



The high seas

From NASA to Nassau via New York, **JILLIAN BOLGER** discovers the glamour of cruising with the kids.

It's 7 o'clock in the morning, and I'm on a run in the North Atlantic. The sun is beating down already, signalling a hot day ahead, but the salt-tanged air brings coolness and comfort. It's exhilarating up here, pounding the running track as I fill my lungs with the purest sea air. The ocean vistas seem endless, spreading out in every direction, reminding me of how little I am in this great world. Despite

the thrilling sense of isolation, I am amongst hundreds of people, all en route from New York to the Bahamas, and most still in bed.

Travelling with Royal Caribbean, we'll stop off in Florida before setting sail for the Bahamas. I'm with my husband and three children, billeted in two spacious inter-connecting staterooms. Our balconies have been connected too, and while I don't spend as such time out here as I'd expected, I can't imagine ►



Rows of candy coloured buildings sparkle in the Nassau sun



sailing without one. Aside from the sense of space, a balcony connects you to the sea, and makes a beautiful place to start your day or retreat for an afternoon read.

At 348 metres, Anthem of the Seas is one of the largest cruise liners in the world. With 16 passenger decks, holding up to 4,905 guests, this modern machine is run with military precision. Anything you'd hope to find in a high-end resort is on board, plus a whole world of additional attractions you didn't even know you needed. If the scale seems alarming, it isn't. Designed with first-time cruisers in mind, Anthem isn't just easy to navigate, but feels neither too big nor too busy, thanks in no small part to the outstanding staff.

We're here to switch off, relax and have fun. We could loll in the spa all day, or fritter away the kids' inheritance in the casino. We could drink cocktails mixed by robots at the Bionic Bar, or scale the outdoor climbing wall. We could do morning stretch classes or catch the West End-quality shows at night. There's no pressure to

partake in anything, but a Daily Planner left in our stateroom each day tempts us all to try something new. With over 100 choices on any given sea day, it's hard to resist.

Kids are likely to gravitate towards the SeaPlex, an indoor activity hub offering everything from bumper cars to Circus School (yes, you can learn to fly on a trapeze), basketball to table tennis, foosball to Xbox Live. Well designed and self-contained, it's a place where adult guests need never set foot, but the children – especially teens – will love it.

There's the FlowRider, too, a 40-foot-long surf simulator that requires a mixed set of skills – balance, self-belief and strong core muscles. Two of us try it out, one significantly more successful than the other. Skydiving proves easier, as we take part in a fun "flying" session involving jumpsuits and an exhilarating skydiving simulation in a giant glass tube.

Of course, we're not just here for the cruising. We've chosen this itinerary for its super-glamorous credentials. The idea of flitting from New York City



Jillian's sons soak up the view from their balcony aboard the ship

to Florida and the Bahamas on one holiday almost seems too good to be true. It certainly doesn't sound like an obvious family trip, but couldn't have worked out any better.

The kids' clubs are properly specced spaces run by enthusiastic staff. My younger two love their time here and the Kids' Daily Planner allows them to plan their days. Our 12-year-old has a cool teen itinerary too and a spacious den for hanging out with new buddies.

We've a haven too: a peaceful adults-only glass-canopied Solarium, where we hang out for a few indulgent hours. Double sun loungers, hot tubs and plunge pools all seduce us while our children are knee-deep in arts and crafts and our eldest is swimming with his pals. Later,

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we'll get together for family pool time, fuelled by the self-serve frozen yoghurt machine on deck. (Imagine the delight when this is discovered!)

Shore excursions are optional, but make for real highlights. A day trip to Florida's Kennedy Space Center mesmerises, as we experience the Space Shuttle simulator and meet an astronaut. From NASA, we sail to Nassau, where we're greeted by swaying palms and rows of candy coloured



buildings sparkling in the sun. Here we spend the day at Atlantis on Paradise Island, enjoying the thrilling waterpark, aquarium and beach. Next day, we drop anchor in the turquoise waters around CocoCay, Royal Caribbean's private island. Now a world-class waterpark, the building is in progress when we visit, but doesn't stop us from snorkelling in the tropical waters and surrendering to the laid-back Bahamian vibes.

Good food is central to cruising, and Anthem of the Seas offers 14 restaurants, many of which are complimentary. Breakfast is a daily treat, and while the Windjammer may be busy, the selection is vast and impressive. There are quieter

restaurants to start your day in, but there would have been mutiny in our crew if we'd suggested leaving the pancake-doughnut-pastry fest. (We adults stuck to healthier options, but all rules were off for the kids.) A family dinner in Jamie's Italian and date night in Izumi were two of the best meals we ate on board; although, when it comes to fussy eaters, the nightly buffets were excellent.

So, was it all plain sailing? You bet. We hit the high seas in search of a brilliant family holiday and found everything we needed and more: relaxation, luxury, fun, new experiences, and quality family time. The kids rank it as the second best holiday they've ever had (well, a safari in South Africa *is* always going to be hard to beat!). ■

Jillian was a guest of Royal Caribbean. Seven nights Bahamas & Perfect Day Cruise on board Anthem of the Seas, sailing from Cape Liberty (New York) to Port Canaveral (Florida), Nassau, Bahamas, Perfect Day CocoCay, Bahamas and back to Cape Liberty on March 8, 2020, from €684 per person, excluding flights, royalcaribbean.ie.

