

Travel

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CRUISES



Jenn Jackson / Special to The Chronicle

Lesbians escape on Olivia voyages

By Meredith May
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The natural law of public restrooms, which states that despite an equal number of stalls the women's line will always be at least four times longer, does not compute on this ship.

All the stick figures on the men's room doors had been papered over with temporary skirts. Perched inside each urinal — a delicate orchid.

It's an Olivia cruise, a glimpse of what life would be like if women ruled the world — or at least a 936-foot, 11-story Holland America ship — a floating sanctuary where no one cares if gals waltz together in the ballroom, kiss each other in the casino, or change the pronouns in the lyrics at karaoke.



Olivia

Passengers gather on deck during an Olivia cruise, above. Rock cliffs surround a beach seen from cabins when the ship is docked at Cabo San Lucas, top.

Olivia continues on G4

FROM THE COVER

Lesbian cruise offers an escape

Olivia from page G1

People aren't too concerned about those sorts of things where I live in San Francisco either, but soon after my girlfriend and I boarded an Olivia cruise ship in San Diego bound for the Mexican Riviera, it became apparent that we were the exception, not the rule.

"You mean, your life is like this all the time, you can hold hands wherever you want?" we were asked, on more than one occasion.

On the surface, it seemed that for most of the 1,850 passengers, a lesbian cruise isn't just a vacation, but a getaway from living the other 51 weeks a year as an "other." I wanted to find out what happens when you mix a big-ship cruise and travelers seeking an escape on a deeper level, in some cases from the closet and the daily pretending for co-workers, neighbors and relatives back home.

Also, I wanted to find out what makes Olivia passengers among the most loyal in all of travel, keeping the niche travel company not just alive, but thriving.

Resort events

"People need this," said founder Judy Dlugacz of San Francisco, who picked the catch phrase, "Feel Free," for the 150 Olivia trips she's led since turning her feminist music company into a cruise company in 1990.

These days, Olivia offers several cruises a year, including a few on small-boat cruise lines such as Lindblad-National Geographic, as well as a few week-long events at resorts in Hawaii and Mexico.

We were first timers on an Olivia cruise, which is rare. The majority of passengers make Olivia cruising a habit, with many signing up for their next voyage while still onboard, vowing never to vacation in the straight world.

"We don't even care if the ship leaves port, we just want to be on it," said Janie Ibur of St. Louis, who has been on 12 Olivia cruises with her partner of 36 years, Sondra Seiler.

Jenn and I took a seat next to them on a boat ride in Cabo San Lucas. They quizzed us about the gay community in San Francisco, while we asked them to tell us what it was like when they were our age.

"When we started dating in the '70s, people threw rocks at us, and even though times have changed, we still have that muscle memory and it's killed our public affection a bit," Seiler said. "Here we can start to get it back."

Passengers decorated their cabin doors like college dorm rooms, with dry-erase boards, sports team posters, and pictures of their friends and pets. When we dropped by later to visit Janie and Sondra, they had taped a picture of themselves in their 20s, sitting on the steps of a public building. Below that, in a second photo taken this year, they posed in the same location.

We learned from Sondra and Janie that there are Olivia cliques — groups of friends who have been meeting every year on Olivia cruises for decades. They sit together at long banquet tables in the formal dining room, some of the women dressed in gowns, others in tuxes.

Secret signs

It turns out, there's even a secret handshake: fingertips touching overhead, forming an "O." (Singles wear dog tags with the Olivia logo, and are invited to special dinners and pool party mixers.)

In most ways, the cruise offerings are standard — cooking lessons with the chef, yoga on the lido deck, swimming with dolphins or whizzing down a zip-line in the afternoon.

But on this voyage everything had a decidedly female twist.

Femme comics told jokes about their "husbians" and the eucalyptus shower gel in the cabins that might be a little too zesty for sensitive areas; women played all the instruments in the live bands; dance instructors taught all-women classes how to both lead and follow in the two-step; and the club music at night was heavy with songs by girls about



Photos by Jenn Jackson / Special to The Chronicle

Jaci Hoch (left) and Christy Knorr of Nebraska, who were legally married in Iowa, celebrate on an Olivia cruise to Mexico.



Line dancing lessons are among the popular activities offered aboard the ship.

girls.

The Olivia lineup also includes pauses to reflect on the equal rights movement.

I was eager to see the commitment ceremony, which happens on every Olivia cruise. Couples cut a wedding cake the size of a ping-pong table, popped champagne and passed the microphone to tell their falling-in-love stories. (When same-sex marriage was briefly legal in California, more than a dozen Olivia staffers became ordained ministers and legally married 100 couples while at port in San Diego.)

Dozens of happy couples streamed into the room, in everything from wedding gowns to Hawaiian shirts, as the DJ played the wedding standard: "Can't Take My Eyes Off You." Christy Knorr of Omaha came in a strapless, beaded white wedding gown with a train, that she had carried through several airports to celebrate her marriage onboard to Jaci Hoch.

"We've both lived the heterosexual life, and now it's time to be true to ourselves," Knorr said. "And although we already got legally married in Iowa earlier, it was really important to be here, surrounded by our community, all these women, and all this love and support."

When couples introduced themselves it came out more like a salvo than a statement:

"Mary and Alice from Texas, 24 years!"

"Lisa and Carmen from Kansas, 15 years!"

I clapped for each couple, and wondered what it must feel like for those who hide back home to be applauded publicly like this.

Splashy competition

At the other end of the ship, atop the lido deck, another kind of jubilation was in full swing. The pool party had gotten way



Above: When an Olivia cruise takes over a ship, the men's rooms are converted to women's lounges, complete with orchids in the urinals.

Left: Frequent Olivia cruise passengers like to decorate the doors of their cabins.



out of hand. It started out innocently enough, with women putting golf balls into a floating ring. But then the belly flop contest began, and the competition escalated.

Women dropped their books, pulled the ear buds out of their ears and encircled the pool with their lounge chairs. Using the applause-o-meter, divers were

judged on best splash, best scream and best nudity.

Competitors climbed up the penguin waterfall sculpture to get more elevation, ignoring that the pool was only four feet deep.

"Usually I can only get like 20 people to participate in a pool game — this was like nothing I'd ever seen," said Aaron Wry, 26, who's worked for the last three

If you go

FUTURE VOYAGES

The next weeklong, large-ship Olivia cruise will be on the Holland America Ryndam, leaving Tampa on Jan. 29 with stops in the Western Caribbean. Fares for cabin categories that don't already have a waiting list run \$1,500 to \$1,700 per person, double occupancy. Go to www.olivia.com for details and other cruise and resort vacations.

years on cruise ships, but never one chartered by lesbians.

"You guys are serious about celebrating. You're buying up the bar, and every single bingo ticket," he said.

Happy dancers

At night, the upper decks turned into a dance club, and women gathered in their military uniforms to celebrate the recent end of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

Among them was Col. Margarethe Cammermeyer, the former chief nurse for the Washington State National Guard who was the first to challenge the ban on gays in the military, in 1989. Her discharge, legal battle and subsequent reinstatement was later portrayed in the film "Serving in Silence," starring Glenn Close.

Dancers were happy, but many did not want to be quoted in a newspaper — reflecting a reality Cammermeyer described in her talk earlier that day:

"The old guard, they will still have a problem with us; they are not the ones raised with Elton John and Ellen," Cammermeyer said. "It will be another generation before we get through all that."

Among the Olivia passengers who gave Cammermeyer a standing ovation was 80-year-old Gayette Ketchum of Paso Robles, who was interrogated about her sexuality while serving as a weather observer for the Air Force during the Korean War.

"I never felt so low," she told Cammermeyer. "The only reason I wasn't discharged was because my job was critical to the planes flying. But I lost so many of my friends. We started marrying men just to save our jobs. Thank you for serving," she said, handing Cammermeyer a teddy bear wearing a military uniform.

Jenn and I spent the majority of our last day at sea on our balcony. We saw dolphins after sunrise, whales at sunset and the room service guy multiple times in between. After a jam-packed week of flying the rainbow flag, we needed a little escape. Because, at the heart of it, people are people, and, lesbian cruise or straight, it is a vacation, after all.

Meredith May last wrote for Travel on Santorini. E-mail comments to travel@sfgate.com.