

“Do not ask me when we’re going to get there!” bellowed Captain Julian. “This is the Caribbean! We live in la-la land 90 percent of the time! If there’s food and booze, we don’t give a damn!”

A Drinking Ship With a Sailing Problem

Windjammer Barefoot Cruises has long been known for its fun-loving ways. But is the party finally over?

A Windjammer cruise isn’t for control freaks or prudes. You gotta expect a little chaos. That has always been the case—there’s a reason for that NO WHINERS sign above the ship’s bar.

On our cruise, the chaos was consistent. Flights in and out of Grenada were delayed or cancelled and luggage was lost (none of which was Windjammer’s fault), and airport pickups and drop-offs never materialized, causing last-minute scrambles for cabs (which was totally Windjammer’s fault). Once we made it on board, we learned that the itineraries on the company’s website are more like...possibilities. We visited just five of the seven ports of call listed for our St. Vincent and the Grenadines trip—Grenada, St. Vincent, Bequia, Union Island, and Mayreau.

Just go with the flow, mon.

And yet, we had way better flow than Windjammer passengers who sailed a month after we did. In August, passengers booked on three of the line’s ships were stranded in Aruba, Costa Rica, and Panama. Crews reportedly hadn’t been paid for months. (So that’s why our crew nudged us to leave tips in cash.)

Clearly there’s a sea change of *some* kind ahead for Windjammer. The company was started in 1947 by Captain Mike Burke, who says he awoke from a bender to find himself the owner of

the 19-foot boat on which he had passed out. (It was floating in the Bahamas. He’d begun drinking in Miami.) Burke christened it *Hangover*, using a half-empty bottle of Scotch, and soon began leading tours on it. Thus was born an empire. His children ran the company for years, amid stories of sibling squabbles, drug abuse, and accusations of embezzlement.

But as of this writing, a group of investors has agreed to take a controlling interest in the company, perhaps ending the financial turmoil (and reimbursing those stranded passengers for their out-of-pocket expenses). One hopes any new owners can also retain the qualities that make Windjammer an affordable, attitudinal antidote to oversize, homogenous cruise ships.

WHEN WE BOARDED THE SHIP, MY HUSBAND, JONATHAN, and I were ready to party. We hadn’t had a kid-free vacation since our older child was born almost six years ago, and Jonathan had just finished a round of cancer treatment. Bring on the rum!

Like Windjammer’s other three ships, the *Yankee Clipper* is a repurposed, reconditioned old sailing yacht small enough to slip into harbors that the big ships have to skip. Built in Germany in 1927, it was one of the few armor-plated private yachts in >>>

By Marjorie Ingall Photographs by Anna Wolf



Passengers on the Yankee Clipper help the crew hoist the sails

It's a shame that the real world has to intrude on the Windjammer experience—which is all about pretending that there's no more urgent question than what to wear to the costume party

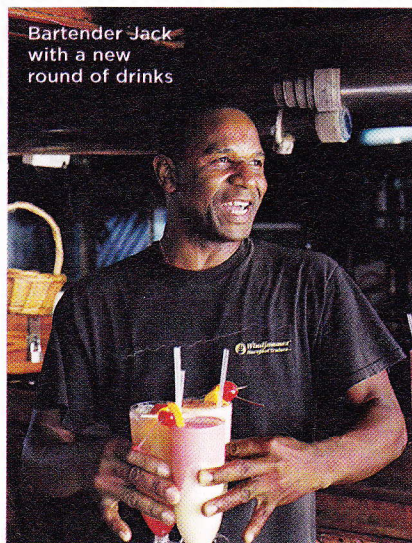
the world, and was later owned by the Vanderbilt family. It's ravishing, a 197-foot, 64-passenger vessel with teak and mahogany finishes, swooping carved railings, and brass accents. Yes, the deck could use refinishing and the masts are showing their age, but those flaws only give the ship character, like a glamorous old-time movie star.

Windjammer's rabid fans agree. More than half the folks on our ship had sailed with the line before: Some were on their 14th Windjammer cruise. Several were starting their second week on the ship. Our 60 fellow passengers were a diverse crew—a cop, a high-school math teacher, a lounge singer, a travel agent, a radiologist, an equity analyst, a biker dude with a giant moustache, a young female soldier who ran a mobile military hospital in Iraq, a retired flight attendant, a farmer. We ranged in age from 16 to 70. There were a couple of families with teenagers. Officially, kids 6 and older are welcome on Windjammer cruises, but I wouldn't recommend the trips for kids younger than 15, unless they were weaned on rum.

Though outnumbered, we newbies quickly picked up the lingo: Veterans are "Jammers," the captain's daily briefing is "storytime," and the rum drinks pounded every afternoon are "Swizzles." (They—as well as early morning Bloody Marys and wine at dinner—are included in the cost of the cruise. To buy other drinks, you use "doubloons," round punch cards you buy for \$20.) Oh, and the *Yankee Clipper* is not a boat. "Can you stand in the middle and pee off the side?" Babu, one of the stewards, sputtered in outrage after I used the b-word. "If you can, it's a boat. If you can't, it's a ship!"

I goofed again later, in front of Captain Julian. He clutched his heart in mock agony and wailed, "Calling my ship a boat is like telling a man that his penis is small!"

PENIS, PENIS, PENIS. THERE WAS SO MUCH BELOW-THE-BELT sniggering that it often felt like we were cruising with the cast of *Superbad*. At the buffet lunch on our first afternoon, the centerpiece was a massive cucumber resting on two apples. At the towel-folding seminar one evening, we learned to make a giant



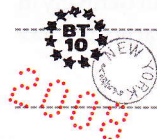
towel penis. (Every day, the crew left adorable towel sculptures on our beds—butterflies, swans, elephants, and monkeys, all with Hershey's Kisses for eyes. There was no Hershey's Kiss in the penis.) And unlike storytime at home, the captain's spiels always ended with an off-color joke.

Windjammer really wants passengers to have fun. In the evenings, there were group activities and contests, such as hermit-crab races, a "sexy scavenger hunt," and a battle of the sexes in which the guys were asked questions about shopping and the girls were quizzed about sports. But it was also perfectly

fine to opt out, read, or just stare at the azure water.

One afternoon, when we spotted a big cruise ship—a "foo foo ship," in Jammer-speak—the regulars started to vibrate with excitement. Crew members raced to the deck with a giant pirate flag and ran it up the mast. The sound system blared "The Ride of the Valkyries." A deckhand affixed a small brass cannon to the ship's railing, then loaded it with gunpowder shells. There was a deafening boom and a huge puff of smoke. "Reload!" yelled Captain Julian. Boom! Boom! Boom! "Give us your women or we'll keep firing!" (Blanks, but still.) Several Jammers leaned over the side and mooned the cruise ship.

The mandatory costume party—"no costume, no dinner"—tested our creativity. The theme was Pirates, Pimps, Prostitutes, Black Tie, Lingerie, Toga. You had to pick one, or dress as something that started with a P, B, L, or T. I wrapped a towel around my head, stuck two Hershey's Kisses on it, and went as a towel sculpture; Jonathan sighed and put on my bra. The well-prepared Jammers really did it up, in elaborate pirate gear. Some of our fellow virgins, though less prepared, came through with shining creativity. A woman whose luggage never materialized during the cruise wore a Windjammer T-shirt she had bought on the ship with a pillow stuffed under it and a piece of paper pinned to her front saying DIDN'T, WOULDN'T, SHOULDN'T. She was a pregnant pirate with contractions. The 20-something Bud-drinking narcotics-squad cop rifled through his wife's lingerie and emerged from his cabin as a Playboy bunny. Whenever the >>>



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The *Clipper* en route to Union Island. Right: nutmeg and mace at a Grenada spice plantation



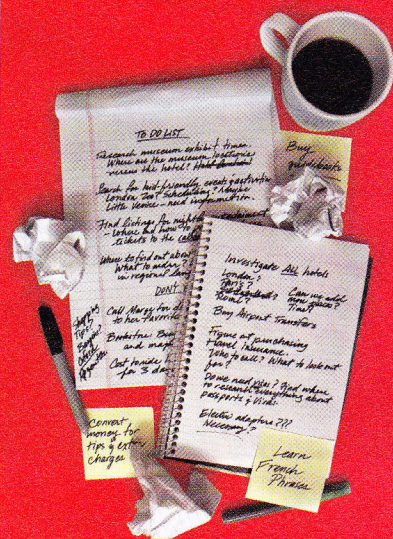
A Windjammer passenger taking a dip right off the ship. Left: The *Clipper* "attacks" a big cruise ship

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tail fell off, he'd carefully and lovingly pin it back on to his rear.

Later that night was the Miss Windjammer Contest, in which two guys compete in drag. One contestant, a med-school student, flitted across the deck in a blond wig, a minidress, pink nail polish, and Hershey's Kisses for nipples. When asked why he should win, he simpered, "Love is one of the many things I spread throughout the islands!"

Sometimes the goofy togetherness got to be a bit much, but we couldn't really retreat to our cabin. It was barely big enough for a bunk, a shower, and a few shelves. It was also a "hot room," as Jammers called it, meaning it was right next to a chimney from the engine room; the

If It Floats Your Boat...

As of press time, Windjammer's future was still pretty uncertain. Keep an eye on BudgetTravel.com for updates—and be sure you read our story on what to do if a travel operator goes belly up (p. 42).

If you book the Grenadines trip, schedule early flights in and out of Grenada, and leave time to connect. (The boat returns to Grenada late Friday night.) Folks on our trip had to pay for charter flights to make the ship or to get home within a reasonable time frame.

Not every Windjammer reservation agent is familiar with the layout of each of the company's ships. Talk to someone who knows the various cabins' quirks.

Standard cabins on our six-night cruise started at \$1,300 per person; we paid \$1,700 each for a small, overheated Admiral Suite. That covered room and board, Bloody Marys in the morning, afternoon Swizzles, a glass of wine at dinner, and launches to and from various beaches. Snorkeling gear was \$25 for the week. The extra tours and excursions ranged from \$28 for the turtle tour to \$85 for a half-day of scuba diving. Jammer regulars paid much less for cabins, having been offered half-price or two-for-one deals through Windjammer e-mail promotions. Be sure to sign up for CyberSailor at windjammer.com before you book: You may be sent a deal soon afterward. (A month after we returned from our cruise, I received a one-day-only sale notification: \$499 per person for any cruise taken in the next two months.)

Windjammer claims that seasickness is "seldom a problem," but this is scant consolation when you're the one bending over the railing. Get a prescription and/or anti-seasickness wristbands before you go. There's a heaping bowl of over-the-counter seasickness pills on the bar, but they made me fall asleep at 7:30 P.M. Then again, when the karaoke started, I really didn't mind.

You'll have to find space for everything in your itty-bitty room, which is even more crowded with two bags of snorkeling gear and a wet beach towel in it. I packed three sundresses and a pair of hiking shoes I never wore. I wish I'd ditched them and packed a thin sheet or a large sarong to sit on at the beach.

bathroom was probably 105 degrees. (Whenever I told a Jammer we were in Cabin 7, he'd start laughing.) Still, the cabin was air-conditioned, and the mattresses were firm and comfortable.

Also on the plus side, the food was good, non-fancy, and plentiful. Jonathan and I fell hard for the addictive, spicy mango- and hot-pepper-based sauces—Kutchela, Calypso, Flambeau, and Hot Chow—available at every meal. And my very first Caribbean mango made me swoon. It was easy to peel, addictive to eat, juicy and complex and floral, and it tasted nothing like the ones at home. Babu, the steward, sweetly kept me a stash of mangoes, presenting them like bouquets throughout the trip.

Not all the camaraderie on board involved Benny Hill-like naughtiness. Whenever we'd set sail, everyone was invited to help hoist the sails while a bagpipe version of "Amazing Grace" played on the ship's speakers. I'm from Rhode Island and grew up watching tall ships in Newport Harbor, but I had never been a passenger on one. I loved the cooperative effort of raising the sail—and the fact that it was the only work I did for a week.

On a Windjammer cruise, the sails are usually augmented with the motor. This may annoy sailing purists, but it did not annoy me, because have I mentioned how I'm all about the not whining? Besides, unless there's a lot of wind, the ship needs the motor to reach the next island. One time, when we did sail with no motor, Captain Julian yelled, "I just saved Windjammer \$500!"

WE GENERALLY "SAILED" AT night and spent days onshore. I sprang for four excursions and loved three. (I could've skipped the Jeep tour of St. Vincent, where our guide actually intoned: "There is a KFC. Over there is a bank. Over there is another bank. There are a lot of banks.")

ESCAPE TO EUROPE!

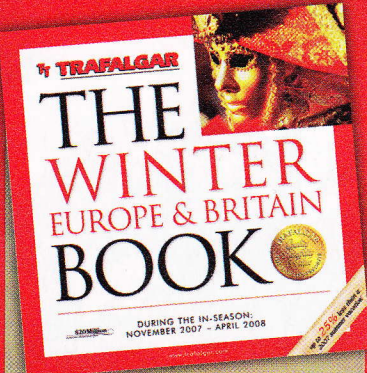
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Happy hour, a.k.a. "Swizzle Time," on board the Yankee Clipper

I loved the cooperative effort of raising the sail—and the fact that it was the only work I did for an entire week

My favorite was the tour of Grenada, which included stops at a postcard-perfect waterfall and at a spice plantation. (Grenada, which produces about 20 percent of the world's nutmeg, is known as the Isle of Spice.) I felt like I got a sense of a real place, where real people lived. The van was swanky; our guide knew what he was talking about; the spice plantation was like something from the 18th century. Cocoa pods lay drying in the sun in giant wooden trays that slid out from under the old stone building like bureau drawers. An elderly woman named Delta showed us how to use nutmeg oil for topical pain relief. We learned that mace is actually the crumbly red skin of the nutmeg seed; that fresh bay leaves smell nothing like their dried cousins; that cinnamon sticks are rolled-up scrolls of tree bark. We peeked into the sweat house where cocoa seeds and pulp are left to ferment; we watched

women silently husking nutmegs and tossing the seeds and skins into hollowed-out calabash shells; and we peered up a wooden ladder into an attic where the nutmegs were stored. The mingled scents of spices stayed with us all the way back to the ship.

I also loved the excursion to Bequia's Old Hegg Turtle Sanctuary, where Orton "Brother" King, a 69-year-old retired fisherman and free diver, raises endangered baby hawksbill turtles. He keeps them for a few years, feeding them canned tuna and sardines, and then releases them into the wild. We got to watch him release his 841st turtle. That's when he discovers what gender his turtles are, he says. The females sniff around for a while so they'll imprint the setting in their tiny turtle brains and come back to spawn. The males make a beeline for the water. We watched, spellbound, as Brother King

gently placed the turtle on the sand. It scurried straight into the surf. (It's a boy!)

And sometimes we just lounged. The beach on Mayreau was dotted with fat-leafed palm trees, thatched huts, pink and purple bougainvillea, and darting butterflies and hummingbirds. Giant starfish sprinkled the soft, sandy ocean floor as if they were in a child's drawing. A short swim away was a small reef with Dr. Seuss-esque, finger-like pillar coral; fan and brain coral; and coral that resembled giant, empty tree stumps. As I snorkeled over the reef, I followed a gliding, otherworldly, black-and-blue batfish. It felt

wonderful to be all alone, in motion, blissfully engulfed in silence.

We found another quiet refuge on Bequia—dinner at a romantic restaurant followed by a long walk along the beach while everyone else was either on the *Clipper* or at a bar on the other side of the cove.

RUMORS ARE STILL SWIRLING ABOUT the future of Windjammer. Will the new investment money materialize? Will the company retain its party-hearty, camping-on-the-high-seas atmosphere? It's a shame that real-world troubles have to intrude on the carefree Windjammer

experience—which is all about pretending that there's no more urgent question than what to wear to the costume party. I've never felt as relaxed as the night a pod of dolphins, seven or eight of them, arced up alongside the ship, playing and leaping in the wake. Jonathan and I held hands and giggled like little kids.

Later, when the Jimmy Buffett CD began playing for the umpteenth time, I caught a passenger rolling her eyes. She grinned at me and said, "If my biggest annoyances right now are too much Jimmy Buffett and getting sunscreen on my sunglasses, life ain't all that bad." ■



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