

ALL ABOARD

THE BIG GAY CRUISE SHIP

By Marie “Riese” Lyn Bernard



Bernard (top right) and friend; Ross the Intern and friends chow down; Bernard (left) and McArdle try their hands at the slots; Bernard (center) and friend entertain the crowd.

FOR THE FIRST hour of our 2007 cruise video, it's Heather and me on the balcony of the suite she's sharing with her girlfriend Haviland Stillwell (my best friend) on the Norwegian Dawn. We're bubbling with vodka tonics and sticky happiness, and the boat's just started sailing from New York to Key West.

The sunset's reflected off the surface of sliding glass doors, and I get up, lean over the railing, turn to Heather and say, "You know, I'm not into like, sentiment or scenery, but this, right here, is more or less perfect." And there it is again: the waves rise and lilt, everything is beautiful, everyone is gay, we're all on this boat, cruisin' together, more or less perfect.

My first R Family cruise was to Alaska (Juneau, Skagway and Ketchikan) and Victoria, British Columbia in 2006. Haviland, who knows Rosie O'Donnell from *Fiddler on the Roof*, is performing in the *Rosie's Broadway Belters* show and she invites me as her plus-one. So I fly to Seattle from New York City, meet up with Hav at the airport, and we bus to the docks. Along with a platoon of gay families radiating contagious enthusiasm, we board, and in the seven days between that moment and our return to the world, I am transformed.

"I wish we were on the boat right now," Haviland is liable to moan on any of the 358 days of the year she's not on it. After the boat, there is only "boat" and "not-boat."

The first night in Alaska, the khaki- and pin-stripe-clad R Family team starts off in the Stardust Theater with a clever opening number, "Big Gay Cruise Ship," peppered with gay in-jokes and ending in a crescendo of "What's better than being on a cruise ship where almost everyone is gay?" That "almost" is key. Kelli O'Donnell, who co-owns R Family Vacations with Gregg Kaminsky, says: "We're all-inclusive; the only gay and lesbian travel company that invites gays, lesbians and their straight friends and family on board our trips. We embrace everybody."

Rosie easily charms the crowd. These are her people; we're on her side. We're on Susan Powter's side, too, and that's why in a few days we're in our sweatpants at 8 a.m., upside down, pressing our toes into sticky purple mats with the intent to

erase the patriarchy. Susan's got big white-and-pink dreadlocks, a million tattoos and the most contagious narcissism I've ever encountered. We love her. Susan teaches daily yoga and gives motivational speeches.

Norwegian's cruises are "freestyle," which means you're free to eat and entertain as you please. The food is fine-to-decent and something's always open. The *Freestyle Daily* newsletter, delivered nightly along with gift bags from assorted gay-friendly donors, details the next day's activities: themed dinners, parties, cooking lessons with Martha Stewart's chef, adoption seminars, auctions, football camp with Esera Tuaolo, presentations, films and shore excursions when the boat is docked.

"If you don't have children, our trips are just as applicable to you. We have specialty dining, adult-gear entertainment, disco, casino, piano bars with Broadway star talent and plenty of daytime programming," Kelli points out. "We've got singles mixers and dinners on board for those looking to meet other singles."

Alaska is beautiful and chilly—the snow-capped mountains, glaciers—all of it. Excursions like dog sledding or glacier watching are available for between \$50 and \$1,000. Haviland and I usually just grab snacks and reboard—with the children gone, we've got the entire silent sun to ourselves, all of it. These are some of our favorite moments.

In Ketchikan, Kathy Griffin and her assistant Jessica spot Haviland and me in the piano bar: "Are you a gay?" Kathy asks. "We need some gays to guide us off this boat; we're lost. We need someone who knows the territory." The boat feels like an artists' colony, but earnest and cleaner. It's so lovely that I soar past nauseated to genuine ecstasy. Performers include Cyndi Lauper, Kathy Griffin, Audra McDonald, Elvira Kurt, Jill Sobule and tremendous Broadway talent. The *Broadway Belters* show, including scenes from *Wicked*, *Evita* and *Les Misérables*, often features a role's original performer, and I actually cry when Haviland sings, even though she's dressed like a cupcake.

On the second to last night, we're dining in La Trattoria with a group that includes two straight couples and their children. Esera smiles at me and Haviland, mimes taking our photograph and mouths "Beautiful." We're so high on life that