



Irma Thomas, the Soul Queen of New Orleans, is always a treat with her classic style delivered from the heart Photo by ©Joseph A. Rosen



Blues cruisers enjoying the Lido Pool Mid-Ship venue onboard the ms Koningsdam Photo by ©Joseph A. Rosen

Getting the Royal Treatment Aboard the ms Koningsdam

By Katie Martin

I had been looking forward to the Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise (LRBC) #28 in January 2017 since I heard they were sailing on Holland America's newest (and biggest) ship, the ms Koningsdam, whose name is derived from the Dutch word for king: "koning." After two cruises, I had come to expect the best from Holland America and the LRBC team. How could I resist the first blues cruise on a brand-new pinnacle-class of ship? My daughter Grace was game to join me for a week of music, food, sunshine and first-class service aboard "The King's Ship," so away we went.

Music is literally the theme of the Koningsdam. The ship features architectural elements that recall musical instruments such as the mid-ship three-story harp-like spiral staircase. Many of the paintings and sculptures that grace the Koningsdam's walls

and alcoves include musical themes and entertainment icons from Prince to Frank Sinatra. We made sure to hit every stairwell on our onboard "gallery tour." The ship's "music walk" on the second deck meanders along venues dedicated to B.B. King, Billboard and the Lincoln Center. It gave me chills more than once thinking that the vessel was dedicated to music history, and we were sailing with a whole ship of living blues music legends.

One of the first icons we met was Irma Thomas, checking out the World Stage venue for her upcoming performance. The World Stage venue is smaller than the main theaters of the ms Westerdam and ms Nieuw Amsterdam ships, but the round stage and amazing artistic lighting makes each seat a winner for catching every moment of dynamic acts like Walter Trout and Marquise Knox.



Always a late-night favorite, Tommy Castro and company join together in a Pro Jam session Photo by ©Joseph A. Rosen



Multi-instrumentalist Taj Mahal, an international treasure, has fused and defined his blues with many cultural influences Photo by ©Bob Sekinger

Many of the upscale niceties of the Koningsdam's understated elegance are exemplified in the service itself. Even the Lido Restaurant felt less like a cafeteria, and more like an upscale bistro market with stations. Instead of a salad bar, gourmet salads are tossed to order in large personal bowls. We went back daily for a bowl of fresh greens and a regal portion of seared ahi tuna.

Another great feature is the wide array of for-pay restaurants. We tried two of Holland America's signature eateries – lunch at the Pinnacle Grill and dinner at Tamarind (on Pajama Night where our luxurious Holland America bathrobes made the perfect attire – even Taj Mahal gave us a nod of approval). What a lovely change of pace to relax and escape the crowd for a moment! And for only \$25 per person, well worth the price for a meal fit for a king.

For blues cruisers, more than anything else, Koningsdam means more venues with more cozy nooks to enjoy performances. The Queen's Lounge was a two-story affair and had the atmosphere of an old theatre. Sister Sparrow fit right in with the retro vibe in an adorable vintage print dress and heels, as she performed with her band, the Dirty Birds.

The two-story Lido Pool Mid-Ship venue was a perfect place for an afternoon chill. We especially enjoyed shows such as the Phantom Blues Band with Tons of Brass and JJ Grey & Mofro from the comfy loungers of the upper deck. With the Dive-In burger joint on the lower deck and the New York Pizza & Deli restaurant above, cruisers could really pick a spot and relax for a show or two, complete with refreshments. Two wings of upper level seating made the second story a great place to view the entertainment, especially the Pro Jams on the Seaview Pool AFT stage, with Tommy Castro and company. We even enjoyed a few shows from the triple jacuzzi for a little "spa time" on a peasant's budget.

Even with all the venue action, we found time to luxuriate in our stateroom thoroughly, taking advantage of free room service and live coverage on our television of the World Stage, Queen's Lounge and Mid-Ship venues. For even more royal touches, our cabin steward left treats and presents from the LRBC team nightly. On our last night, I felt especially honored to receive a little commemorative pin and a note from Holland America letting me know I had logged enough miles to be a Mariner Society member.

The airport hustle-and-bustle was a rude awakening from the royal blues treatment we had grown accustomed to over our week on the King's Ship. The next chance to sail away with the LRBC aboard the ms Koningsdam is February 4–11, 2018, to Tortola, San Juan, Puerto Rico and Grand Turk. For more information on upcoming LRBC cruises, visit www.bluescruise.com. 🎵

Katie Martin operates Ozcat Radio 89.5 FM of Vallejo, CA with her husband David. She uses her skills as a writer and graphic designer on behalf of the station's website and social media. You can catch her radio show, The Sunny Mix, on the air Fridays from 9 a.m.–noon PST at www.ozcatradio.com.



Judy and Geoff Alexander (far left, far right) honor Michael Burks' widow Bobbie (center) in his memory at the LRBC's Virgin Party Photo by ©Joseph A. Rosen

From the editor: You see them on every Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise – behind the scenes, on stage hosting the Virgin Party and the Awards Party, in the crowd... WHO ARE THEY? Geoff and Judy Alexander are some of the original blues cruisers. These days, they help to make each cruise the best ever.

Original Blues Cruisers As told by Geoff Alexander

In the early 1990s, George Myers and Roger Naber, partners in Kansas City's premiere blues venue, the Grand Emporium, conceived the idea for the Ultimate Rhythm & Blues Cruise (URBC). In 1994, Judy learned about the URBC from an ex-boyfriend (who was also my fraternity brother). The third sailing was scheduled for January 1995, and one day when I came home from work, Judy announced, "We're going to go on a cruise." I retorted, "Over my dead body." Getting on on a big ship full of my friends to visit foreign cultures seemed like such a wrong way to learn about other places and cultures.

But then, Judy discovered a newsletter from a professor at San Jose State who had been on URBC2 and written an article about his experience, illustrated with a photo of Marcia Ball chatting with cruisers around the swimming pool. I had been a big Marcia Ball fan for decades, and that was the seminal turning point for me. I finally got it – the point of this cruise was not becoming one with the Caribbean Islanders, it was immersing yourself in blues music with fellow blues fans and musicians.

So, Judy was right. We went on URBC3 in 1995, became friends with George Myers and got involved in the URBC business. Sadly, in 1998, the URBC went bankrupt and George passed away. But for Judy and I, our lives had already changed irreversibly. We stayed in touch with Roger Naber, and when he resurrected the cruise as the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise (LRBC), we became one of his partners. URBC had paved the way, and in the intervening years, the hunger among URBC cruisers for a new cruise reached a fever pitch. In 2001, we announced the first ever Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise at the Tampa Bay Blues Festival, and 17 days later, tickets sold out.

October 2017 will be the 29th LRBC, and will be the 32nd blues cruise for Judy and me. The cruise has created an international family of blues cruisers. At any blues music event anywhere in the world, you will meet other folks wearing LRBC garb. It's like meeting up with your cousins; there is a common shared experience that creates a real bond. After every cruise, folks ask, "How was the cruise?" I always respond, "It was the best ever." And it is always true.