

OUR HOLIDAYS: *Orlando/Caribbean cruise and stay*

Could a stay-and-cruise holiday to Florida and the western Caribbean keep everyone in the family happy?

Enjoy beautiful scenery and exotic stop-offs as you carry on cruising

On land and sea



Luxurious Loews Royal Pacific Resort

A stay and cruise holiday enables you to do and see a huge amount in a short period of time. The stay part involved four nights at the luxurious four-star Loews Royal Pacific Resort, one of the three on-site hotels at Universal Orlando, Florida. Complete with a Lagoon-style pool, private beach and a choice of six restaurants, it couldn't fail to please.

The hotel is just a few minutes' walk or a free water taxi ride from the resort's two theme parks — Islands of Adventure and Universal

Studios — and the buzzing entertainment and shopping complex CityWalk.

Islands of Adventure is divided into six themed islands, including Seuss Landing, where smaller children can enjoy The Cat in the Hat ride, and Marvel Super Hero Island, where thrill-seekers of all ages can feel their world turn upside down on The Incredible Hulk Coaster or do battle with villains on The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man.

But the real highlight is the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. Entering Hogsmeade and seeing the steaming *Hogwarts Express* train and sparkling roofs of the wiggly shops and houses is like walking on to a movie set. The shops will be familiar to fans — there's Ollivanders wand

Here we go!

Virgin Holidays Cruises offers an 11-night Orlando Stay and Caribbean Cruise on *Freedom of the Seas* from £1399 per person, including Exclusive Rockstar Service and entrance to the v-room. You'll have four nights at the Loews Royal Pacific Resort on a room-only basis with car hire and three-park Universal Pass included, before joining *Freedom of the Seas* for a seven-night cruise from Port Canaveral calling at Labadee,

Falmouth, George Town, Cozumel and Port Canaveral. Prices are per person based on two adults sharing an inside cabin on a full-board basis and include transfers and Virgin Atlantic flights from London Gatwick to Orlando (based on a departure date of 9 January 2013). Offer is subject to availability and includes all applicable taxes and fuel surcharges which are subject to change. For more information or to book, call 0844 573 4398 or visit www.virginholidayscruises.co.uk

store, Honeydukes sweet shop and Zonko's joke shop. You can even try the famous Butterbeer in the Hog's Head Pub.

Then head up to Hogwarts Castle and make your way through the classrooms and corridors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to join the most thrilling four minutes of your life. Grip on to the magical bench as you soar and spin above the castle grounds, immersing yourself in Harry's world and meeting magical creatures.

If that's not enough action for you, outside the castle there's Dragon Challenge — a high-speed double roller coaster — and the Flight of the Hippogriff, a family-friendly coaster woven from wicker and decorated with leaves.

At Universal Studios next door, you can ride your way through your favourite movies and TV shows, from helping to save

E.T. from those pesky scientists to crashing through Krustyland on The Simpsons Ride and zapping aliens on MEN IN BLACK Alien Attack.

In the evening, the streets come alive for the Mardi Gras parade (February to April), a sensory overload of colour with floats and dancers recreating the festival atmosphere of Bourbon Street in New Orleans.

The next day, Port Canaveral beckoned as the cruise element

of the holiday got underway. Home for the next seven days would be Royal Caribbean International's gargantuan *Freedom of the Seas*. It's the length of 37 double-decker buses, has 15 decks and enough accommodation to house 3634 passengers and 1360 crew.

As we pulled out of dock, there was a carnival atmosphere with everyone cheering, taking photos and enjoying a cocktail, while the kids were enthralled at the entertainment laid on by the crew and DreamWorks characters, including Kung Fu Panda and Shrek.

Our cabin was relatively easy to find — it's amazing how quickly you can orientate yourself in such a huge place. As well as a comfortable bed, widescreen TV and view out to sea from the balcony, we got our own cabin steward — and room service at our beck and call day and night.

On exploring the ship further,

the facilities were amazing. For action and adventure, there was the brilliant FlowRider™ surf simulator, the rock-climbing wall with 11 routes to the top, the nine-hole mini golf course and a full-size basketball court and boxing ring. There was also a jogging track running all the way round the top deck, a swimming pool, whirlpools that jutted over the sea and a kids' H2O Zone waterpark play area.

For the really energetic, there was a gym offering fitness classes, with pampering sessions at the spa to wind down afterwards. I couldn't imagine the usual 'Mum, I'm bored!' mantra ever being voiced here.

If the children want to go off and meet other kids, then the Adventure Ocean clubs are great. Children from three to 17 are catered for in age- and activity-related groups. There's loads for them to get stuck into, from arts, crafts and games to sports, science experiments and parties for the older ones.

There are numerous shopping,



The Promenade Deck and FlowRider onboard ship



entertainment and dining options on board. The Windjammer café is the main restaurant where all your food and soft drinks are included in the cruise price, but it's worth paying a small supplement to enjoy a fine-dining experience in one of the speciality restaurants such as Portofino, which serves delicious Italian classics, or Johnny Rockets, a 1950s-style diner that specialises in burgers and milkshakes.

In the evening, catch the parade down the Royal Promenade shopping zone — all the DreamWorks characters dance their way down the main shopping area and you can high-five Shrek, Fiona and Po.

And as if that wasn't enough, you can visit the English pub, the Bull & Bear, or Vintages wine bar, or catch a live theatre show, stand-up comedy or an ice show. Yes, you really could be watching an ice-skating extravaganza in the middle of the Caribbean! If this inspires you, hire some skates and have a go the next day.

The fun doesn't stop there either — there's a 3D cinema or you can watch a film by the poolside on the huge screen — blissful on a warm night.

Over the course of the week, the ship made four ports of call, at Labadee in Haiti, Falmouth in Jamaica, George Town in Grand Cayman and Cozumel in Mexico. I chose to join a cultural tour of Labadee and came away with a bag full of Haitian artefacts from the Artisan's Market, famous for local crafts.

In other ports you can do anything from swimming with stingrays and jungle river tubing to culinary tours and a tour of

ancient Mayan ruins. Everyone will surely find something to enjoy on shore.

A stay-and-cruise holiday definitely meets the challenges a family holiday presents. I can see it now — as the eight-year-old flings himself down the FlowRider, Granny will be on the mini-golf course, Uncle in the casino, Dad in the gym... and Mum? Ah well, rest and relaxation is what I'm after on my holiday and there's plenty of that to be had. A life on the ocean waves is for me!

Anna Pattenden

Anna's tips

- Staying at an on-site hotel at Universal means you enjoy Early Park Admission (an hour before the park opens) to some of the most popular attractions, including The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, as well as free Universal Express Ride Access to skip the queues on participating attractions at both theme parks. For further money-saving tickets check out www.universalorlando.com before you go.
- Onboard ship, pick up a copy of the daily newsletter, *Cruise Compass*, which contains details of all the scheduled activities, plus weather and docking information and offers at the shops, bars and restaurants.
- Take more than one swimming costume and, although it's rare on such large ships, if you're prone to seasickness take any tried-and-tested medication.
- Do plenty of research before you go at www.royalcaribbean.co.uk and www.cruisecritic.co.uk to make sure you make the most of your trip.

WIN! A CARIBBEAN CRUISE. PAGE 64



Head to private Labadee Beach, Haiti, for watersports, bars and shops



Magical Mardi Gras and Harry Potter's Wizarding World at Universal Orlando