

Clean marine

Ocean Cay is more than simply a beach playground, discovers Joanna Booth on a trip to MSC Cruises' private island in the Bahamas



As the board wobbles gently beneath me, I manage to clamber to my feet and paddle off across Ocean Cay's calm lagoon. My stand-up paddleboarding skills are functional rather than stylish – I can get around, and love doing it, but it's hardly graceful. You can see the effort. I'm the opposite of the proverbial swan that glides along elegantly without showing that it's paddling furiously beneath.

Unlike me, Ocean Cay itself is very much the swan of cruise lines' private islands. On the surface, it's all about low effort, maximum reward. Expansive white beaches are lined with loungers; bars right on the sand dispense giant cocktails; and there's a secluded spa, where you can have a massage in a shady cabana as the sea breezes ruffle your hair.

If you're trying to tempt cruisers back onto the water, this is the way to do it.

OPERATION CLEAN-UP

There's a lot more to Ocean Cay than meets the eye, however. This swan has had to paddle like hell to get where it is today after starting off as rather an ugly duckling.

When MSC Cruises leased the site from the Bahamian government, it wasn't a particularly pretty prospect. Formerly a sand-mining facility, the island resembled a rubbish dump. "I snorkelled here before we cleaned it up, and you couldn't see the

seabed for tyres and cables," says Michelle McGregor, Ocean Cay's manager.

The clean-up operation was massive. Chemical spills were remediated, and more than 1,500 tons of scrap metal was removed. Then 5,000 trees and 75,000 plants and shrubs were introduced. Perhaps most significantly, a 64-square-mile marine reserve was created around the island. Large areas of coral have been replanted, replacing and creating reefs to enrich the marine ecosystem.

SUSTAINABLE SAILING

All trace of Ocean Cay's industrial past is gone. Now, visitors will find a pristine island with two miles of platinum beaches lapped by clear, Bahamas-blue water – the only clue that it hasn't always been this way is the somewhat diminutive height of the palm trees, and these won't take long to grow.

The chance to reverse Ocean Cay's ecological fortunes was all part of the appeal for the cruise line. It would have been simpler and cheaper to lease an untouched island where nature thrived intact, but this was a chance to make good on the line's commitment to sustainability, which has seen it make marine operations carbon neutral, develop LNG-powered ships and set a target to eliminate single-use plastics.

Ocean Cay's radical recovery programme has turned a site that had almost no value – either to tourists or wildlife – ➤

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | OCEAN CAY

ISLAND ACTIVITIES

CHILL

☼ Spice up your sunbathing by hiring a cabana, a floating beach mat or an inflatable raft.

☼ Cruise around with minimum effort on an electric pedalo, or take a boozy boat trip on a rum-soaked catamaran excursion.

☼ In the evening, book a sunset beach picnic or champagne cruise, then finish up with a beachside stargazing session.

THRILL

☼ See how the environment has bounced back with a snorkelling trip in the marine reserve, where you glide over a sunken shipwreck populated by tropical fish, endangered corals, stingrays and a resident pod of dolphins.

☼ Take a guided trip by kayak or stand-up paddleboard, or rent equipment and go it alone.

☼ Scale the 165 steps to the top of the candy-striped lighthouse for the ultimate sea view.

☼ The action doesn't have to stop when the sun goes down – rent a special stand-up paddleboard fitted with LED lights and you can glide around the lagoon under the stars.



PICTURED: Scenes from Ocean Cay, including The Spa, snorkellers and an aerial view of the Bahamian island

PICTURES: MSC Rights/Michel Verdure, Conrad Schutt, AP Images



and resurrected it, to the benefit of both. And with cruise operations suspended for the best part of a year, the ecosystem around Ocean Cay has had even more time to rebound, ready for visitors to see it at its best.

Environmentally, the process isn't over. An on-island research centre is being developed that will give scientists and students a permanent base from which to work, monitoring local marine populations and undertaking a study into 'supercorals' – tougher strains that can survive the effects of climate change.

LIFE'S A BEACH

While Ocean Cay's environmental credentials are key for MSC Cruises, guests can choose how much attention they wish to pay to the green agenda. On the island, drinks are served in reusable glasses, straws are biodegradable, and reef-friendly sunscreen is encouraged, but beyond that, visitors won't find sustainability shoved in their faces.

The main focus is relaxation. There are eight beaches, including one dedicated to families, a secluded stretch of sand near the spa, and a private beach with butler service for Yacht Club guests, alongside their own stylish clubhouse. Food trucks and bars on almost every beach mean sustenance is always just a few steps away, though there's a lively main bar and a central buffet for more choice and a buzzier atmosphere.

Active guests will love the watersports on offer, from

“As the sun sets, a Junkanoo Parade with costumed dancers stretches from the main bar to Ocean Cay's striking lighthouse

kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding to snorkelling and scuba diving. As the sun sets, a traditional Bahamian Junkanoo Parade with costumed dancers stretches around from the main bar to Ocean Cay's striking red and white lighthouse. When it's fully dark, there's a spectacular light show – the tower itself flaring up, illuminated by 23,000 bulbs. They're energy-efficient LEDs, of course... **TW**

BOOK IT

All **MSC Cruises** ships sailing from Miami and Port Canaveral will call at Ocean Cay as part of their Caribbean itineraries. In winter 2021-22, this includes MSC vessels *Armonia*, *Divina*, *Meraviglia* and *Seashore*, and for summer 2022, *Divina* and *Seashore*. Prices start from £369 for a seven-night sailing (cruise-only).

msccruises.co.uk