I Went on My First Gay Cruise — Here's What It Was Like

Here's why I chose vacation company Vacaya to book my first gay cruise.

By **Kwin Mosby** | Published on February 4, 2022

PHOTO: COURTESY OF GABRIEL GOLDBERG (GABRIELGOLDBERG.COM)

Nonstop parties, unwarranted comments, and a lack of diversity were a few reasons why I avoided booking a gay cruise. However, that changed with Vacaya, a large-scale adults-only vacation company that touts its inclusivity to the entire LGBTQ+ community and our straight allies.

I've always been insecure about my weight, and if the marketing strategy for an LGBTQ+ cruise, vacation, or tour company doesn't include me or make me feel seen — as a chubby Black gay man — I avoid it. But when I was offered the opportunity to sail with Vacaya, I asked a few friends about their gay cruise experiences — specifically, about the company's chartered sailings and resort vacations. I heard words and phrases like "diverse," "body positive," and "it is what you make it" — and that made me happy.

So, I decided to step outside of my comfort zone and join more than 1,500 passengers aboard the Celebrity *Millennium* for a seven-day Caribbean cruise with stops in Aruba and Curaçao.

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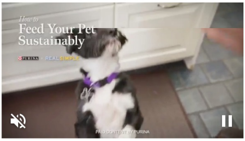
A Conscious Decision to Be Inclusive

After a couple of hours on the ship, before leaving Port Everglades in Hollywood, Florida, I was pleasantly surprised by the diversity of passengers boarding. The age of passengers skewed older, but it was a microcosm of the LGBTQ+ community — different ethnicities, sexual orientations, and more. Even before setting sail, some of my preconceived notions about gay cruises seemed to fade.



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That same diversity also extended to Vacaya's programming and entertainment. *Glee* star Amber Riley paid homage to soulful divas like Chaka Khan, Aretha Franklin, and Whitney Houston. Actress Susie Mosher added comedic levity as the host of a show where fearless passengers sang their favorite tunes. The Skivvies performed a roster of music mash-ups with high-brow humor, comedians Gene Moore and Geneva Joy made us laugh until we cried, actress Marilu Henner dished about her Hollywood career, and drag queen Shangela took center stage for an engaging show that included a tribute to Beyonce.

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Throughout the cruise, passengers went all out dressing up in elaborate costumes to show off their creativity at theme parties — usually with DJs Corey Craig or Susan Morabito at the helm. The DJs largely catered to an audience who preferred electronic dance music (EDM), and some passengers, including myself, wished there was a bit more variety.

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"There were different ethnicities on board: Black, white, Spanish, and Asian. Vacaya should consider adding a little Afrobeat and other music genres that people can enjoy," said Samira Alston, an African American bisexual passenger from Brooklyn, New York.

Meeting people like Alston was easy. There was a strong sense of community on board, and it was an effortless, stress-free process to connect with different people and exchange cruise cards — one way to stay in touch on the ship.

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I met several people, including Ken, who drove 12 hours from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to go on his first gay cruise; Eric and his partner, Jason, from Tacoma, Washington, who chatted about how they met, Jason's "coming out" story, and his amicable divorce from his ex-wife; and Oscar, a passenger from L.A., who was single and ready to mingle after a divorce from his ex-husband.

I discovered that a gay cruise allows us to be fully ourselves in a respectful environment, reuniting with old friends from previous cruises and cultivating new friendships that go beyond our seven-day journey.

The Nitty-gritty of Cruising

This wasn't a typical vacation for me as I had to work, so I paid for Celebrity's Xcelerate Stream package for two devices (phone and laptop). The unsecured Wi-Fi access was spotty and slow in my cabin, and I often had to go to public areas for better reception. If you can, I recommend skipping the Wi-Fi charge and truly unplugging.

True for many cruises, there are also separate prepaid packages for dining and beverages. I was more than happy to eat most of my meals at the Oceanview Cafe, an international buffet serving Mexican, British, Italian, Asian, and other cuisines. I splurged an extra $45 to eat at the Tuscan Grille, and was also invited to try Le Petit Chef, which blends 3D tabletop entertainment with a delicious four-course meal. I don't drink much, so I

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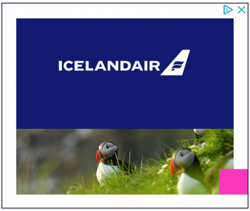

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opted out of purchasing a beverage package and paid for cocktails and wine as needed — primarily for the poolside parties.

As for activities, the shore excursions in Aruba offered a variety of beach, wildlife, and immersive experiences. In Curaçao, I visited the Dolphin Academy for an up-close animal encounter. It's worth noting that this three-hour experience costs $159 (excluding lunch) and included waiting a considerable amount of time for the 15-minute dolphin show, which may be underwhelming for some.

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Cruise Travel During a Pandemic

These days, it's impossible to discuss cruise travel without mentioning the elephant in the room: COVID-19. A week before I was scheduled to depart, a Royal Caribbean ship (not a Vacaya chartered cruise) was turned away from Aruba and Curaçao due to the number of positive COVID cases on board. So, I was concerned that we wouldn't be able to stop at the same ports, too.

I made the conscious decision to go on a cruise, understanding the potential risks, even as a fully vaccinated person. All passengers had to provide negative COVID-19 test results no more than 48 hours before the day we set sail. I took an at-home test, a rapid antigen test at Reagan National Airport, and ordered a 10-pack of N95 masks. And when it came to the poolside theme parties, I enjoyed them from the top balcony to avoid the large crowds below. Passengers were diligent about adhering to Celebrity's protocols to mask up for all indoor performances and activities.

Bill Onieal and Ryan Focht understood the precautions necessary to stay safe on the cruise. Onieal is a nurse with 13 years of experience in the emergency department, having also worked in palliative care and special needs pediatrics, and Focht is a chemist working in preclinical toxicology research. From Jersey City, New Jersey, the engaged couple is fully vaccinated, received their booster shots, and gets tested regularly because of their professions, but Onieal said, "There's always the chance that we

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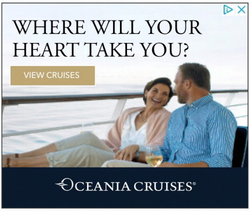

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may contract COVID."

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"The safety measures that were implemented were the only reason we felt safe attending a Vacaya cruise during the pandemic," said Focht. "Celebrity and Vacaya were transparent about their contact-tracing protocols."

Of course, doing all the right things doesn't entirely erase the risk of COVID. In a post-cruise press release, Vacaya cofounder and CEO Randle Roper said, "Over the course of the week, 27 guests tested positive and were placed in insolation, and 72 additional guests who'd been in close contact with a positive person were tested, placed in quarantine for the recommended 24 hours, and retested before being declared COVID-free and released."

Final Takeaways

Looking back on my cruise, I would do it again as a solo traveler. In fact, a few friends and I have already discussed the possibility of booking Vacaya's fifth-anniversary Caribbean cruise on the Celebrity *Reflection*, scheduled for February 2023. Celebrity's safety protocols and Vacaya's attention to detail, transparency, and inclusive vibe and strategy are all reasons why I was able to enjoy my first gay cruise and return home COVID-free.