

Trending Now :: THEME CRUISE

Cruise Well

Holistic Holiday at Sea offers a healthy way to sail the Caribbean. **by MARGOT BIGG**

I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO TAKE A CRUISE, BUT BECAUSE I'VE BEEN A vegetarian or vegan since I was a small child, the idea of spending a week or more at sea subsisting on salad and bread held me back. Then I found out about Holistic Holiday at Sea and its annual vegan Caribbean cruise and decided it was time to take my first oceangoing vacation.

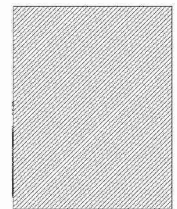
Good Eats - The theme cruise, which first set sail in 2004, places a strong emphasis on the health benefits of veganism, with a packed daily schedule of workshops and social events that start at the crack of dawn and go well into the night. This year, some 1,500 cruisers from as far away as South Africa and Japan descended on Miami to board **MSC Cruises' MSC Divina**. Though many were already hardcore health foodies, a few were there to learn more about the plant-based lifestyle or simply take a weeklong detox from meat.

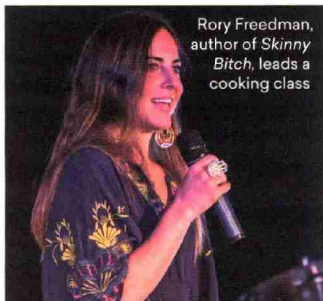
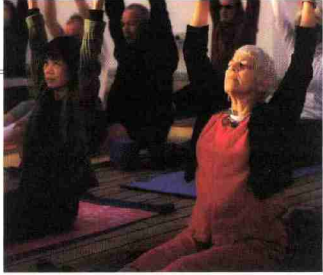
As a longtime vegan, I wasn't planning to give anything up, but I did hope that a week away from easy supermarket access would at least help me get my sugar cravings under control. And it did.

The first few meals tasted *very* healthy - in a carob instead of chocolate kind of way. As



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Rory Freedman, author of *Skinny Bitch*, leads a cooking class

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someone who typically loads up everything remotely savory with a tongue-destroying amount of hot sauce, my taste buds stubbornly refused to register much flavor. While each five-course meal left me satisfied, it wasn't the kind of food I'd use to entice my meat-eating friends to come to the other side.

"The food gets better as the week progresses," a veteran Holistic cruiser assured me. And right she was. Though the menus always looked good, with offerings such as eggplant parmesan with sunflower cheese and Caribbean coconut cream pie, it was later in the week, when items such as vegan stroganoff and chocolate cake started showing up on the menu, that I really got into the gourmand spirit. Plus, the sparing use of sweeteners such as maple syrup, which has a slightly lower glycemic index than the refined stuff, helped calm my sweet tooth.

Onboard Learning - While the culinary offerings were a big draw, many participants were sailing that week for educational purposes. There were healthcare professionals who had the option of earning Continuing Medical Education (CME) credits as well as members of the general public who just wanted to up their knowledge about plant-based health and wellness.

Every day - even port days - was packed with lectures by some of the world's leading experts on health and plant-based nutrition, including T. Colin Campbell, author of *The New York Times* bestseller *The China Study*. There were yoga, Pilates, and general fitness classes; hands-on cooking courses; and other offerings such as my personal favorite: "harmonic massages," which are soothing chair massages in which a therapist applies a device emitting low musical frequencies to different parts of your body while you listen to the cheerful instrumentals of what I can only describe as "happy music."

The cruise's organizers kept things going well into the night with cocktail hours, pizza

parties, and vegan ice cream socials. While breakfast and lunch were offered either at one of the ship's restaurants or in a special vegan section of the buffet, dinner was a sit-down affair and provided the best opportunity to chat with other cruisers and hear their stories and motivations for being on board.

For example, one of my tablemates was 78-year-old Clyde, a longtime vegan whose blood pressure was so remarkably low (but in a healthy range) for a man his age that his doctor thought he was some

sort of medical anomaly. Also at our table was a woman who ate a traditional American diet, but wanted to learn how to cook with less meat in hopes of losing weight.

Throughout the week I'd hear similar claims from fellow passengers, many of whom, despite being well into their golden years, had the glow and energy levels associated with much younger adults. Dinner conversa-

tions were peppered with statements ranging from hope-inspiring ("My oncologist says I'm a miracle.") to chuckle-inducing ("I grew up vegan so this is like comfort food to me").

The classes heightened my awareness of nutrition, and the variety of food on board made me more open to experimenting with new flavors and textures. While veganism and health food were nothing new to me, by the time we docked back in Miami a week later, I felt much more aware of my dietary choices and was inspired to eschew the heavily processed vegan snack foods that had worked their way into my diet.

And though I must confess that my love affair with processed sugar has started to rekindle since I've been back on land, at least I'm now checking labels for more than just animal products. Plus, I don't feel the need to dash off to the nearest health food store to load up on gelatin-free gummy bears. ■

➔ Visit holisticholidayatsea.com for details on upcoming cruises.

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