



May 2013



We have returned from the second ToaD sailing, this time on Royal Caribbean's Oasis of the Seas. We had a fantastic time with everyone and look forward to future sailings. I have included some information about our impression of the Oasis of the Seas and comparisons to other lines we have been on.

We also had a chance to get to Walt Disney World for our first runDisney event. Between the cruise and the race, we were too exhausted to enjoy Epcot's Flower and Garden Festival. Thankfully, Leo DeCandia was able to check it out and get us some photos. Stay tuned for these in our blog and our Facebook wall!

We are heading west to Disneyland for a special celebration. My husband and I will be celebrating our 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and thought Disneyland would be a great place for that. We'll have more time to check out Carsland this time. We'll also get to see Fantasy Faire and hopefully catch a preview of the new show. The best part of the trip is that we are staying at the Disneyland Hotel for the first time.

**Flag Retreat**  
By Nicole Riley

Anyone who knows me knows that I love Disney. People are constantly asking me when I'm returning to Disney World. With over twenty trips under my belt in the last fifteen years, you would think that I've seen it all. Yet it never fails, each and every time I experience something new.

Our latest "new find" happened over Spring Break. My daughter and I had spent the day at the Magic Kingdom. We were getting ready to leave for dinner. As we approached the Town Square, we noticed that

a small crowd was forming around the flagpole. We soon learned this was the daily Flag Retreat ceremony. Each day at five o'clock, the flag is lowered and folded. I've often seen in my daily life a flag being lowered after a day of school or at the end of business hours. But, I've never seen it quite like this.



This is a ceremony. A visiting veteran is selected to help with this process. While we were visiting, the veteran who was chosen to help also had a young lady with him. I would guess her to be about seven years old. She led the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance. The flag was lowered and folded all while patriot music was played by a band in the background. There were several cast members that lined the street creating a pathway for the veteran to carry the folded flag. I would guess that in total there were three or four songs played.

It was a perfect ending to our stay at Disney World to be reminded what a great country we live in. I was highly impressed with Disney to care enough to respect our flag in a way that doesn't always happen and to show respect and honor to a person who has helped protect what our country stands for. It has taken twenty trips for me to see this, but definitely something that I will watch over and over again.



### **Is Disney Cutting Back on Discounts?**

By Tracy Whipple

The simple answer is yes.

A couple years ago, there wasn't a day in the year that we couldn't find some kind of discount at Disney World, except maybe Christmas. Those days appear to be gone.

Discounts used to be simple – 20% on value resorts, 25% on moderate resorts, 30% on deluxe resorts. Now we are seeing different amounts in each of the categories with some discounts as low as 5%, if available at all.

Free dining dates used to start mid-August and continue through the end of September. This year, the dates released are for a mere three weeks in September.

What we are seeing is more benefits to the PIN codes. How do you get a PIN code? There isn't a clear answer to that, but one way to improve your chances is to register to receive marketing information from Disney and the Disney family of companies. I personally have not ever received a PIN offer though people sharing a room with me have. PIN codes can come by email or snail mail and are specific to a person and address, so they cannot be shared. The PIN holder must be traveling.

Your travel agent can book a PIN offer for you, we just need the 15-digit number on the offer.

It is always a good idea to work with a travel agent on your Disney vacation reservations. With the last round of discounts, I heard stories of people sitting on hold for more than 4 hours for Disney to adjust their reservation. We monitor the pricing and promotions and get them applied for you as soon as they become available. Most of our agents who had adjustments to make were done with all reservations within 30 minutes of Disney opening.

### **Juneau: The Alaska for Everyone**

By Keira Alkema

When I fall asleep at night, I don't think about the homework I neglected to do, the dishes I left unwashed, or the looming threat of the zombie apocalypse. My mind is far from school, sanitation, and the walking dead. Instead, it's in a town approximately 961 miles north of my current location. It's in Juneau, Alaska, my adopted summer home and the only place that has ever managed to capture the majority of my waking thoughts and lucid dreams.



Like most towns in Southeast Alaska, Juneau has no system of roads that connect to other parts of the state. If you drive far enough to the northern or southern ends of town, the roads simply end.

My fascination with Alaska first manifested itself in my fifth grade state report. I distinctly remember gluing pictures of polar bears to poster board, feeling satisfied with my perceived knowledge and skill. At the tender age of twelve, I read Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, prompting me to seriously consider visiting the Great North for the first time. My fanciful daydreams consisted of a tween version of myself roaming the foothills of the Alaska Range, amidst moose and mountains, lost in the wild like Krakauer's protagonist, Chris McCandless.

A few years later, I made my Alaska dream come to fruition, while combining the necessity of making money during my summer break from university. In early 2012, when I was offered a job in the capital city Juneau, I immediately accepted, ensuring that my dream of visiting the state would be memorable.

When I fully realized I would be spending three months in the Last Frontier's capital *city*, my hopes of living out some Arctic, Jack London fantasy were dashed. Within ninety minutes of my arrival in town, however, I found myself staring at the terminus of the Mendenhall Glacier, the antithesis of urbanity and the epitome of the natural Alaska I originally sought.

You could say that Juneau was quick to prove me wrong.

It didn't take much longer for me to understand that Juneau was unlike any other place I had ever visited. From downtown, it's possible to walk past the Governor's Mansion *and* wander up into the mountains on the state's oldest road, Perseverance Trail. In less than twenty minutes, it's possible travel from sea level to nearly four thousand feet upwards

onto the side of Mt. Roberts via the Mt. Roberts Tram. In the course of a day, it's possible to enjoy the rich history only found in state capitals and the insane natural beauty only found in Alaska.



I spent three months in Juneau, and when I wasn't working, I took advantage of everything the city had to offer. I saw glaciers calve at the South Sawyer Glacier in Tracy Arm, I serendipitously met Governor Sean Parnell at a community picnic, and I spent days climbing the mountains that surround the city. As a result, I returned to the Lower Forty-Eight with three months' worth of memories that are sure to stay with me for the rest of my life.

As you read me wax poetic about my extended stay in Juneau, you may feel excited about the prospect of seeing glaciers, overwhelmed at the amount to see and do, or even bothered that your visit to Alaska is significantly less time than my gratuitous summer break. THIS IS NATURAL. Yes, Juneau has a lot to offer, but the good news is that if you plan carefully, you can experience a lot of it even with the strictest time constraints.

One year ago, I foolishly thought my chances of seeing Sarah Palin were greater than seeing a bald eagle scoop up a salmon from the Gastineau Channel (note: I saw the latter at least twice during the summer). And fortunately for me, the only Sarah Palin sighting I had was her likeness in the form of a cardboard cutout on the steps of the Alaska T-Shirt Company on Franklin Street.



It's one thing to read a book, write a glorified book report, or watch a Travel Channel special about a place, but to experience it firsthand is entirely different and infinitely more valuable. Travel in all forms allows for an enhanced understanding of the world, and to spend even a week in a place as unique as Southeast Alaska is treat for any traveler. Regardless of the fast-paced nature of your itinerary, know that the Alaska you always dreamed of visiting is well-within reach!

### **ToaD Oasis of the Seas Cruise**

By Tracy Whipple

One of the first things I noticed about the Oasis of the Seas that totally impressed me was the speed at which we boarded the ship. I am not sure how they do it, but we arrived at the port by 11:00 am and were on the ship by 11:40 am. This was not unusual. Even members of our group who arrived later were onboard quickly. This may have been due to the email message we received on Friday telling us to arrive later (each with a different time), but I doubt it since part of our group arrived after 1:00 pm.

Royal Caribbean and Oasis of the Seas definitely have a lot of activities for everyone onboard. The daily Compass was never less than five pages double sided. They definitely had all age groups covered as well. For families looking for a lot of entertainment on the ship, I think Royal Caribbean is a fantastic choice.

For those that want to be taken care of on vacation, who expect top-notch service, I would consider

another cruise line. When we were woken up at 5:00 am due to someone turning the AquaTheater screens on CNN at a very high volume and it took 25 minutes to be adjusted, I was told that maybe a ship as large at the Oasis is not a good choice for me by an officer. Since I had similar feelings about the customer service on smaller RCCL ships, I think it is a cruise line issue for me.

When I ask for assistance with anything, I want the first person I talk with to take care of me. It may mean that they have to contact someone else but they don't just say "I can't help you" and leave it at that. Too often we were either not given answers or told where to go to get the answers (which meant a lot of running around on a ship that we were already getting a work out on).

This doesn't mean that Royal Caribbean isn't a good choice for some. And it also doesn't mean that this is the service level you will get from all Royal Caribbean crew. We met a couple different crew who were very helpful.



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