

CRUISE NEWS
November 2005

DODGING WILMA
Or Where We Didn't Go
On Our Caribbean Cruise

As we boarded Royal Caribbean's *Rhapsody of the Seas* on Sunday, October 16, we gave little thought to the tropical disturbance in the Western Caribbean. There already was a hint of fall in the Galveston air and we were looking forward to sunny skies and calm seas on a trip that was taking us to Ocho Rios, Jamaica, Cayman Islands and Cozumel.

That all changed around noon Monday at sea when Captain Anders Ingebrigtsen made an announcement. Wilma was a new tropical storm headed toward the Yucatan Peninsula. Heavy rains were already causing problems in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands and the storm would be impacting Cozumel on Friday, the day we were scheduled to be there.

"Your safety is always our top priority. With that in mind, as well as the storm's predicted track, I regret to inform you that we must modify your itinerary—canceling our ports of calls. We have decided to sail directly to Cozumel, arriving Tuesday morning well ahead of the storm," explained Captain Ingebrigtsen.

"We will spend Wednesday at sea and Thursday will arrive in Key West at 6:00 am and remain until 2:00 am Friday morning," he said.

Naturally, with two ports cancelled, many guests expressed disappointment. No swimming with stingrays or climbing Dunn's River Falls. For us, no Ocho Rios meant no Bob Marley Zion Experience tour—again. Still we all understood the dangers involved and knew that the decision was the only alternative.

The weather in Cozumel was perfect. As we enjoyed our monster margaritas and guacamole outdoors at Pancho's Backyard on the beach, we noticed that there were no visible signs of preparation for the impending storm—now Category 5 Hurricane Wilma. The scene was so different from our scramble to get ready for Rita back in September.

Wednesday morning we got more news. Our stop in Key West was cancelled because the port was closed to all traffic. They had already issued evacuation orders. The captain announced that we would try for Tampa on Thursday. We were experiencing 10-foot swells that lasted all day. Thank goodness for our cabin's mid-ship location which helped ease the motion.

Tampa wasn't quite ready for us. Only two tours were available: The Aquarium and a City Tour. Buses finally started arriving and after all non-U.S. citizens were cleared, we were able to depart the ship. The people in Tampa were very gracious. With Wilma threatening, they were anxious to secure their property and leave when necessary. Yet, businesses near the pier stayed open and made for a pleasant visit for *Rhapsody* guests.

Back on the ship, we headed for Galveston. Two days at sea and lots—or nothing if you chose—to do. Besides the Spa, shopping, Bingo, and Horse Races, there were some enrichment events. We took in the Cocktail Academy hosted by the ship's bartenders.

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and a half at a cost of \$9.95 per person, we enjoyed mixing techniques, recipes, juggling ala Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*, and generous samplings of 4 or 5 of the most popular of Caribbean drinks.

Friday at sea, we learned we were about 450 miles northwest of Wilma—and we were still experiencing 8-10' swells. Gradually, the seas calmed down and stayed that way until we arrived in Galveston.

Rhapsody of the Seas offers a fantastic feature new to us: Express Departure Service. On most cruise ships, debarkation can be a long, draw-out process. Early rising, and then the wait for your color luggage tag to be called so that you can proceed to Customs on board. After this phase, guests must wait again for their color luggage tag to be called so that they may leave the ship and collect luggage at the terminal. Not with Express Departure. To qualify, guests must not be booked on any transportation for connecting flights and must be able to carry ALL their luggage with them off the ship. (Note: this service alone makes packing light even more advantageous.)

Express Departure started promptly at 7:00 am. By 7:04 am we were off the ship, and had completed our Customs inspection in the terminal. By 7:09 we were waiting at the taxi stand for the next available cab. (We would've gotten there sooner, but stopped to say hello to old friends Dean Holland and Carol Barnlund with Shore to Sea Services). By 7:35 am we were back at home on the West End, making fresh coffee. Normally, we wouldn't arrive home until 10:30 or 11:00 am!

One thing you might be thinking: "Since you didn't visit two popular ports, did you get any sort of discount from the cruise line?" The answer is no. No shipboard credit or compensation of any kind was offered. In fact, the passenger cruise ticket contract states that the "carrier may for any reason, at any time and without prior notice, cancel, advance, or substitute another vessel or port of call, and shall not be liable for any loss whatsoever to passenger by reason of such cancellation, advancement, postponement, substitution or deviation." Any goodwill gesture is at the ship's discretion.

For the next several weeks, itineraries will be altered as damage assessment and clean up continue on the Yucatan Peninsula, thanks to Hurricane Wilma. Our thoughts, prayers and best wishes go out to all affected by this storm. We'd like to thank the captain and crew of *Rhapsody of the Seas* for a safe and comfortable cruise. Although our journey didn't take us where we thought we were going, we had a lot of fun and excitement along the way.

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