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Beach facilities at Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings' Harvest Caye island complex in Belize

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Welcome! Cruise lines' "private islands" in the Caribbean have been around now for several decades, mostly offering a secluded, very pleasant beach party experience, a barbecue luncheon at no extra cost, plus the availability of water and beach sports. However, as ships have become more and more massive, crowding of existing facilities has become increasingly apparent, while familiarity with the "beach day" for veteran cruisers like me, regardless of the line involved, has served to make them rather generic. Thus I was most interested to explore Harvest Caye, an island retreat off the coast of Belize that was developed relatively recently by Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings Ltd., for the exclusive (at least at present) use of the guests of its three lines...Norwegian, Oceania and Regent Seven Seas. Promoted as a new concept of resort-style destination, the facility officially opened in November, 2016, although my first opportunity to visit was on this past March 20th during a call of *Norwegian Jade*. Incidentally, this is the only Belizean port that features a lengthy cruise pier adjacent to the guest amenities.

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Was I impressed? Indeed I was, and I expect most cruisers will readily concur. First, this place is huge. 2,400 passengers (more or less) aboard the mid-sized *Jade* couldn't put a dent in the expansive facilities, as row after row after row after row of bright blue beach chairs were completely vacant as I wandered around with my trusty camera. With larger vessels like *Norwegian Bliss* arriving soon and on the drawing boards for the near future, somebody at NCLH was obviously smart enough to make Harvest Caye big enough to easily accommodate future needs. Furthermore, in addition to being anything but crowded, the island is beautifully landscaped, spotlessly maintained, and features a seven-acre white sand beach that is sure to please the most ardent sun worshippers.

Here also is just about the largest swimming pool I have ever witnessed, reportedly covering 15,000 square feet and offering a swim-up bar for those with a water-borne thirst. There is no charge to use the pool, beach and poolside chairs, or visit the wildlife conservation area, which includes a butterfly garden, aviary and educational center. Not being a beach person myself, I spent quite a while photographing the butterflies instead. A shopping village features retailers selling name-brand merchandise and local crafts, but it is not done to excess like some other Western Caribbean ports like Cozumel and Costa Maya. And numerous excursions, classy private beach and pool cabanas, as well as a variety of recreational facilities are available at reasonable extra cost for those so inclined.

Available tours feature the island's wildlife and mangrove estuaries, as well as a quiet electric boat cruise; excursions to the nearby mainland for visits to Mayan ruins and archaeological sites, a spice farm, rural Belizean villages, plus rainforest river tubing and jungle rafting; or underwater sightseeing for snorkelers on the world's second largest barrier reef. Active guests can also enjoy beach volleyball, or (at extra cost) paddle boarding, parasailing, kayaking, ziplining from the Flighthouse (in the appealing, photogenic form of a lighthouse), and a ropes course. One difference from other typical "private island" days worth noting is that no free beach barbecue is provided...guests, after all, are within walking distance of their ship and, of course, unlimited eats on board. However, there are half a dozen convenient food and beverage outlets on the island, including the indoor/outdoor, two-story Landside Bar & Grill, developed in partnership with Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville." Harvest Caye definitely gets a "thumbs up" from me.

CroisiEurope recently launched its first-ever Africa product with land-and-cruise packages through South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Botswana. New reservations will receive \$572 off per cabin on select fall and early winter departures from this September through December, with prices starting at \$6,033 per person.

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