



It is often said that taking a child to Disneyland for the first time and experiencing the Magic Kingdom through their eyes is the best way to see it.

After being on more than 80 cruises, I am convinced that taking over 100 people on their first cruise is also the best way to experience the joy of cruising! Especially when the majority of those people are dealing with various levels of amputation. I just returned from a five night cruise onboard Royal Caribbean's Liberty of The Seas which was announced through the Amputee Coalition (www.amputee-coalition.org) in June, 2011 and was worked on for 18 months. The result was 112 participants including 67 amputees setting sail from Port Everglades on December 3, 2012. During the 18 months of planning, we endured many cancellations due to illness, surgeries and, unfortunately, three deaths but we prevailed and came onboard with excitement and the anticipation of meeting people we had friended on Facebook and met at previous Amputee Coalition National Conferences as well as looking forward to meeting new people. We were not disappointed! We belong to a very special club and, once a member, we

promise to accept each other the way we are and offer ourselves to each other with empathy and understanding. We do not pass judgment, just compassion for each person's very special and unique situation. Our group included people in their 20's through their 80's and varied in use of mobility aids and types of prosthetics. However, the common thread that prevailed through our group was the smiling faces you saw everywhere you went and the sheer joy of being in each other's company. We delighted in the comments and questions from the other passengers onboard and welcomed their inquisitiveness. We all encourage this so that we can educate the public and help them to better understand that we are merely dealing with an inconvenience and are not looking for sympathy.

I was personally surprised by how many recent amputees participated, those that had surgery within the last two years. This exhibits amazing courage and tenacity to accept one's situation and get on with life. Two people who particularly come to mind in this category are both young men in their 20's. One lost both hands in a fire and was totally awesome on the Flow Rider! He commented that if he could have one of those in his backyard, his life would be complete! The other young man lost both legs and an arm and is still enduring a lot of pain and discomfort. Both are real "charmings" and were an honor to meet.

We had participants in our group use the "lift" to get in and out of the pool, try rock climbing and mini-golf as well as several who did very well on the Flow Rider. Many did the Zip Line over the ocean in Labadee which proved to be a definite highlight of the trip for them. The confidence they gained from one another in all of these activities gave them the opportunity to try new experiences they may have otherwise not done.

The wonderful time that everyone had is evidenced in the fact that many have already expressed a strong interest in the next cruise! Most even remark that they don't care where the ship is going as long as they get to cruise with the same group!

I have specialized in travel for people with special needs for more than twenty years but this experience was certainly a highlight of my career. It was truly a "Labor of Love" and I enjoyed speaking to each and every person that signed up

for the cruise. I have been an amputee for more than 33 years but I still learned so much from everyone as they shared their stories and experiences with me. I personally want to thank them all for allowing me the opportunity to be part of such an amazing event.



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