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Getaway: Winter blues? Try vitamin sea

by *Cheré Coen*

We do have it easy here in the Deep South when it comes to winter's wrath, but that doesn't mean we don't tire of the dreariness and cold. And even though our closets aren't full of mukluks and mufflers, it's only natural to dream of warmer climates when the cold wind starts blowing from Canada.

A quick and easy escape is to drive the short distance to New Orleans and jump aboard either Carnival or Norwegian Cruise Lines, both of which sail down the Mississippi to enjoy various vacation lengths in the western Caribbean. Carnival Triumph, for instance, offers trips as short as four days to Mexico or as long as a week to Belize, Honduras and Cozumel.

It's a bit of a stretch traveling down the Mississippi and across the Gulf, but there's plenty of activities aboard ship, such as the casino, shopping, pools, lounges with live music, spa and salon and camps for children, not to mention the giant TV screen on the Lido Deck where Saints games are aired when available.

In the evenings, there are two seatings for dinner — with formal nights scheduled — followed by a Vegas-style show in a luxurious theater. And because it's cruising, there's always plenty of good food and drink, with ongoing buffets, 24-hour burger and pizza stands and specialty spots such as the nightly sushi cart.

The Triumph takes two and a half days to traverse the Gulf and arrive in Belize for a day in the small Caribbean country full of jungles, rain forests and adventures through Mayan caves, then another night to reach Isla Roatan in Honduras, a beautiful island new to tourism with an unspoiled feel and friendly natives. Carnival just opened a new port at Roatan where cruisers can enjoy the protected beach, New Orleans Daiquiris (no kidding) at the "Big Easy Bar" and lots of shopping without leaving the area, but you'd be remiss not to visit this exquisite island and take in some snorkeling or kayaking on the pristine blue waters. The third visit is Cozumel, with its equally gorgeous waters, eco-beaches preserved from tourism and coastal Mayan ruins.

All locations offer excursions — at an extra cost — through the Carnival Web site or with companies independently arranged. Visitors can also rent scooters at places like Cozumel or Roatan (it's not recommended in Belize because of the condition of roads) or take taxis to nearby destinations.

Since the boat heads back north on its travels through the Caribbean, the trip back to New Orleans only takes a little more than a day.

Is cruising for me?

Cruising today is affordable and includes everything you will need on board, including food at any hour of the day or night. However, items such as soft drinks, alcohol and specialty coffees are extra.

After boarding the ship, guests receive a card they will use to charge any incidentals. Used wisely,

guests will leave within budget, but some have been known to receive quite a shock at the end of the cruise.

Be prepared for a long line when checking in; a recent voyage took two hours to make it through from parking to entering the cabin. It's best to get to the Port of New Orleans early, before the required time. There is a charge for parking in New Orleans, so you will save money by having someone drop you off.

A photo ID and birth certificate is required to the foreign travel, but it's advisable to obtain a passport.

Excursions are extra but are worth the money to break away from the American-style shopping ports and restaurants. Be adventurous, and see the countries with natives.

Excursion recommendations include: Raiders of the Lost Mayan Cave adventure in Belize, Kayak and Snorkeling Adventure in Isla Roatan with lunch at the fun Cannibal Café and the Beach Buggy Adventure in Cozumel that includes a home-style Mexican lunch on the beach. All come with friendly guides who share the love of their home ports.
