

Everything You Need To Know About Your 4-day Cozumel Cruise On Carnival's INSPIRATION

by Sherman Cook and Fred Tutwiler

The UNOFFICIAL guide to making the absolute most out of your 4-day cruise to Cozumel, Mexico aboard Carnival's mega-ship, *The Inspiration*.

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Chapter 3: About Your Ship



A whole floating city unto itself, your Carnival ship is a festive combination of live entertainment, casinos, pools, sports, activities, and more. Carnival ships serve up the cruise industry's most active nightlife scene along with the added benefit of the Caribbean sun by day. All rolled out in a fun, theme-park atmosphere that is unmatched in the industry. Nearly a thousand staff work rotating shifts, 24-hours a day, keeping shipshape a vessel that's almost 1,000 feet long, 10 stories high, and weighs over 70,000 tons. It's a chance for average folks to feel like a Vegas high-roller – even if it's just for a few days! The

Fun Ships are an insomniac's delight. When passengers on most ships are calling it a night, Carnival's guests are just getting busy with diversions such as midnight adult comedy shows, raging discos, and 24-hour pizza parlors.

If you are taking the 4-day cruise to Cozumel out of Tampa, FL, then you are traveling aboard *The Inspiration*, one of their "Fantasy" class mega-ships. While there are differences to the décor and colors of the different ships, the basic layout is identical on all the Fantasy-class ships.

The entire Fantasy-class fleet will receive extensive upgrades in the next three years. Children's water parks, a new more open design for the pool areas, the creation of an adult's only deck, and upgrading spa and fitness equipment will be part of the renovations. *Inspiration's* makeover begins September 1, 2007 and is scheduled for completion 5 weeks later. While in dry-dock, the *Inspiration* will also upgrade all cabins (including the addition of flat-screen TVs throughout) and public restrooms, redesign the disco, rebuild the two main dining rooms, extend the Camp Carnival indoor kids area, expand the casino, enhance and expand sound systems and wireless internet access throughout the ship and remodel the Promenade throughway.

Placed in service in 1996, Carnival's *Inspiration* is now a feisty teenage, which adds up to a LOT of nautical miles and about a million passengers. Even without the upcoming makeover, the ship wears its years with dignity, though it is definitely a dated dignity. After all, the design ideas that went into the original *Inspiration* go back to the late 1980s (it takes a while to go from drawing board to launch with these big ships). 20 years ago the number one TV show was Dallas; MTV was brand new and played only music videos; Apple computers were just emerging; Johnny Carson was the undisputed king of late night television (cable TV was in it's infancy); George Michael, Madonna and Ronnie Milsap were

the top musicians on the Billboard charts; the biggest movie of the year was “Back To The Future”; and the techno-dance music genre was dominating the national dance club scene.

The Inspiration is a fearless edition of the themed décor strategy used with all the Fun Ships. Designer Joe Farcus assigns a theme to each of the ships he designs - the *Fascination* features Hollywood, the *Elation* revolves around creators and their creations, the *Inspiration* honors the Arts with representations from ancient to modern day. Imagine that. Designing a cruise ship to reflect a history of world art and music. Farcus has cajones!

The theme is reflected in the huge wooden violin handles that dominate the Promenade Deck, the spicy statues of Greek maidens in Chopin’s Lounge (the cigar bar), the black and neon flashy-ness of the main atrium, the stately heaviness of the library (complete with an array of Shakespearean quotes painted on the ceiling beams), and the bizarre purple tentacles that worm their way across the overhead in the Brasserie Bar and Grill (we’re still wondering what Joe was taking when he came with all THAT). It’s all big, brash and a visual feast.

The Fantasy-class ships are a great value, especially for first-time cruisers and families. They offer a variety of family-pleasing activities ranging from the popular Camp Carnival programs for youngsters to the extravagant production revues with talented young singers and dancers, magnificent sound and light contributions, and Las Vegas-type costuming.

The ships feature a six-story atrium on the main deck (The Empress Deck on the Fantasy-class ships). This is the main entrance, one of the first things you see when you board. It is also the location of the Purser’s desk (equivalent of the main desk in a hotel lobby), the Shore Tours center, the internet café and a large horse-shaped bar. The bar is a favorite gathering place before dinner, and presents a classical music trio each night during dinner seating.

Basic Fantasy-class Ship Stats

Total Staterooms - 1,026
Private Balcony Staterooms - 54
Public Decks – 10
Passenger capacity - 2,052
Total crew - 920

Tonnage - 70,367
Ship length – 855
Ship Width - 104 feet
Max speed: 22 knots

Fantasy-class ships have 10 public decks, all of which follow a basic layout throughout the Fantasy fleet, though décor and some floor plans are different in each ship. Elevators located just forward of the Atrium access all public decks, while the Atrium elevators access 6 decks – the Empress, which is main entry level of the ship, up to the Sports deck. Elevators located mid-ship, near the casino, service decks 1 – 6 (Riviera – Lido). The elevator bank near the rear of the ship, just after the main pool and sun deck, serves decks 1 – 7 (Riviera – Lido)

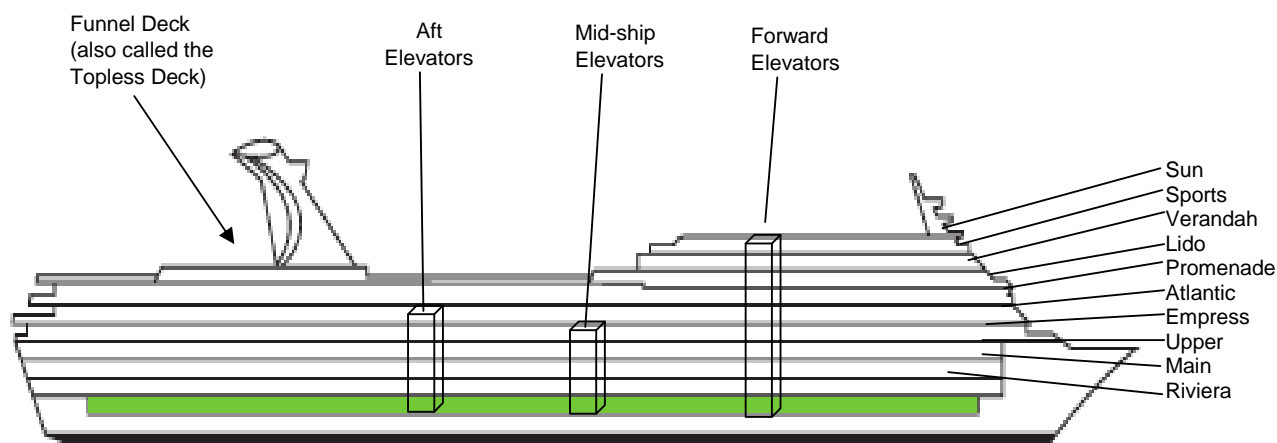
The bridge - the navigational and command center for the ship - is located all the way forward on the Lido deck.

There are no cabins on the Atlantic, Promenade, Lido, Sports or Sun decks while the Verandah Deck

DECK 3 - Infirmary and Gangway.

The only times you will go below to Deck 3, which is one deck down from Riviera, is when you are using the gangway to go ashore and if you need the infirmary. In both cases you will use the forward elevators.

houses a few balcony cabins forward of the Atrium. Riviera, Main and Upper decks are devoted entirely to cabins with no public areas.



You can check out the deck plans for the *Inspiration* on-line at http://www.carnival.com/Deck_Plan.aspx?shipCode=IS. There have been a few changes to the specifics of the layout as shown, but it is generally accurate and shows where everything is located.

The Inspiration – Deck By Deck.

Empress Deck – Located amidships is the information hub of the public areas. The bottom floor of the atrium (called the Grand Spectrum on *Inspiration*), it includes the main Purser’s Desk, the shore tour counter, internet café and a semi-circular bar, all housed beneath an imposing six-story kaleidoscope of shiny black surfaces and colorful neon lighting accents. Two silently gliding glass elevators add their movement to the space, contributing to the energetic, fun atmosphere of it all. During dinner seating, the Spectrum comes alive with the sounds of a classical music trio which plays on an elevated stage behind the bar. The twin shiny circular staircases that descend from the Atlantic Deck above are some of the most popular backdrops for photographs, especially on Formal Night.



Immediately aft of the Spectrum is the Photo Gallery, where all of the pictures taken by ship’s photographers are posted for passengers to view and purchase. You can also purchase camera supplies (including underwater disposables) and get rolls of film developed. The gallery can get really crowded at times, especially in the evening on the last night of the cruise. Pictures are arranged by day of the cruise and by location to help locate yourself.

Atlantic Deck. Located immediately above the lobby area, this is home to the two dining rooms that are used for evening main dining (*Mardi Gras* and *Carnivale*). It also includes *Rhapsody In Blue*, the always popular piano bar (a HOT spot that can fill up to standing room only at times), the library (an elegant and subdued room styled in Shakespearean era décor, including a wide variety of quotes painted on the overhead wooden beams), Elite golf Cruises (a golf pro shop where you can book lessons and excursions, or play a round of “virtual” golf), the ship-board shops and the lower entrance to the main forward lounge (Paris Lounge on the *Inspiration*), the venue for the major entertainment productions.

Internet Café.

Carnival has implemented internet access on all of its ships, though there is limited wireless connectivity on The Inspiration at present. When the ship goes into dry-dock in September, internet access will be expanded dramatically so that it includes the entire Promenade deck, the Lido Deck and many (if not all) cabins. But for now, the only internet wireless signal you'll get is around the Spectrum. You can also use the shipboard computers in the Internet Café, located adjacent to the Purser's Desk

Internet service on all Carnival ships (in fact, virtually all cruise ships) is provided by MTN (Mobile Telephone Network), an international provider of telephone and wireless communications. They are also the concession that manages your online cell phone service, though you don't interact with anyone for that.

Whether you are using your laptop or one of the ship's computers, the speed is probably slower than what you are used to. It's somewhere between dial-up and DSL, with a tendency to resemble dial-up at times. Consequently, you'll want to manage your usage in ways that you wouldn't have to back home. For example, download all your e-mail, log off the internet and THEN read. Also, compile all your messages off-line, then log on and send.

The minutes are relatively expensive, ranging from \$.75 for "pay-as-you-go" down to \$.40 if you purchase a 60-minute package. Err on the side of getting a larger package; you'll be surprised how fast you can burn through those minutes. A one-time activation fee of \$3.95 is charged to set-up an account. You cannot add to a package, so if you buy the 30-minute version and then decide you want more minutes, you'll have to purchase a new package. Unused minutes are not refunded.

Before you leave for your cruise, you can find a very good explanation for how to access different e-mail programs from aboard the ship at <http://www.cruisemates.com/articles/onboard/internet-tips.cfm>.

Promenade Deck. The real pulse of the Fantasy – class ships is the Promenade and Lido Decks. Here is where the party never ends. The Promenade Deck is a streaming avenue of passengers and activities running the length of the ship from the Paris Lounge at the forward end of the ship all the way to the Candlelight Lounge at the very rear of the ship.

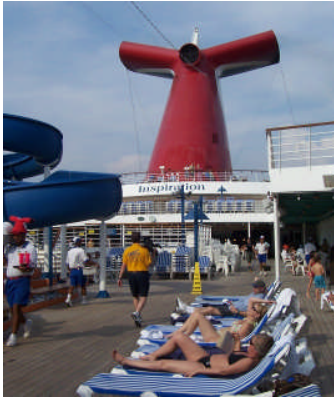
And it's hoppin'! Here you'll find the entrance to upper-level seating in the large stage Paris Lounge in the front of the ship. As you move toward the rear, past the Spectrum, you find the *Monte Carlo* casino, *Café de Artistes* coffee and pastry bar, the full-service *Violins* beverage bar, two night clubs (the *Avant Garde* and the *Rock 'n' Roll* disco) with late night dancing, a \$10 gift shop, a video arcade, plenty of comfy sitting and lounging areas with a stunning wide open view of the ocean, and various stations that showcase musicians.

As night falls on the ocean outside, The Promenade Deck becomes a throbbing mixture of laughter, slot machine's clanking out coins and high energy music escaping from the night clubs. Sitting on the Promenade Deck during Formal Night is like watching the crowds at a movie premier. It's the fashion equivalent of a grown-up's Junior-Senior Prom night. People are decked out in their best (some of which is absolutely stunning!) as they gather for dinner or club-hop

after hours. Toward the rear of the ship is a luxurious and sedate cigar bar, Chopin's Lounge, located just outside the Candlelight Lounge at the very rear of the ship. The environment is relatively quiet, an oasis for some from the noisy activity on the rest of the ship, and almost always entertains an older crowd. A couple of flat screen TVs show sports, movies or news (the bartender will be happy to change the channel for you). Chopin's also houses a couple of late night poker tables (Texas Hold 'Em is the current hot attraction) and

presents a classy stairway that serves as one of the entrances to the rear main dining room, the Fantasy Dining Room, on the Atlantic Deck below.

The Promenade Deck is bodies-in-motion 24 hours a day. Naturally, the crowds get thin once the night clubs and casino close, but from morning until about 3:00 am, this is “main street” with all the sights and sounds you expect from a floating vacation city.



View of the Lido Deck looking aft towards the funnel.

Lido Deck. Up one level is the pool-side sister to the Promenade. As bristling as the Promenade Deck is during the night, the Lido Deck takes center stage during the day. Expansive teak-covered deck space for sun worshippers, a pool, 2 hot tubs, water slide and outdoor stage all take their turns as the center of attention and all get plenty of use. The outdoor part of the Lido Deck includes a couple of full service bars and an outdoor grill that serves up classic casual “grill” fare from 6:30 am – late afternoon lunch. At least one night of the cruise, the Lido Deck is the spot for the ships deck party, complete with a raucous, aloha-shirted steel drum band and a partying crowd that spans generations. At various times during the cruise there are live bands performing on the stage, special buffets and other activities.

Towards the rear of the Lido Deck is the most popular dining alternative on board, the *Brasserie Bar & Grill*, a full service buffet restaurant that serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. The huge, wide open dining room has outdoor and indoor seating and 24-hour coffee, juice and soft ice cream. Some veteran passengers never actually make it to the main dining rooms during a cruise, preferring the casual atmosphere here. At the very rear of Brasserie on the port side is a 24-hour pizza grill which also serves up a dandy Caesar Salad and the pizzas are really good! On the starboard side is a full-service bar that says open until 2:00 am. A surprisingly good deli counter is open from 11:00 am -11:00 pm. Understandably, this area gets pretty busy after the clubs close and can stay that way for several hours. As in, some people watch the sun come up.

Verandah Deck. Around the middle of the ship, between the Spectrum and the signature whale-tail exhaust funnel, the Verandah Deck serves as a balcony surrounding the main pool area on the Lido Deck. In addition to providing more sun-bathing areas, it’s an ideal spot to people-watch, especially during the games and frivolity that are happening all the time down below on the Lido. Forward of the pool area is a covered deck which includes tables, ping-pong, a floor-sized chess board, the upper Spectrum and access to the forward cabins. Towards the rear of the ship, the Verandah Deck is a whole ‘nother party area with a huge wide open space. The area includes a net-enclosed basketball/volleyball court, a full service bar, and about 10,000 square feet of teak decking, an ideal sun-bathing surface looking out over the stern of the ship. This area has its own small pool and 2 hot-tubs.

There are actually two separate decks above the Verandah Deck. The main one of the two is the **Sports Deck**, the very top level of the Spectrum. Sitting atop the forward section of the ship, it is home to the Nautica Spa, which includes the beauty salon, massage rooms, gymnasium, steam and sauna rooms and a hot tub.

The other, less publicized deck is the **Funnel Deck**, which was previously known as the “Topless Deck”. It still is “Adults Only”, accessible only to passengers 18 and older, but nobody is checking IDs and practically nobody does it topless anymore. It’s greatest appeal is that it’s one of the most secluded areas of the ship, day or night, is a great venue for

people watching on the decks below and it provides some spectacular views of sunrises and sunsets.

Sun Deck. The highest public spot on the ship is the Sun Deck located on the forward section of the ship above the spa. It has a 200 meter all weather running track. After the ship's makeover, it will also include a miniature golf course, but for now it serves as a sunbathing deck, which is much quieter than areas around the pool area. Shielded on the front by large glass windows to break the wind when the ship is underway, this is one of the most majestic views on board. And at night, if you can handle the steady headwind, it's absolutely stunning to watch the Caribbean spread out in front of you as the ship glides through the water.

Navigating The Ship

As we said earlier, your ship is a floating city with a population of about 3,000 people, including passengers and crew, occupying 800,000 square feet and stretching 10 stories above the ocean. It's not hard to get lost or disoriented in such a large space, especially with the added distractions (or advantages, depending on your point of view) of flashing neon, music and the warm glow of those marvelous Bahama Mamas (or whatever).

But there are a few general rules that will keep you pointed in the right direction most of the time. Any time you are in the cabin areas, even-numbered cabins are always on the port (left) side of the ship and odd-numbers are always on the right (starboard). Numbering starts at the front of the ship and goes back.

Cabin numbers lower than 80 are either beneath or forward of the Spectrum. There is a four-car elevator bank and two stairways in this area of the ship, with the elevators going all the way up to the Sports Deck.

In theory, mid-ship cabins give a smoother ride in all kinds of weather. Ask your travel agent what they think.

Cabin numbers between 100 – 160 are located roughly in the middle of the ship and are beneath the forward dining room (Mardi Gras Dining Room, located on the Atlantic Deck), as well as the night clubs and casino on the Promenade Deck. There is a four-car elevator bank and two stairways in this section of the ship, though they only go up to the Promenade Deck. If you want to get to the Lido Deck (where the pool is), take the elevator to the Promenade deck and there is a stairway up one deck to the Lido.

Cabin numbers above 160 are toward the rear of the ship. The aft elevator bank also has four cars and two stairways. It goes up to the Lido Deck, ending just outside of the Brasserie Bar & Grill at the rear of the Lido Deck.

Speaking of The Sun Deck.

One of our favorite traditional rituals is to take a bottle of champagne up to the front of the Sun Deck at midnight of the first night out and toast the voyage. Prior to this, we make it a point to meet at least two new adventuresome souls and invite them to join us.

The price of admission to this cruising custom is a wine glass, a toast and a joke. Many marvelous friendships have been spawned in these late night bonding moments, and many Caribbean sunrises have christened these new friendships.

If you just wanted to, you could start your own traditions. Whatdya think?

Traveling from one end of the ship to the other can be challenging if you are on the wrong deck. All four of the lower decks (Riviera, Main, Upper and Empress) travel the full length of the ship if you are in the outside corridors. The Atlantic Deck is interrupted in the middle of the ship by the two formal dining rooms and the huge galley that sits between them. The Promenade Deck stretches all the way from the aft lounge to the forward lounge, but for most of the journey you must travel on the starboard side of the ship. The Lido deck will take you from the dining room/grill at the rear of the ship to the Spectrum. The Veranda will take you from the rear pool deck all the way forward to the cabin area, with most of the way being outside. Sports and Sun Decks are located only at the front of the ship, between the main pool area and the bow.

It's a good idea to get a feel for the travel patterns when you get on board. There is so much to see, especially for first-time cruisers, but it's well worth it to get your bearings early on. Ship diagrams are posted near every elevator bank and you can pick up a pocket-size ship diagram at the Purser's Desk.

The Fantasy-class fleet are some of the oldest mega-ships in operation, which is understandable since this fleet debuted the class of ships in the '80s. Sometimes the age is reflected in the architecture, colors and floor design of the ships. But don't worry about whether or not your ship will be clean, modern and comfy. It will. Carnival spends tens of millions of dollars each year to upgrade its fleet. While some cruise lines invest billions of dollars in building bigger and more extravagant ship, Carnival invests money, training and ingenuity into the fleet it already has. The Fantasy-class size (~73,000 tons) are the most popular ship size in the industry for the 3 – 5 day cruises. Periodically (at least every 3 years if not more often), each ship is taken out of service for several months and undergoes a top-to-bottom refitting.

While these aren't the newest, shiniest ships in the industry, they have plenty of years of quality cruising ahead of them and Carnival does a fine job of protecting their investment. Besides, the odds are that, in the midst of all the fun you'll be having, you won't even notice the age. Of course, you may see some chipped paint or a clogged toilet or a stain on the carpet. Our recommendation – GET OVER IT! Like we said, if you want absolute luxury, spend the extra bucks and get it. There are some terrific cruise lines catering to that market.

The Fantasy-class fleet is comparable to good 4-star quality hotels like Holiday Inn. They're not 5-star, and they don't try to be. So relax, kick your sandals off, lather up the sunscreen and make the most of your excursion to the Caribbean. The ship and her crew will take care of you in fine style.