



MARC MEWSHAW FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The 170-foot-long Regina idles in St. George's Bay on the island of Symi, Greece.

Luxurious Aegean

On a huge, eye-catching sailboat where every sense is freshened

BY MARC MEWSHAW | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BODRUM, Turkey — On a white-hot day in this seaside town, a gaggle of onlookers gathered at the marina, snapping shots with their camera phones. Behind them hulked a 15th-century crusader castle straight out of a medieval dreamscape, and yet they'd trained their cameras on my seven traveling companions and me. It's a heady moment when you realize you've trekked thousands of miles to a tourist destination like Bodrum only to become an attraction yourself.

But who could blame them for gaping? We stood aboard Regina, at 170 feet the largest private charter sailboat in Turkey. With its sweeping, scimitar-like profile, lustrous mahogany woodwork, and towering masts, it's a megayacht born to draw goggle-eyed stares. And while Regina has been turning heads on the Aegean since its maiden voyage in 2011, this fall it dazzled an international audience of millions as the backdrop for a steamy encoun-



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The author's daughter, Grace Wright, 3, at her own afternoon tea on the Crown Princess.

Kid-friendly Caribbean

Cargo of onboard adventures appeals to all ages— with time to go ashore

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

GALVESTON, Texas — When we booked a tropical Caribbean cruise, I envisioned sunny days lounging by the pool, deep tissue massages, turquoise waves splashing on white-sand beaches, and lazy afternoons strolling the decks under the golden light of a low-lying sun.

I did not expect to have a wet monkey wrap its tail around my neck, to go tubing through caves believed to be the underworld by the ancient Maya, or to watch our daughter learn to speak Thai while dining on the Caribbean Sea. But we had it all on Princess Cruises' newest voyage to the Western Caribbean, a seven-day trip that took me, my husband, our 1- and 3-year-olds, and 3,012 other passengers from Galveston to Honduras, Belize, and Mexico, a trip that was full of welcome surprises.

Princess started sailing out of Galveston two months ago for the first time in five years. We boarded right after New Year's.

All for the family, food to fun to ancient ruins

►CARIBBEAN

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We spent our first two days on the Crown Princess relaxing in the pools and hot tubs, catching snippets of movies on a giant outdoor screen, playing miniature golf on the top deck, and finding all the kid-friendly spots to hang out, with occasional stops at the ice cream bar. Most pools on the ship are 5 feet, 1 inch at their shallowest points, so the best place for our beginner swimmers to play was in a wading pool next to the fabulous Princess Kids' Club, a free onboard amenity.

Children 3 to 17 can attend the kids' club day or night on sea or shore days. Parents may bring children under 3 to the youth room as long as they stay with them. Here, infants and toddlers can climb around a padded playhouse, color, play with LEGOs, ride a tricycle around a secure outside play area, or sink into a bean-bag chair and watch a movie.

We had planned to take our daughter, Grace, only a couple of times, but she loved it so much and enjoyed the routine of going to "camp," as she called it, that we took her there daily, for an hour here and there, or for entire afternoons or evenings. Each time, she came "home" with new crafts, like fingerprint art, a crown decorated with feathers and faux jewels, and fanciful drawings that soon brightened our cabin's walls. She even learned about the Caribbean's sea turtles and humpback whales.

Traveling with kids made for a much different experience from our last Princess cruise, a high-thrills Alaskan honeymoon adventure (think heli-hiking, glacier exploration, and flightseeing over Mount McKinley). This time, we made closer connections with other passengers and the staff, who soon formed our new onboard community.

Although we had chosen anytime dining, we sat down at the same corner-window table in the Michelangelo Dining Room at 5:30 p.m. throughout the cruise.

"Sawatdee ka (Hello)," Grace said to our Thai waitress, Nantana Saensrira, when we arrived each night, much to Nantana's delight.

"Sawatdee ka, Miss Grace!" said Saensrira. "Sabai dee mai



If you go . . .

Princess Cruises

800-774-6237

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The 7-day cruises out of Galveston, Texas, **depart weekly** through April 27, with rates starting at \$599 for an inside cabin; three- and four-berth cabins have drop-down beds that come out of the ceiling and make **cool lofts** for children.

Babysitting at the Princess Kids' Club: **\$5 per hour** after 10 p.m.

Sign up for excursions in advance using **Cruise Personalizer** on www.princess.com; you can avoid **sellouts** and the **long lines** at the ship's Shore Excursions desk, which has limited hours. Book **spa** appointments and specialized **fitness classes** online up until a week **before departure**.

ka (How are you)?" she added, teaching her another phrase.

The waitstaff brought out our kids' dinners almost instantly, and then the maitre d' often scooped up our son, Sam, while Grace went to the kids' club, meaning my husband and I enjoyed some of the most relaxing dinners we've had in nearly four years. We hadn't expected such a kid-friendly experience.

What also drew us to this particular cruise was the variety of shore activities, ranging from cultural and nature-based to adventurous. Our ship first docked at Cozumel on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. Some passengers took off for stingray encounters, helmet diving adventures, and catamaran trips. We opted for a tour of the Mayan ruins at Tulum with a two-hour stop at tropical Playa Paraíso

for lunch and a swim.

Our kids and some of the other passengers felt queasy on the choppy 45-minute ferry ride across the Cozumel Channel to Playa del Carmen on the mainland, a tough way to start a hot, 9½-hour day trip. The crossing can be a bit rough during winter months, December to April, we later found out.

Tulum, 45 minutes south of Playa del Carmen by bus, was still worth the adventure. The ancient walled city sits on a 40-foot-high cliff overlooking the Caribbean and was one of the last cities occupied by the Maya, according to Manuel Turrisa, our tour guide.

Our one-hour tour included an informative yet hurried explanation of the site, which served as a trade hub starting in the 13th century. Turrisa pointed out several temples and a castle perched on a bluff. Then many of us hiked up to a viewpoint overlooking Playa Tulum, a postcard-like white-sand beach. The sea breezes revived us for the mile-long walk back to the bus. As interesting as the ruins were, the day's highlight was splashing through waves at nearby Playa Paraíso.

The next day on Roatán, one of Honduras's Bay Islands, the ship docked next to a rusty old shipwreck in Mahogany Bay. We considered visiting the botanical gardens or taking the chairlift from the dock to a nearby beach. Instead, we chose the Gumbalimba Park adventure, which took us 35 minutes down the island in a no-frills local bus to the West Bay.

We spent an hour at the park, visiting a cave where we learned about a one-legged, one-eyed pirate named John Coxen, who hid his plunder in a hole — hence the name of Roatán's main city, Coxen Hole. We also hiked through lush tropical forest with agouti, which are brown rabbits without the tell-tale bunny ears and fluffy tails (they're often mistaken for rats), emerald hummingbirds, and black iguanas.

"Iguana used to be a popular dish," said our guide, Ryan Agustos Washington. "We're not allowed to eat it now because in 1987, they discovered that this variety, the black spiny-tailed iguana, is only found here on Roatán."

Then we crossed a 237-foot rope bridge over a small lake to



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

On a stop in Belize, ship's passengers went cave-tubing in Nohuch Che'en, an archeological reserve. The Princess Kids' Club provided plenty to entertain the author's daughter, Grace.



reach an area that contained scarlet macaws, Honduras's national bird, and friendly white-faced capuchin monkeys. Here, we could let a monkey stand on our shoulders, providing we didn't scream ("They'll scream right back at you," said Washington), run ("They'll chase after you"), or carry anything loose on us that we cared about ("Remember, monkey don't take no for an answer").

"Don't freak out if they put their tail around you," Washington added. "They do this for balance."

Our kids, who were spooked by these unfamiliar creatures, watched from afar while the rest of us took turns letting a monkey climb onto our shoulders. I could feel the monkey's scratchy, claw-like feet on my bare shoulder, but the most unnerving part was the sensation of its wet tail, from the day's

many rain showers, wrapped around my neck. I resisted the urge to scream. Thankfully the monkey soon scurried over to another woman.

After two long day trips, my husband and the kids decided to have a relaxing day on the ship while I took off for a cave-tubing adventure in Belize's limestone mountains. The trip took a busload of us from Belize City an hour and a half southwest through dry savannah to a rain forest region around Nohuch Che'en, or Caves Branch, Archeological Reserve. The park is home to a series of caves once used by the Maya for everything from food storage to human sacrifices. Several tubing companies run rafting trips through three of the area's nine caverns.

With each of us carrying a tube on our shoulders, we hiked 20 minutes through a

dense forest. We spent the next hour floating through 65-million-year-old caverns where clusters of bats clung to the ceiling and limestone formations twinkled under the glare of our headlamps. Stalactites reached down from the ceiling, and cracks overhead released trickles of water that dripped onto us as we passed underneath — a "Mayan blessing," said our guide, Edmond Williams.

After our fun-filled shore adventures, we spent our final two days at sea relaxing by the pool and getting bamboo massages. Some of our most memorable moments were simple ones: watching Grace have a tea party with her baby doll on our balcony, trying to eat ice cream in the tropical heat before it melted onto our flip-flops, discovering tucked-away lounges and sunning areas around the ship, and chatting with fellow passengers.

The ship got soaked in by fog on disembarkment day, meaning it couldn't dock in Galveston until mid-afternoon. The delay caused us to miss our flight home, but it gave us one more day to stroll around the decks and practice Thai with the waitstaff.

"Khob khun ka (Thank you)," Grace said to Saensrira, as we prepared to leave the ship. "Pope gun mai ka (See you later)."

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