We're not aristocrats. Or Batman. We're young Canadians who had somehow found ourselves on a press trip on one of the world's most luxurious cruise lines. The idea of this courteous stranger sorting through our grubby possessions — delicately hanging up my worn-out T-shirts — seemed absurd. Embarrassing, even.

"That's fine, I think we'll be all right," I said brightly.

Karthik's face fell.

Lorna and I looked at one another. Had we insulted his professional pride? Maybe unpacking our own belongings was impinging on his territory, like charging into a restaurant kitchen and cheerfully telling the chef not to trouble himself with the ol' steak, we'll just grill the sucker ourselves.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked anxiously. We looked around the room, scanning for possibilities. A bottle of Cham-



ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE MURRAY

pagne sat chilling on ice. The mini-fridge was stocked. We were on an all-inclusive cruise floating in the warmth of the Caribbean Sea. What could we possibly need?

There was an awkward silence. "Maybe some more water?" Lorna said uncertainly.

"Absolutely," Karthik said, looking relieved. "And please phone me if you need anything else."

For the rest of the afternoon we explored the Silver Spirit, a 642-foot ark of blindingly white surfaces and smooth, rounded edges. With

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It was incredible, but we couldn't help feeling a little awkward about the whole thing. The social anx-

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room for 540 passengers and almost as many crew members, the ship is the newest and largest vessel in the Silver Seas fleet. It has an art deco theatre, a small pool, a spa, a casino, and five bars and lounges. Its six restaurants serve delicious, extravagant dishes that always seem to include at least a little foie gras, as if just to show off.

We spent the next day off the coast of Grenada, snorkelling in a submerged sculpture garden and sipping rum punch on the deck of a sailboat as we shuttled along the coast.

Back in our room, sun-soaked and tipsy, we found that Karthik and his invisible team of housekeepers and stewards had anticipated our

ities of shore life had followed us on-board. I couldn't shake the thought that Karthik was somehow disappointed in us. Had he really trained at the prestigious Guild of Professional English Butlers, where the servants of the British Royal Family learn their trade, just to be assigned to a pair of schlubby young Canadians?

According to *The Remains of the Day*, my only source for butler psychology prior to our trip, a butler's prestige is only equal to the people he serves. There were judges on-board, wealthy surgeons, too, and Karthik was stuck with us. It was obvious: We were bringing him down.

But everything changed on Formal

Among the village people

Allure of the Seas is a city unto itself

BY LYNN CUNNINGHAM

My first impression as I board Royal Caribbean's Allure of the Seas, this season's winner of the world's biggest cruise ship contest, is that I have been teleported to the West Edmonton Mall. The deck is called the Royal Promenade, and over there is the Guess store, while across the way is the high-end jewellery shop. Toward the bow end is the Starbucks — the first at sea, as the staff is eager to relate. And at the opposite end, the Rising Tide Bar, which, in the best WEM tradition, ascends and falls pneumatically between decks five and eight.

This engineering marvel glides through Deck 6, a.k.a. the Boardwalk (convincing old-style carousel, ice-cream parlour, Johnny Rockets diner), fetching up in Central Park (many plants, annoying faux bird-song, tonyish restos). The trip provides enough time to feel sorry for the passengers occupying the "inside balcony" rooms that overlook the "park" — lodging for those who take a cruise but don't get to view the sea from their rooms, just other hapless inside balconyers and the habitat of the recorded birds.

Happily, as a member of the small press contingent on this two-day mini-cruise, I am assigned an outside balcony billet on Deck 14, two levels down from the top and high enough up that the only real indication of rough seas is an almost imperceptible shudder. The room itself seems designed to discourage hanging out — it is attractive and has truly comfy beds, but two people moving around simultaneously requires some advanced logistics.

Clearly, the notion is that you get out and doing, and there are plenty of choices: evenings there are shows of the stage, stand-up comedy, ice and aqua varieties. During the day, choices included a rock climbing wall; four pools, each a little larger than a beach towel, although I can attest the so-called sports pool is big enough for a bitty aquafit class; a sports court for basketball and the like; and, of course, dance lessons, without which no southern vacation would be complete.

There's also a gym, which contains almost 160 of the latest heave-and-ho machines, plus perhaps the best view of any such establishment due to the all-glass, bow-facing exterior wall. If you need structure, there are daily classes; if you need maintenance, there's a spa.

Had my jaunt been much longer, I would have found the gym a necessity given the Allure's adherence to the cruise-ship tradition of almost non-stop eating opportunities. The ship resembles a particularly eclectic and often upscale food court. There are 26 restaurants, from the mallish pizza and hot dog joints to the main dining room, the multi-level Adagio, which seats more than 3,000, as well as the much-smaller specialty rooms (with special surcharge), including Izumi, Giovanni's Table and Samba Grill — a "Brazilian" spot strictly for carnivores, since dinner largely consists of more than half a dozen barbecued meats, from chorizos to filet, presented rather menacingly on implements that look like rapiers.

The wielders of these meat swords are a fraction of the 2,000-plus staff, half of whom are on food/beverage detail. As a whole, the crew is almost aggressively cheerful — I suspected that no guest is to be passed without at least a "Hello," but this is still a nice big-mallish/small-townish touch. And the ship's total population of 8,000 qualifies it for small-town status, albeit one with a fairly narrow target demographic: 30 to 50, plus children, is the norm. (The trip I was on, being pre-official maiden voyage, skewed heavily to middle-aged travel agents.)

Unlike this trip, which simply looper out from and back to the winter berth in Fort Lauderdale, regular Allure sailings visit St. Thomas, St. Maarten and the Bahamas, or Mexico and Labadee, in Haiti-but-not-Haiti. But really where you'll be, as the Royal Caribbean slogan has it, is the Land of Why Not?

Weekend Post

VACATION DEALS

AIRFARE OF THE WEEK \$668^{USD}
Los Angeles → New Zealand

THAILAND GETAWAY
9 days \$1225**
Return air on United Airlines from Vancouver, 7 nights accommodation 4 Star Phuket Resort for the price of 5 and daily breakfast.
Trip Code: 73282

MOROCCO
9 days \$1818^
Return air on Air Canada from Toronto, 7 nights First Class accommodation, sightseeing with local guides, most meals, entrance fees and transportation.
Trip Code: 59231

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* Travel 1 May - 8 Jun '11, book by 1 Mar '11. Taxes additional \$350. ** Travel 16 Apr - 24 May '11, book by 24 May '11. Add \$316 tax. ^ Price based on 20 Aug '11 departure. Add \$383 tax.

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