

## May Royal Caribbean Cruise

Last month Lunarfans members Dusty Manning and Tom Burns cruised with a group of "Lunarfriends" out of Galveston aboard Royal Caribbean's Navigator of the Seas cruise-liner. The ports of call were Cozumel, Grand Cayman and Falmouth Jamaica. The cruise was for seven days which passed by too quickly.

The ship is over a thousand feet long and includes standard features such as a disco, casino, spa, gym, outdoor movie screen, casual buffet, formal dining room, swimming pools and hot tubs. Additional features are the Flow Rider surfing simulator, a rock climbing wall and even an ice skating rink. As far as I know, nobody in our group took advantage of those special features.

Entertainment included a couple of production shows, a special show by The Texas Tenors and a top celebrity impersonator from Las Vegas. Last but not least was an ice skating



show. One of the house bands was the rocking Bubba Feathers Band out of Memphis. Bubba's father, Charlie Feathers, co-wrote "I Forgot to Remember to Forget Her" which was a big hit for Elvis Presley back in 1955 when he was still with Sun Records. Bubba remembers visiting Elvis at Graceland with his father "back in the day".

Prior to the cruise we did some research on snorkeling sites. That included Google Earth since the water in Cozumel and Grand Cayman is clear enough to see where there might be something besides sand at various sites. A site that looked interesting in Cozumel turned out to be called Playa Corona which is on the old coast road just south of Chankannab Park and near the intersection of new road and old old coast road. On-line reviews, including one just two weeks old, confirmed that it was a good snorkeling site, so we decided to give it a try. Unfortunately when we tried to get a cab in Cozumel, the drivers tried to talk us out of going there. One told us that Playa Corona had closed months ago. Another told us that it was still there but was still badly damaged from the hurricane a few years ago. Obviously, the cab drivers in Cozumel must be getting some perks for delivering cruise ship passengers to some of the bigger beach clubs further south. Those have pretty white sand beaches but the best snorkeling is off rocky shorelines. We persisted and finally found a driver with a van that agreed to take the size of us to Playa Corona for \$24. When we reached Playa Corona we were pleased to find that while it wasn't new and glitzy, it was in good shape and pleasant. There were several tables underneath colorful palapas and we were able to grab the one closest to the water since we arrived there early. Entry into the water was via a line of sandbags placed over the rocks. After swimming north along the shore for a few minutes I started seeing clusters of large purple sea fans waving back and forth in the gentle surge. Soon, large elk horn coral colonies appeared. The tops of some were just a few inches below the water's surface. Juvenile fish hid in the corals' branches. So, there were plenty of good photo opportunities. Later, we swam south along the shore. Again there were a lot of sea fans and some elk horn corals but fewer than along the north shore. There was also a lot of fire coral. Fish sightings included a lizard fish, peacock flounder, an adolescent French angelfish and too many other small colorful fish to identify. While snorkeling in Cozumel it is important to be aware of the current because there are not always good places to exit the water along the rocky





shoreline. Sometimes the only way out is where you got in and that is the case at Playa Corona. Fortunately, the current there was barely detectable that day.

The following morning we arrived off Georgetown, Grand Cayman. There is no pier there big enough for a cruise ship so tender boats shuttle passengers back and forth. According to our research there were several good snorkeling sites within walking distance of the tender pier. One of the sites is named "Cheeseburger Reef" due to its proximity to the Burger King. It was maybe only a ten minute walk to the north but it took us a little longer due to some iguanas in a row of beautiful bougainvillea bushes that we just had to stop and try to photograph. Once there we found a little beach with a small inlet between the rocks. It was actually just north of the helipad from which the helicopter tours take off. It was the easiest snorkeling entry/exit site ever because the rocks were like benches perfectly placed for donning and removing fins. Swimming out I found a hole in the rocks in which a number of nocturnal big eyed squirrel fish were hiding. Turning left I swam out over a mostly sandy bottom which didn't seem very interesting until I came across a small sea turtle resting on the bottom. I followed it for a few minutes and took a couple of good pictures of it. On the way back I found a school of numerous cuttlefish ranging in size from a few inches long to over a foot long. It was fun to photograph them and watch them change their colors and patterns. But, it was my turn to watch our stuff on the beach so somebody else could snorkel for a while.

When it was my turn to snorkel again I headed to the right, away from Burger King. After a while I found myself above a school of thousands of silversides so thick that I could not see the bottom. But then a four foot long tarpon swam below me and created a tunnel through them. I tried to follow the tarpon through the tunnel but it was too fast for me. There were several other large tarpon pursuing the silversides as well. One was big enough to host a remora. While playing with the silversides and watching the tarpon, I discovered a new snorkeling hazard. I heard a horn honking which I ignored at first. But, it honked again so I looked up and discovered that an amphibious tour bus was waiting to enter the water and I was snorkeling just off the boat ramp it used. I had never worried about getting hit by a tour bus while snorkeling before! Oh well, I doubt anyone recognized the idiot snorkeler blocking the bus.

Our third and last stop was at the colonial town of Falmouth, Jamaica in Trelawny Parish on the northwest coast. For better or worse, Royal Caribbean built a cruise terminal there with two berths and a tourist complex with shops, restaurants and bars. Excursions from there are relatively expensive because Falmouth is sort of in the middle of nowhere east of Montego Bay and gasoline there is about \$8 US per gallon. Going off by yourself there isn't recommended due to the high crime rate. So, we just took a \$20 historical tram tour of the town which lasted maybe an hour and a half. The main stop on the tour was St. Peter's Anglican (English/Episcopal) Church which was built in the 1790s and still has its original mahogany furnishings. The furnishings include the old pew boxes which are elevated above floor level to protect them against flooding during hurricanes. There was restoration work going on in and around the church while we visited. I hope to visit there again someday and see it and other historic buildings fully restored. Besides history, our tour guide pointed out a number of important plants such as breadfruit and ackee fruit trees. Jamaica is also famous for its coffee which is grown up in the Blue Mountains on the east side of the island.

