



# LOVE BOAT

Colm Howard-Lloyd boards a big gay boat to the Med

TRAVELLING by air these days is a pretty tense affair. I've lost count of the number of times I've had a hot flush going through security as I realise my bag contains at least one of the banned items - not difficult as the list now includes tweezers, nail files and other gay boy essentials. Therefore, it wasn't surprising that when I boarded a ship I was ready for another frisking (I must get out more!). "This isn't a security check, this is your welcome hug. Welcome aboard!" As a European I have to confess to not being particularly good with "welcome hugs" but this was definitely an American experience; this was 'Disneyland Gay Homosexuals on the High Seas' and, like it or not, I was here for the week.

Atlantis have been in the gay cruise business for quite some time, but this was the first time I'd ever signed-up to spend a week on a ship with 1800 gay men - and the odd mum! The last time I heard the word Atlantis was a WH Auden poem from my school days. Looking back I realise what a suitable name it is: "Only the Ship of Fools is making the voyage this year. You must therefore be ready to behave absurdly enough to pass for one of the Boys, At least appearing to love hard liquor, horseplay and noise." Bring it on!

7 days, 6 ports of call, 4 big parties and 1800 gay men, this was going to be no ordinary holiday. Before I went on this cruise I had in my mind that it was likely to be pretty much a Floating Fuck Fest. Thankfully, or perhaps sadly, this didn't turn out to be the case. Everyone was really friendly and there was plenty of action going on, but people seemed to be just as happy to have a conversation.

Gay cruising is big business in America and although the three main players (Atlantis, RSVP and Olivia) offer broadly the same destinations and ships, the on-board experience is

vastly different. Olivia caters for the lesbian end of the market and, in a world where lesbians can still feel second-class, has been described as a life changing experience. And you thought it was just a holiday! For the boys (or anyone that prefers to travel with a majority of boys) there is a choice between RSVP and Atlantis. Generally the main difference is in the formality on-board ship. With RSVP you get the traditional cruising experience; black tie events, fixed schedule dining, the captain's cocktail party and all of the other elements you'd expect on a cruise. With Atlantis the experience is less formal, but no less hectic. In place of black tie dinners there are more white parties, singles nights, pool parties and just about every other kind of entertainment you can think of. Dinner is served when you want with who you want. Think of Atlantis as a floating circuit party and you get the idea. Unsurprisingly, Atlantis tends to attract a younger crowd - the average age on-board was about 35. There was a high number of couples on this cruise, but I am told that this is because it was an "exotic destination" i.e. Europe.

So back on the ship, having recovered from my welcome hug it was time for the mandatory lifeboat drill. I guess it's the maritime equivalent of the safety demonstration on airlines that we all ignore, although on a boat if something goes wrong it probably will require a lifejacket whereas on a plane we're probably crashing into concrete so it's kind of pointless. Thank goodness you have a small plastic whistle and a torch!

Picture if you will 1800 gay men dressed up in large bits of orange nylon and foam. It was a nicely levelling experience so early in the week. I do take my hat off to the crew members repeatedly having to tell people

that no, the lifejacket didn't come in any different colours. I think they were just starting to realise what kind of week it was going to be. Does anyone know, in the absence of women (mostly) and children (unless you count acting like one) who gets to go in the lifeboat first? During the lifeboat drill it was announced to much excitement that, due to bad weather, we would not be calling at Monte Carlo but instead would visit Cannes. This was greeted with a good deal of cheering and clapping although a couple next to me asked each other where Cannes was - in the end they decided it was in Queensland! I think this crowd would cheer and clap just about anything; it was like almost two thousand 7 years olds visiting Disneyland for the first time. We did visit some pretty interesting places on the cruise; Barcelona, Cannes, Rome, Naples, Palma de Mallorca and Ibiza but you really didn't need to leave the ship to have a good time. I guess this is demonstrated by the fact that with the exception of an overnight stop in Ibiza the ship sailed every night so partying on the ship was the only option. This wasn't much of a hardship as the entertainment on-board was first class but it didn't rather reinforce the Gay Disneyland feel. I think by the time we got to Ibiza there were plenty of people on-board gagging for fresh faces (and bodies!). I had expected the entertainment to be made up of all-American DJs and entertainers, not that that's a bad thing; those boys know how to put on a show. But take an Atlantis cruise and you'll find QX favourites Pam Ann and Wayne G. We definitely need to make sure we keep those two busy in London otherwise we may find we lose them permanently! As far as the American talent goes there were a couple of my favourites that we really should think about kidnapping; in particular the hilarious comedian Shann Carr and hypnotist Bruce McDonald. Both are, apparently, fixtures on most Atlantis cruises if you need more reasons to go. If you've never partied on the deck of a cruise liner, to the sound of Wayne G, with 1800 tanned and toned men in swimwear, as the sun sets over the Mediterranean, then you really haven't lived. It's a memory that will stay with me forever, although by the end I did start to realise that food 24 hours a day really isn't compatible with a swimwear figure. I think before I go on my next Atlantis cruise I'm going to spend weeks on a diet and months in the gym. So, by the end of the week, I'd been to a White Party, a Mardi Gras Party, a Dog Tag Party, a Beach Ball Party and a whole load of parties for parties sake. I'd eaten enough wonderful food to give Dr Atkins a heart attack, and I'd just about got used to everyone being so damn cheerful. I'd even got used to the concept of welcome hugs. I do have to admit finishing the week a little gay-ed out, but in the nicest way possible. Yes, Atlantis is a bit of an imaginary world, but it's the kind of place many people would choose to live in. I was really sad to leave the ship at the end of the week. I confess; I'm an Atlantis addict. See you on the next cruise!

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