

Pickleball *and* cruising



A match made in heaven?



WRITTEN BY STEVE COHEN

It was only a matter of time before pickleball and cruising collided. Virtually every major line has added pickleball courts to their ships. So as an avid player, who is also a ship snob – being at sea in luxurious accommodations with good food and wine is a travel priority, multi-port cruising is not – I

knew I had to try it. The only question I had was whether this duo could work. So I decided to assess the state of play on two very different ships.

TESTING THE WATERS: DOES PICKLEBALL WORK ON A SHIP?

I had two overriding questions:

first, could the quality of play be passable given that most ships are windswept as they travel at about 20 knots, sometimes through choppy seas? And second, would there be enough players who weren't beginners – trying out yet another cruise activity – to have a decent game? The answer to both questions

turned out to be a resounding “yes” – with only a few caveats.

I’m a reasonable pickleball player for an old guy: playing at the 3.5 level at New York’s Court 16 leagues, generally with people half my age. When I travel, which is usually city focused and upscale, I bring my paddle and regularly seek out open-play games. So, when the opportunity to take two week-long cruises on ships boasting pickleball courts, I eagerly took on this arduous assignment. My wife Sarah – not a fan of cruises – joined me on one, happily became a seafaring convert and even enjoyed her first pickleball lesson.

CRUISE CONTRAST: HOLLAND AMERICA VS REGENT SEVEN SEAS

The two ships, cruise lines and itineraries were very different. The first trip was aboard Holland America’s Rotterdam to Scandinavia. The second was on Regent Seven Seas’ Explorer. As experienced cruise folks know,



Regent - pickleball court ©Steve Cohen

Holland America is a mid-priced premium cruise line, while Regent berths in the ultra-luxury segment.

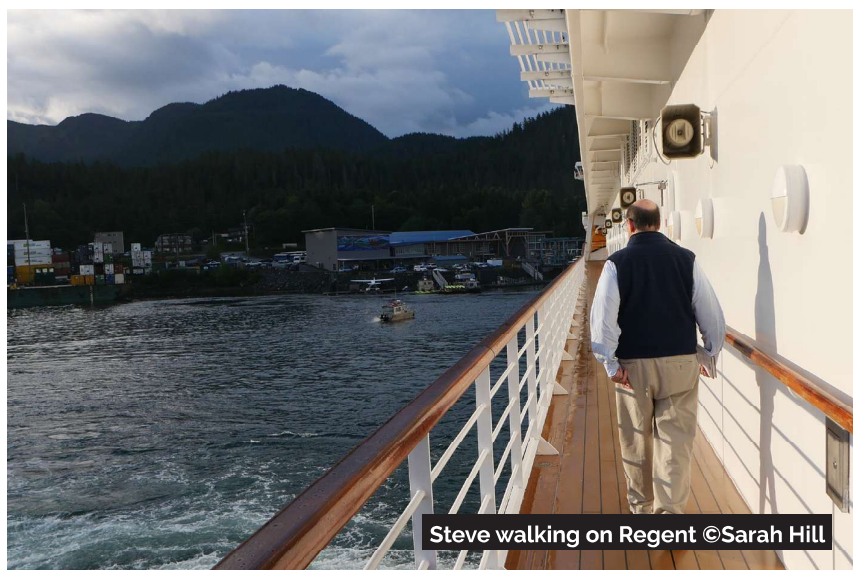
So, I evaluated each on its own terms, recognising that their pickleball facilities, cabin accommodations and food could be compared. Other factors, like crowd size, are a given. A big ship is a big ship, and crowds come with the territory. The real difference with ultra-luxury is the absence of heaving throngs, making for a far more relaxed experience. In early August I

sailed aboard the Rotterdam on a voyage through Norway and Denmark. In late September, Sarah and I cruised on the Seven Seas Explorer to Alaska.

DINING ON THE ROTTERDAM

The Rotterdam is a massive ship, nearly 1,000-feet long and accommodating nearly 2,700 passengers and 900 crew. It felt big, but not overwhelming and I never got lost. I had read that food was not a strong-suit on Holland America ships, but there were no bad meals aboard the Rotterdam. I ate in the main dining room several times because I wanted to sit and talk with other passengers from around the globe.

I also tried all the ship’s specialty dining rooms, which charged a modest \$35 supplement per meal and they were very good. Drinks, bottled water and specialty coffees – think morning cappuccinos and after-dinner espressos – cost extra. But these packages offering good value are



Steve walking on Regent ©Sarah Hill

available prior to sailing. Bottom line: they were worth it.

SENSATIONAL SPA

One high point of the Rotterdam was the spa; it was spectacular. Seven-day access costs around \$200 extra, but it boasted steam rooms, saunas and heated lounge chairs in a serenity room overlooking the sea, alongside the largest whirlpool/hot tub I've ever seen. Easily 25-feet in diameter with seat-level water jets along the entire perimeter, it had two six-foot, high-pressure hot water taps that gave me instant massage. I used the spa every day and it was absolutely worth it.

My cabin was great. It had a king-size bed with luxe linens and pillows, a small sofa, a walk-in shower with superb water pressure, more well-designed storage space than my Manhattan apartment and a balcony with two comfortable lounge chairs and a table.

THE SEVEN SEAS EXPLORER: ULTRA-LUXURY IN ALASKA

Regent's Seven Seas Explorer, which took my wife and me to Alaska, is a mid-size ship. It is 734 feet long but carries only 746 passengers, all in balconied suites and large cabins.

With 548 crew members, the passenger-to-staff ratio assures each guest extraordinary service. One never sees a crowd or a queue, and the sense of luxury is ever present. The all-inclusive price includes six specialty restaurants, drinks, excellent wines and as many espressos and cappuccinos as I could handle. The food was very, very good.

SPA SERVICES

The Explorer's spa was lovely and included various saunas, steam rooms, a cold room and a plunge pool on the stern of the ship. Like the Rotterdam, it included a full range of spa services – lots of massage treatments, manicures – all at extra cost. And while I didn't indulge, my wife did, and loved it. The only surprise was – and it was a subject of old-guy kibbitzing as we sat in a gorgeous

sauna with large windows looking out to the sea – was that neither swimming pool was heated.

SPACIOUS CABIN

The cabin, similar in design to that on the Rotterdam, was much larger and quite luxurious. Champagne, fresh fruit and macarons magically showed up at just the right moment. The ship's layout was very similar to the Rotterdam's, just smaller. I never wanted for anything, whether large theatre or intimate entertainment, a casino, bars or open deck space. My only regret was that I didn't discover until the penultimate day that the library had printed facsimiles of major newspapers.

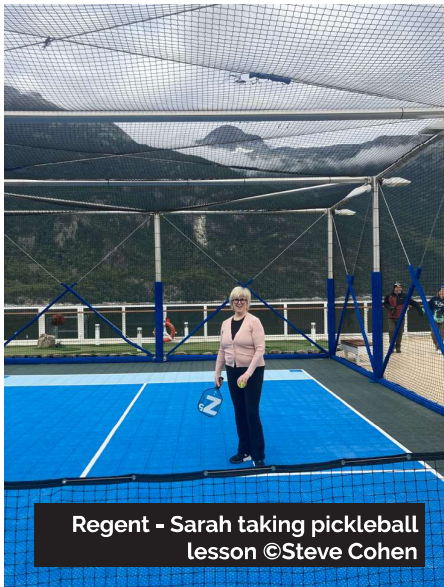
HOLLAND AMERICA'S COURTS: WELL-DESIGNED AND FUN

This company takes pickleball seriously – probably because it's the official cruise line of the Professional Pickleball Association (PPA). The Rotterdam has two courts (with movable nets so the space can be shared at specific times with basketball players), a rubberised quick-dry surface, lighting for night play, and 25-foot-high netting that keeps errant balls from fouling the sea. There is also adequate space behind the baseline and sufficient distance between the courts.

There are paddles and balls for those who didn't bring their own, and the courts are open for impromptu games almost any time – except for limited hours



Rotterdam spa ©Steve Cohen



when the space is reserved for basketball. Plus, there are specified meet-ups scheduled each day that are publicised in the daily programme.

The ship even boasts a full-time sports director, Lauren Buckle, a twenty-something South African who was a good player and even better teacher. Each morning, she gave group lessons for beginners and more experienced players. About 15 (mostly new) players showed up for each lesson.

TOURNAMENT FUN

On the last day at sea – appropriately National Pickleball Day – Lauren arranged two tournaments: one for beginners and the other for more advanced players. I partnered with Dutchwoman Marly Tielmans, who had never played pickleball before her lesson that morning. Although she was a spectacular tennis player, we lost in the semi-finals to the eventual winners, a 4.0 couple. Interestingly, there were travel agents on

board conducting research for a pickleball cruise they were arranging for couples later in the Fall.

PICKLEBALL ON THE SEVEN SEAS EXPLORER

There is only one pickleball court aboard the Explorer which offered plenty of room behind the baseline and high netting to stop balls going overboard. Paddles and balls are provided. The court had a plastic surface with fast-drying interlocking pieces with a few dead spots. But they were no worse than the 'potholes' at Brooklyn Bridge Park. According to the cruise director, by the time this article appears the surface will be replaced.

The Explorer staff offered no lessons, nor did they arrange tournaments, but meet-up times were published in the daily programme. Nonetheless, I regularly found games with experienced players, including four couples who were traveling together whose rankings ranged

from 3.75 to 4.5.

ROUGH SEAS, SMOOTH GAMES

Surprisingly, neither the ship's movement through sometimes choppy seas had any bearing on a game. The only downside of pickleball on any ship is the wind. And not unexpectedly, it is more pronounced when the ship is at sea. But even then, both ships sited their courts well, either behind a superstructure or the ship's funnel, to allow play in the wind's shadow, save for extreme conditions.

So, while I don't think anyone is likely to go on a cruise just to play pickleball, having a court on board can make a difference in planning a voyage. In fact, I played with one woman who said she chose the Explorer precisely because it had a court. After experiencing pickleball on board myself, I can now see myself making a similar choice.