

Oceans of fun

Wondering what's new for fun-loving families at sea? The *Travel Weekly* team takes in some of the latest ship launches to sell this summer

TRIED & TESTED by Jane Archer

Symphony of the Seas

Royal Caribbean International gives you all sorts of stats about Ultimate Abyss, the two ferocious-looking tube slides on new ship *Symphony of the Seas*.

At 100ft, they are the tallest slides at sea. They take you plunging between decks 16 and six in about 13 seconds. You'll be travelling at around 10mph.

What they neglect to mention is that to get to the slides, which you ride with feet and legs tucked safely in a sack, you have to cross a glass platform some 150ft above sea level.

Most probably don't even notice; for those of us who don't do heights, getting across is more challenging than the hair-raising plunge from the sports zone to the Boardwalk below. But it's one of those things you just have to do if you're coming aboard.

► BIGGER AND BETTER

Launched in March, *Symphony of the Seas* is the fourth in Royal Caribbean's series of world's biggest ships that started with *Oasis of the Seas* in 2009. In the spirit of evolution, each has been a little bigger and, dare one say, a little better.

Royal Caribbean president and chief executive officer Michael Bayley says: "We design ships with tradition, revolution and evolution in mind. There is something for every demographic on these ships."

So while *Symphony* matches predecessor *Harmony of the Seas* in terms of length and width (if standing upright they would be

taller than the Eiffel Tower), it steals the world's largest cruise ship title from *Harmony* by being 2,000 tons heavier. It is a whopping 228,081 tons, the same as 17,000 African elephants, in case anyone is wondering.

As for being better, top prize definitely goes to a new glow-in-the-dark laser tag game, where teams of robots and aliens do battle for control of Planet Z (the 'planet' is actually an inflatable maze on top of the ice-rink in Studio B; when it's not in action, there are ice-skating sessions). It's great fun, if impossible to comply with the 'no running' rule.

► DINNER TIME

Among other new features, *Symphony* has seafood restaurant Hooked and a diner-cum-sports bar called Playmakers, with 31 TVs and a pub grub menu.

Both cost extra and join a line-up of restaurants that include returning favourites Jamie's Italian, Chops Grille steakhouse, 150 Central Park and Wonderland, which pairs quirky decor with eccentric dishes such as 'crispy crab cones' and 'snap, crackle and pork'. Restaurant prices range from \$39 to \$49 per person.

Among complimentary options are El Loco Fresh, a new outdoor Mexican diner, and meals in the main dining room or Windjammer self-service. There are also free sandwiches, salads, pastries and pizza in the Park Cafe on Central Park, an area planted with real shrubs and trees, and the cafes and bars that line the two-deck-high Royal Promenade.

Royal Caribbean was behind the curve when it came to putting water slides on its ships, but made up for it with Perfect Storm (pictured), a trio of flumes

that debuted on *Harmony* and also feature on *Symphony*. Two are straightforward slides – even if there's nothing straight about the way they twist and turn – but the third takes you into a bowl that you whizz around before plunging out.

► ROOM WITH A VIEW

Some of the ship's extra weight can be attributed to the fact that more cabins have been added (there are 2,759 v 2,747 on *Harmony*), taking the total passenger count to 5,518 at double occupancy, or a maximum of 6,680 when all berths are full.

Among accommodation options, a new family loft suite has a slide for kids to get from their bedroom to the lounge below, a Lego wall, a climbing wall on the balcony and a price tag from £30,000 a week.

Children will love it of course, but I suspect parents would swap its dazzling orange and yellow colour scheme for one of the other loft suites, whose decor is gorgeous. They also come with complimentary speciality dining, drinks packages and free Wi-Fi, and are attended by a 'Royal genie' (butler).

Entertainment is a mix of old and new, with musical *Hairspray* making a return after its debut on *Oasis* back in 2009, and a home-grown theatre production about flying. *1977* is an ice-skating show with special effects that even create a whale beneath the ice.

In the open-air AquaTheater, a feature on all the Oasis-class ships, divers plunge from 10-metre-high boards into tiny pools below. It does make tackling Ultimate Abyss seem rather tame, but who cares. There is something for everyone on this ship, even if it's just overcoming one's irrational fears!



PICTURE: ANDY NEWMAN

RIGHT: Guy's Pig & Anchor Bar-B-Que Smokehouse & Brewhouse



LEFT: SkyRide

➔ **TRIED & TESTED**
by Harry Kemble

Carnival Horizon

Carnival Horizon is only an hour into its voyage and already rows of excited passengers are doing the Cupid Shuffle – the line’s own sailaway dance – in the Beach Pool area.

The atmosphere is alive on this sailing from Barcelona to Naples, one leg of a 13-day voyage. It’s akin to the buzz of the first night a famous rock star takes up a long-awaited Vegas residency in front of a devoted audience.

Throughout the Vista-class vessel, it feels like party central. Every waking hour there is a thrill for fun lovers.

The ship is also filled with innovations that proved popular on sister vessel *Carnival Vista*, which launched two years ago.

On Deck 12, there’s a Dr Seuss-themed water park with

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its distinctive coloured slides – gentle and not so gentle – for all ages to enjoy. Flinging yourself down the 213ft Fun Things slide, next to The Cat in the Hat water tunnel, there’s barely even time to say ‘hi’ to the lifeguards before they point you down the tube.

Your body rockets through the shadows, hurtling round corners at a serious pace before you burst out into the pool below with a grin on your face.

The SkyRide makes a return on Carnival Horizon. You can either race a loved one on the cycle track suspended 150ft in the air,

or gaze out into the ocean with the ship beneath you.

But a word of warning for the adrenaline junkies: if you are looking for a quick kick, Dr Seuss WaterWorks may be a better bet because the SkyRide is such a hit, there can be queues.

▶ **FOOD WITH FLAIR**

While the water park and the SkyRide are exhilarating, there are plenty of opportunities to unwind, or pause to enjoy a leisurely dinner.

The 133,500-ton vessel debuts the intimate and unusual Bonsai Teppanyaki on the Promenade Deck. Up to 16 passengers can enjoy main courses such as black cod, shichimi spice grilled chicken and filet mignon, with crockery being whirled around by the skilful teppanyaki chef. A meal costs between \$25 to \$30, but there were no shortage of takers, and a combination menu is also on offer for a break from the Far East delicacies.

The new Guy’s Pig & Anchor Bar-B-Que Smokehouse & Brewhouse is another place to relax, with lunch included or dinner at a supplement. It has renowned barbecue favourites with an array of craft beers, created by the only brewmaster in the North American cruise industry. They include ParchedPig Smoked Porter, ParchedPig Farmhouse Ale, and ParchedPig West Coast IPA, which are all brewed on board.

▶ **SOFT SELL**

Our balcony stateroom was comfortable enough, but it was hard to stay put and miss out on all the action going on outside.

Carnival president Christine Duffy meant it when she said the brand puts the guest experience first when building a new ship. “It is not about the hardware, it is about the software,” she said, explaining why Carnival Horizon is geared towards creating the best possible onboard experience. ➔



➔ **TRIED & TESTED**

by Harry Kemble

Norwegian Bliss

The amount of fun offered on board Norwegian Bliss is simply staggering.

At one vantage point by the vessel's go-kart track on Deck 19, you can see the hairpin turn drivers have to negotiate, as well as the laser tag and the aqua park - and those are just the upper decks.

But it's not only adrenaline-packed activities that Norwegian Cruise Line's Bliss has in store. There is an exclusive area, The Haven, for passengers wanting a private deck with sumptuous sunbeds and 24-hour butler service.

▶ **STAY COOL**

Spectacularly, The Haven houses 52 owner's suites, 24 family villas, and 24 penthouses, which are sure to be popular when Bliss sails the Caribbean this winter.

This extra luxurious space is a bonus, as Bliss has 80 fewer cabins than sister ship Escape, which passengers complained was a bit of a squeeze.

During a two-night Bliss sailing, my balcony stateroom wasn't huge, but had a sumptuous bed that was just as good as those in The Haven.

▶ **SPECIAL MENU**

We ate at two speciality restaurants - Los Lobos, a premium Mexican



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restaurant, and Cagney's Steakhouse, already familiar to repeat Norwegian passengers, near the ship's stern.

Waiter Cheeky and sommelier Ernest expertly guided us through our meal at Los Lobos. However, it was the chef who made the meal stand out, immediately offering to whip

up a guacamole without onions to accommodate one diner with allergies - and having tasted both of the freshly-prepared dips, we couldn't tell the difference; both were mind-blowing.

We got great levels of service at à la carte Cagney's Steakhouse too. The filet mignon (\$16) melted in the mouth and was cooked to perfection. The price tag here if you go for every course is about \$35 a head.

As well as the main dining rooms, other complimentary options include The Local, with classic pub grub, and The Haven Restaurant, exclusively for guests of The Haven. Speciality venues include Food Republic for sushi, Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville for poolside favourites, La Cucina and Le Bistro, which tick off Italian and French cuisine, Q for Texas barbecue bites, and Ocean Blue for seafood.

▶ **TECH TROUBLES**

The only downside was the perennial cruise passenger's complaint about the lack of a fast internet connection on board.

Saying that, poor Wi-Fi did not affect the rest of the tech on the ship. For instance, the laser tag was run efficiently with passengers of all ages enjoying it, for a fee of \$5 per session.

It's clear Norwegian Bliss has cemented the line's place as a direct rival to other family-oriented lines, so if you've got clients with kids searching for a fun-packed escape, send them on Bliss and they won't go home disappointed.



PICTURE: RICK DIAZ PHOTOGRAPHY

ABOVE:
The Haven

LEFT:
Laser Tag