

A Queens' Retreat



Galveston, Texas, and Royal Caribbean know how to spoil the girls on a getaway.

BY KAREN EAKINS



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The Tremont House (top) is celebrating its 35th anniversary in its current location this year but traces its history in Galveston to 1839. A tour in Roatan, Honduras, includes a stop at Las Palmas Beach Resort & Spa for a boat ride and a chance to browse replica Mayan artifacts (above).

“I woke up this morning and my face hurt,” said Linda, tenderly touching her cheeks. “I realized I haven’t stopped smiling since I got here.” It was barely 24 hours into our girlfriends’ getaway, and as Linda, Mona (our third companion) and I quickly discovered, there was plenty to smile about because this small Texas town and Royal Caribbean’s huge *Navigator of the Seas* dish out royal-size fun.

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Big Texas Welcome

Galveston and its sandy shores, an hour south of Houston, have a long legacy in the hospitality game. The Tremont House polished the reputation, swinging wide the doors and ushering us into spectacular suites. Sited in an 1879 dry-goods warehouse, the Italianate-style

hotel boasts the great features of well-loved old buildings—14-foot ceilings, wood floors, black-and-white-tile bathrooms—plus all the modern accoutrements such as fine linens, cushy sofas and electronic suites. It made leaving the room difficult.

However, Tremont also has the sleek 1888 Toujouse Bar in the lobby and the (city's only) Rooftop Bar. Plus, it's a block from the popular Strand—a historic stretch of Victorian-era buildings repurposed into bars and restaurants, clothing and jewelry boutiques, and souvenir and candy shops.

We went wild, buying earrings at the Jewel Garden, browsing clothes at Head to Footies, perusing Mexican artisan goods at Hendley Market and Milagro's, and drooling over chocolate-filled cases at La King's Confectionery.

The Tremont's sister, Hotel Galvez & Spa, aka the Queen of the Gulf, is a gracious, 104-year-old city institution lording over the seawall. Its wide loggias still shelter guests snuggled in wicker wing chairs, while a 10,000-square-foot spa in the basement indulges other solace seekers. We padded into the relaxation room, separated for our treatments, and came together again to toast our adventure and the Galvez with lavender champagne.

When hunger intervened, we slipped into Riondo's Ristorante back on the Strand for a superlative dinner. In its secluded side room, the Vault, we tucked into locally sourced, from-scratch Italian specialties such as stuffed bellas and lasagna Bolognese then finished with shared tiramisu and a surprise dessert—Chocolate Brownie Cake—while owner Don challenged us to guess the mystery ingredient. Our evening's finale included a performance at The Grand 1894 Opera House—the crown jewel of antique-and-art-laden Postoffice Street—an intimate venue complete with opera boxes and velvet curtains.

Farley Girls—with options ranging from eggs Benedict to 3 Chicka Tacos (flour tortillas filled with eggs and black beans)—was spot-on for breakfast. It's not close, but the Tremont provides courtesy shuttle service on request, which is also handy for that trip to the cruise port nearby. Never needed a car.

Three to a Stateroom

Royal Caribbean is one of four cruise lines (along with Carnival, Disney and Princess) with ships homeported here, and *Navigator of the Seas* set out to spoil us as well. Fortunately, our budget-saving objective of sharing a deluxe balcony stateroom didn't work against us—a little cooperation and consideration went a long way. I even found my bunk above the stateroom's beds to be quite comfortable.

Navigator isn't a new ship, but it carries its age well. A top spot on any Royal Caribbean-company ship is the

adults-only Solarium, and *Navigator's* didn't disappoint. Close enough to wander over to the main pool and watch or join the usual dancing lessons and contests, it was well-equipped with dozens of loungers, a lap pool and two massive hot tubs.

The Promenade Shops drew frenzied crowds for daily sales, and the Metropolis Theater's nightly shows packed 'em in—as did the Flowrider, climbing wall and ice rink—and I still found quiet places to squirrel away with a book for some private downtime. The specialty restaurants were packed—Johnny Rockets was a particular favorite and well it should be with those performing waiters, thick shakes and a '50s diner vibe. Our favorite was Sabor—a modern take on Mexican well worth more than one visit.

Delights of the Islands

Port stops always provide adventure, and Royal Caribbean offered a slew of shore excursions in each spot: Roatan, Honduras; Belize City, Belize; and Cozumel. Those options allowed us to choose secure ways to explore without each other, but we opted for something different at each port together.

Roatan spread out its tropical glory before us as we traversed its narrow roads by guided island tour. A Garifuna Indian dance performance at Punta Gorda was the highlight. Moored at Coxen Hole, we had time post-tour to explore local artisan crafts and mahogany goods at the Straw Market and Yaba Ding Ding.

Snorkeling was a must, and Belize and Cozumel are both standout options, so we headed for river tubing in Belize, where we were (unfortunately) strung together with five other people to float the Sibun River. A little history, a lot of wet, a few iguanas and howler monkeys—it was a complete stress crusher.

That left snorkeling to Cozumel, which never disappoints. Three dives later, we had our fill of spying colorful tropical fish, rays, puffer fish and giant crab in some of the most-perfect water on Earth. Cheers with Pacificos all around made for a rousing close to the final stop before we headed for Galveston. However, one memory will continue to live on—Linda's smile never did diminish, not for 10 whole days.

Planning Your Trip

For more on Galveston, log on to www.galveston.com. For information on Royal Caribbean cruises, visit www.royalcaribbean.com. For trip-planning assistance and to take advantage of AAA member benefits, contact a AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel.

H&A

Karen Eakins is features/copy editor of Home & Away.

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Visit HomeAndAwayMagazine.com for the recipe—including the secret ingredient—for Riondo's Ristorante's Chocolate Brownie Cake.