

PIRATES

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entertainment cruises in Virginia Beach three years ago. The company changed ownership and permanently relocated last October to Southwest Florida, where about 30,000 riders have set sail with the rowdy, playful and raunchy crew since then.

My afternoon cruise was very kid-friendly, with mostly families onboard. One of the pirates (Gun Smith) looked and sounded like Will Turner of the Disney "Pirates of the Caribbean" trilogy, while another (James Silver Leaf) imitated the accent of Johnny Depp's Captain Jack Sparrow with precision.

The swashbuckling crew garbed in gold earrings and baggy clothes with swords and guns affixed to their belts went over safety instructions.

"If a child falls in, we throw the parents in after 'em," said Captain Flaherty.

Between the character similarities and loose improvisational style of the script, the cruise was somewhat reminiscent of the third "Pirates" Disney film — except it was only 90 minutes long and had more laughs, plus snacks and drinks. Moreover, the cruise went beyond the Disney hype, honing its quirkiness with its own pirate characters, like Mad Mike.

The "ship psychiatrist," explained how he got his name. "I'm a bit angry and I'm a bit crazy, I am," he began. After being drafted and beat up by fellow Royal Navy members, he jumped ship to escape, consequently seeking revenge on the Navy ever since. Mad Mike needed his mates to restrain him throughout the cruise, reminding him to take his medication.

The ladies-man pirate and ship gunner, Gun Smith, told us he loved "sellin' guns, buyin' guns, tradin' guns, stealin' guns, and women who like... big guns" with a devious smile.

James Silver Leaf introduced the skipper, Ravenous Randy, who, he said, had no fingers or toes and could only see out of half of one eye. "He is known to fall asleep suddenly and without warning but he is the best skipper that we can afford," Silver Leaf warned.

Silver Leaf, in charge of "all the gold and all the punishment," informed us that our ship was cursed and that if we varied at all on our set path, "even by one degree," we might see some ghosts.

Although some of the adults without kids grew restless with the skit, the bartender, Pickpocket Pete, entertained them well enough. He served drinks like the "Peg Leg," which a fel-



COURTESY PHOTO

The pirate ship Pieces of Eight sails from Salty Sam's Marina to plunder Southwest Florida.

low passenger speculated gained its name from making its consumers walk like a pirate with a peg leg. But many also laughed along at the brazen attitudes and adult humor of the pirates.

Gun Smith warned us to treat the bartender well. "If you don't, you never know what you'll find floatin' in those drinks of yours."

Meanwhile, the crew tried to adjust to the clean smell of "land-lovers."

"You smell all fresh and clean like you've been bathing with soap," Silver Leaf said with a disgusted face. "I can smell it on every single one of you. That's why I haven't taken a shower in over a year and I smell great," he said beaming proudly.

He was not only displeased with the fact we didn't smell like pirates, but also that we didn't look enough like them. The crew immediately set off to change that, offering riders face-paintings by Captain Flaherty while taking a break from the skit and playing pirate-themed music.

Fifteen pirates have been cast to entertain on the cruises, including two Coast Guard trained captains. Each went through auditions, which usually included a few ride-alongs, said Matt Hanson, general manager of Salty Sam's Marina. Some of the actors have a theatrical background, but most are just spirited performers with a passion for playing pirates, Mr. Hanson said.

On return from the break, Gun Smith came out of the galley with a passenger now deemed "Pirate Sarah," a good-humored homemaker from Milwaukee riding with her family. Her hands bound, Gun Smith told Mad Mike his suspicions about Sarah.

"I found her with her hands all over me booty!" exclaimed Gun Smith.

"You had your hands all over his booty!?" Mad Mike asked Sarah, look-

ing at Gun Smith's behind.

"Wait, wait," interrupted Gun Smith, correcting Mad Mike. "She had her hands all over the chest," he explained.

"The chest? What chest?" asked Mad Mike sarcastically, pointing at his mate's actual chest.

"Not that chest!" cleared up Gun Smith.

The two agreed Pirate Sarah needed punishment and took suggestions from the crowd of amusingly morbid children on the cruise.

"Walk the plank!" One yelled.

The pirates decided to flog her, but not before a blunder from Gun Smith came to her rescue — a gold coin fell from his clothes onto the deck. Gun Smith insisted he wasn't stealing coins from the treasure stash but struggled to come up with the coin's owner. "It's... it's... Michael Jackson's!"

"Michael Jackson's?!" shouted the Captain. "Quick! Hide the children everyone," he advised, receiving laughter.

The plot scattered as the pirates argued with each other about who had been hoarding treasure. Finally, they settled on one thing — story time.

Exciting children sat on mats in front of Silver Leaf, who told them about the golden age of pirates, occasionally catching parents' attention by interjecting, "No, I can't buy you a rum and Coke," to the children.

Kids gawked at the cartoon pictures of pirates he flipped through while talking about pirate Calico Jack Rackham, who he said had visited Fort Myers Beach during his journeys. The popular flag seen in movies and pop culture nowadays, with two crossed swords and a skull, came from Rackham. At a time when female pirates were unheard of, Rackham took with him two notorious female shipmates

— Anne Bonny and Mary Read.

In 1718, the governor of the Bahamas, Woodes Rogers, offered pardons to pirates so he could reduce piracy and hire the ex-pirates as privateers for the British government, according to the BBC. Rackham traveled there to accept his pardon and met Anne Bonny, with whom he had an affair. To escape punishment for her affair, Bonny ran off with Rackham to continue a life of piracy together. Later, the pair met Mary Read, a passenger of a ship they captured. She also became a pirate. Privateers eventually caught the criminals, hanging Rackham and 11 crewmates in 1720. Bonny and Read avoided the death penalty by claiming they were pregnant.

Silver Leaf told the children about other legendary pirates, their weapons, punishments, and the job duties of crewmembers, like gruesome tales of the ship surgeons.

"Sometimes he'd patch you up, sometimes he'd lob it off. The surgeon — when he got done choppin' up all those fingers and toeses he would take those body parts and he would actually bring 'em over to the cook. And the cook would stew 'em all up," he explained, prompting Gun Smith to enter from the galley with a large bowl of greenish brown muck, offering it as a snack to gross out passengers.

After spotting a kraken, the crew brought out the cannon, which Gun Smith boasted as "absolutely massively large." Of course, they proceeded to bring out a tiny cannon, no more than a foot long. "Hey! It's not the size, it's how you use it," he retorted to amused riders.

A game of limbo and a pirate oath followed before the scalawags finally let us have some of their treasure, which included plastic coins, rings, and treasure maps.

Mr. Hanson said he's received a lot of feedback from visitors, especially rave reviews from groups with kids who can't seem to stop talking about their pirate experiences. "It complements everything we're already doing here," said Mr. Hanson, speaking of the family-friendly atmosphere of Salty Sam's Marina.

Although the cruises largely cater to children for now, Mr. Hanson said plans for the future include more adult-oriented sunset rides.

Customized private charter cruises can also be arranged for business meetings, weddings, birthday parties, and field trips. The crew can tailor their skits to fit school curriculum, even incorporating FCAT material.

For information on cruise schedules and prices, visit the company's Web site at www.piecesofeight.com, if ye dare. ■

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