

An Unexpected Stop: Guantanamo Bay, Cuba

by Camille Pepe Sperrazza

"Terrorists" and "prisoners" are not usually discussed with the captain of a luxury cruise liner at his Gala Reception. But then, cruise ships don't normally stop at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Our stop there wasn't part of the usual itinerary. The captain announced it while people were stuffing zucchini into their bathing suits during "Fun and Games by the Pool." We learned that a passenger required immediate medical attention, and our military base at Guantanamo Bay was the closest port.

I travel frequently aboard cruise ships, so I've occasionally let my mind stray to the concept of being stricken with a life-threatening ailment while in the middle of the ocean. No doubt being adrift at sea has got to aggravate an already anxiety-filled situation. I couldn't help but wonder if this particular patient found any comfort in being told by the ship's officers, relax, we've made arrangements to drop you off at Guantanamo Bay.

I was lounging on the sun deck when I heard we would be making this unexpected side trip. As one who loves to visit exotic destinations, I was thrilled, and immediately grabbed the camera. I knew I'd have to join the military or be sick aboard a cruise liner to ever pass this way again. As I only point and shoot with a camera, the last option offered the only real possibility, and should it ever happen, photographs might not be uppermost on my mind.

So there I was, hanging over the rail, clicking away as we grew closer to the island, chatting with fellow passengers as the drama unfolded before us. Soon the boats of the American Coast Guard surrounded our huge ship. Soldiers, in full uniform, machine guns in hand, arrived to secure our safety. Hundreds of us, clad in our bathing suits, camera straps hanging over our shoulders, cheered, clapped, and waved to show our appreciation. Surprisingly, these young men seemed just as excited to see us as we were to see them. Not only did they wave back, one of the boats circled the ocean, creating loops, to the enthusiastic applause of the vacationers. It was the ultimate tourist show.

Yet, not every passenger shared the excitement. Some, like the nearby teenage girl, found it unsettling to be surrounded by soldiers who had been sent to protect us from enemies that lurked only miles away. Aboard ship, the music played poolside, but it didn't quite fit with the scene that was being played out port side.

Still, there was a growing sense of disappointment as some of us realized we weren't actually going to dock at Guantanamo Bay. This meant there would be no chance of pointing port side and shooting a terrorist -- with our cameras, of course. Instead, these long-distance glimpses of the island was as good as it was going to get.

In reality, this was literally a "rescue at sea." We watched as one of the ship's tenders was lowered into the ocean. It presumably contained the ailing passenger, as it was surrounded

by additional Coast Guard boats and escorted towards shore, while our ship remained stationary. Shortly afterwards, the captain announced that we planned to wait for the tender. It would return after the passenger was dropped safely ashore, and then we'd resume our course.

With the excitement of the afternoon's unplanned events waning, I left my post. That's when I learned that some passengers had been too busy to notice our jaunt aboard this journey. On a ship that contained every amenity, it was easy to get lost in the distractions. While we had been part of a Caribbean adventure, they had been watching, "Pirates of the Caribbean."

But others were grumbling. This was putting us behind schedule, they complained. We were going to be late arriving at our next port, Grand Cayman. As a result, they would miss their morning snorkeling tours. Never mind that that on this reality show, a passenger had been deemed so sick, it was thought safer to be taken to a place where our military was policing hundreds of our worst enemies.

Later that evening, we dressed in our finest clothes, and attended the Captain's Cocktail Party, a tradition at sea. But on this night, the captain was bombarded with questions from concerned passengers who wanted to learn every aspect of the afternoon's events. Following proper protocol, the captain chose to keep the details confidential, but he did use the pronoun "he," revealing, inadvertently, that the patient was male, and that yes, "he" was expected to be just fine.

What a relief. So it was okay to drink, eat, dance, pull the slots at the casino, and enjoy the shows. Tomorrow we would arrive at Grand Cayman, a little later than anticipated, but we would be there. And Guantanamo Bay would become just another picture inside our trip's photo album.

For more information or to book a trip, [contact](#) "Commodore" Camille today.

This article was accurate when it was written, but everything in life changes. Enjoy the journey!