

STORY BY MARGIE GOLDSMITH | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH A. ROSEN

# CRUISIN' WITH THE BLUES

**F**or years, friends have been urging me to go on The Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise, an eight-day sailing with top blues musicians playing on ten stages from morning till 4am. No one has to buy a ticket to any show -- it's all included. You can sit in the front row whenever you want because no seat is reserved. You don't need an umbrella because this festival is indoors and on covered decks. My friends said I'd be crazy not to go, but I hate big ships. They seem so impersonal, like a Las Vegas casino floating in the water.

I had more reasons not to go. I have type 1 diabetes and my insulin needs to be refrigerated. The staff assured me every cabin had a mini fridge. I have serious health issues and have been in hospitals too many times. Would there be a doctor on board? Yes, there was a full medical facility. What if something unforeseeable happened -- would I be able to fly home early without losing money? Yes, said my travel insurance company.

Still, I was hesitant. There would be 2,400 other blues lovers onboard, and I was going alone. Would I be lonely? What if I hated the cruise? But this wasn't just any cruise; this was the famous Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise. So, in spite of my concerns and because I love the blues, I signed up.

---

Young African American artists who play Blues. L to R. of front line: Stephen Hull, Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, Sean "Mack" McDonald, Mathias Lattin, Dylan Triplett





Up until eleven years ago, I knew nothing about the blues. Sure, I knew who B.B. King, Muddy Waters and Etta James were, but I'd never heard of Howlin' Wolf or John Lee Hooker or any of the other famous players of the past or present. Then that changed. I travel the world for work, often to places where I don't speak the language. But there's another way to communicate: through music, our universal language.

I decided to learn the harmonica because it looked easy and was small enough to fit in my pocket. I joined a beginner's blues harmonica jam camp in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Unfortunately, the harp (not to be confused with the standing instrument with strings, but rather this comb-sized thing with ten little holes which musicians call the harp) turned out to be extremely difficult to play. Every time I blew a note, I sounded like a bleating sheep. Not one to give up, I took Skype lessons and have been taking them since, going from a raw beginner to a half-baked intermediate.

I'll never play like the masters, but wouldn't it be great to hear famous harmonica players like Rick Estrin, Charlie Musselwhite and Dennis Gruenling all in one place? And how about some of the other famous bands who'd be onboard? Taj Mahal, Los Lobos, Elvin Bishop, Carolyn Wonderland... the list was endless, and the blues ranged from classic to R&B, rock, soul, funk, rhumba, boogie-woogie, swing and take-it-to-church Gospel.

In preparation, I checked out the cruise's Facebook page which offered advice to blues cruise virgins like me. "Pace

yourself," they said. "Bring a costume for the parade." I decided to pack my left-over Halloween nun's costume. Another newbie asked, "I'm retired and ready to cruise, but is there a chiropractor on board?" The answer: "No, but if you purchase the beverage package, you'll forget you even have a spine." I asked, "When do you sleep?" The answer: "When you get home." Someone said, "Bring your axe for the pro-am jams." I don't play guitar, but I took a couple of harmonicas with me, because you never know.

The ship, Holland America's luxurious Koningsdam, was waiting for us in San Diego. I was un-

packing in my sun-filled cabin when I smashed my foot into the wheel of my suitcase. Ouch. Not an auspicious beginning. My toe throbbed, but the first band was about to start, so I limped to the pool deck where blues artist Vanessa Collier was playing sax, then belting out:

Oh sweatin' like a pig, singin'; like an angel

Yes, you're sweatin' like a pig and singin'; like an angel

If the funk is smelling funky, you can be sure it'll sound real sweet.

Her voice was gritty, sexy and soulful, a cross between Bonnie Raitt and Maria Muldaur. Her band was killing it, and half the audience was dancing in front of the stage. My toe hurt too much to even stand, but I tapped my good foot and boogied in my seat. Collier introduced her guitarist, Laura Chavez, the first woman ever to win the Blues Foundation best guitarist award. The crowd went wild, and the music made me forget my throbbing toe. I was in a happy trance and screamed my approval along with the audience.





Twenty-six bands played that day, many overlapping. I couldn't see them all in one day, but most played three times during the week, so I had other chances to hear them. At the other pool deck, the Nick Moss Band featuring harmonica player, Dennis Gruenling, was ripping it up. Gruenling, the best jump blues player in America, blew his heart out and I hollered until I was hoarse. And there was still more. Rick Estrin & the Nightcats, my all-time favorite blues band, played at the opposite end of the 975-foot-long ship. I hobbled across and found a seat. Estrin, a brilliant showman as well as the world's most entertaining harpist/ singer/ songwriter/ front man sang:

I should have known better  
Cuz just look where I met her  
On the Blues Cruise.

His band was flawless, fearless, and bursting with unfathomable energy. The joy was infectious. Everybody (except me, of course) was on their feet.

When the show ended, I was hungry but didn't want to waste time in the dining room ordering dinner, so instead I chose the buffet, which I would choose most of the week. There was everything from hand-carved meats, chicken fish, and salads to international dishes, home-made breads and enough desserts to sink the ship. I wasn't the only person alone. I sat down next to a woman from Florida who was on her fourth blues cruise. Here, no one asked where you were from. They just wanted to know how many blues cruises you'd been on.

Nick Moss Band featuring harmonica player, Dennis Gruenling, was ripping it up.





Founded in 2002 as the world's original chartered blues cruise. The Legendary now sails twice a year. Many onboard have been onboard twenty or more times. I told the woman I was sitting with that not everyone in New York City is passionate about the blues. "Hey," she said, "if you like the Rolling Stones, you gotta love the blues!"

After dinner, I went to listen to virtuoso harp player Charlie Musselwhite, who was explaining how he ended up in Martin Scorsese's movie, Killers of the Flower Moon. Musselwhite's grandfather had shot the famous train robber, Al Spencer, and got to keep the shotgun. Now, both Musselwhite and his grandfather's gun play a part in the movie. Musselwhite picked up a harp and played the way only he can - with pure passion and soul on every note. I was in blues heaven.

I couldn't believe I'd seen three of my favorite harp players in one night. I made my way past the smaller stages where a young vocalist was singing his heart out, dancing on stage. The audience screamed. I asked the woman next to me who it was. Dylan Triplett, a 22-year-old blues prodigy, winner of the Best Emerging Artist at the Blues Music Awards. "Hey!" she said, "I know you from Facebook. I'm Amy Brat." I remembered her -- she promotes musicians, and some were on this cruise. Amy suggested I check out other new faces like award-winning 21-year-old singer/songwriter/guitarist, Matthias Lattin. How could there be so much young talent in a musical tradition that goes back to around 1890?

And there were other players under 25, all award winners: Whitney Shay, Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, D.K. Harrell and more. During a presentation, "Newcomers Explor-

ing the Blues," Triplett said, "There's no greater music than the blues, because it's in my ancestry. I grew into it. There's a feeling I get from my soul that it can't be sad to let the good times roll."

The good times kept rolling and Amy and I became fast friends, sharing meals and performances. We were often joined by her roommate, Laura Carbone, a blues-loving doctor whose passion is photography and who was filming the musicians non-stop. With two new friends, it was much more fun.

Port days were a welcome much-needed break after so much great back-to-back music, and there were three: Cabo San Lucas, Mazatlán and Puerto Vallarta. I hate group sightseeing and probably would have stayed onboard if I'd had to join a huge city bus tour. Instead, Amy, Laura and I made our own itineraries. We hired

taxi drivers to take us sightseeing, to the local markets for shopping, and lunch in small non-touristy restaurants.

We didn't sightsee in Puerto Vallarta. Instead, we were driven to a secluded spot where we swam in the Pacific, ate freshly shucked oysters, and drank margaritas sitting barefoot in the sand. After lunch, Amy and Laura wanted to shop, so I went back to the port. At the next dock, four medics were wheeling a woman strapped onto a stretcher towards an ambulance. She wore an oxygen mask and looked terrified. My heart sank. My last E.R. visit had been just a few weeks ago, but this wasn't happening to me. The minute I got back on the ship, I raced to the Greaseland All-Stars and lost myself in the pulse-pounding music. Then, I went to the poolside stage and sat in the warm water listening to yet another fabulous band.



Cruisers make their moves to the blues. Opposite: Dylan Triplett leading the band





Los Lobos. Right: Elvin Bishop on the guitar. Opposite: Charlie Musselwhite, and

Later that night was a Pro/Am Jam. I'm not new to playing on stage. Every Monday night in NYC, I play harp at Big Ed Sullivan's World-Famous Blues Jam at The Red Lion in Manhattan. Each time I get off stage Big Ed says, "Did you have fun?" I always say "yes," because it's so satisfying to make music with like-minded music lovers.

But this was different - there were hundreds of pro musicians onboard and I was hesitant to sign up. I did anyway. When it was my turn to get up on stage, I played my heart out, and yes, I had fun. How could I not? I had just played on the Legendary



#### Rhythm and Blues Cruise!

But I'd come on this trip to listen, not play, so I went to hear Ruthie Foster. On the way, I passed the piano bar where a crowd of people were cheering and holding up their cellphones, lit up like Christmas trees. At that moment, guitarist/singer Tommy Castro was proposing to Deanna Bogart, who jumped up from the piano, completely surprised. Tommy clapped his hand on his forehead and said, "Oh, I'm so stupid, I forgot the ring."

What I loved besides the unexpected moments was speaking with the musicians during their breaks, and listening to surprise guest musicians like Shemekia Copeland. My favorite event, besides all the great bands, was the Gospel Show which had us all screaming and hollering.

There were also informal presentations such as Taj Mahal cooking up an Indian curry dish. When someone asked him how much garlic to use, he said, "I just go by the feeling."

And then there was D'Mar Martin, the Nightcats' jumping drummer, talking about his 17 years playing with Little Richard. D'mar said he'd be playing the way the band had rehearsed it, then suddenly Little Richard would change the beat and scream at D'mar in front of 30,000 people, "This is your last night." After the show, D'Mar would unhappily approach Little Richard and ask, "Am I fired?" Little Richard would laugh and say, "Nah, I'm just messin' with you."

Every day was like a carnival, and most days had a theme: Most Colorful Outfits





day, Funny Shirt Night, and Derby Day with so many women wearing chic hats I thought I was at Ascot. I put on my nun's costume and joined the costume parade. I walked up on stage and grabbed the mic from a very surprised M.C. and played 24 bars of my bluesiest Amazing Grace. "And who might you be?" he asked. I replied, "I'm a Jewish nun who plays harp." The audience roared, and I

left the stage with a huge grin on my face.

The last night, I was sitting on the back deck listening to the great singer/songwriter Carolyn Wonderland with Shelley King. I could distinguish each instrument making its unique sound and the two voices blending into a kaleidoscope of beautiful music. My toe was healed so I stood up and danced, think-

ing about all the extraordinary musicians I had seen in a week, the new friends I'd made, and thrilled that I'd had the chance to experience so much great blues by so many talented musicians, young and old. In that week I heard more live music than I've heard in my entire lifetime.

"So will you come back on another cruise?" someone asked. Hell yes!

Greasland All-Stars led by Kid Andersen.  
Below: Kingfish and D'mar of Rick Estrin and the Nighcats

