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If you're seeing black in a sea of turquoise waters, you're probably riding the waves of a gothic cruise.

As self-described "stealth goth" Bob Westphal recalls it, the idea for GothCruise arose several years ago at an inebriated party in Las Vegas with his now ex-wife and some friends. "The question came up, 'Where's the most unlikely place you'd find goths vacationing together?'" The answer, Westphal says, was "on a cruise ship in the Caribbean."

And so that's what we decided to do! The concept," he adds, "was to get a group of our friends and their friends all on a ship together, add rum, and have a great time."

A sun-splashed Caribbean cruise did seem a stretch. Goths — cultural descendants of 1980s new wave and punk rockers — are most often identified with wearing black clothing and makeup and as night owls who shun the sunlight and cultivate pale skin. But, Westphal,

who works for a research firm in Palm Harbor, Florida, and his then-wife managed to round up some 65 like-minded goths to test the waters of Key West and Cozumel aboard a Carnival Cruise Lines' ship.

The concept caught on, and the seventh annual GothCruise set sail in 2010, carrying several dozen goths through the Eastern Caribbean aboard Royal Caribbean International's *Serenade of the Seas*. The cruise was dubbed "The Sinners and the Saints" in part because of its "saintly" destinations: San Juan, St. Croix, St. John, St. Lucia, and St. Kitts. As for the sinners — well, you can draw your own conclusions. Special events included "Skaryoke" (karaoke), the "Black Hole" ("that's when we all eat together while wearing black," Westphal explains) and "Goth Soup" (hot tub parties). But GothCruises aren't jammed with official activities. "The main idea is to enjoy a vacation together," says Westphal.

GØING, GØING,

GOTH

By Clark Norton

The Gothic Cruise



Sergio Anzorovich



The fourth GothCruise, which sailed to Bermuda in 2007, even became the focus of a documentary film, *Goth Cruise: The Movie*. The producers followed five goth passengers (out of more than 100 in that year's group), including a war veteran, a couple on their honeymoon, and a married architect called Lobster who liked to don dresses and devil costumes. The war veteran, Sean Lewis of Portland, Oregon, now a computer technician who says he has been "in the goth scene since 1982, before it was even called goth," praises the film as "a good introduction to our subculture — and they didn't interfere with our fun."

But if one annual goth cruise seems unlikely, how about two? A competitor — known as the Annual Gothic Cruise and Masquerade Ball — actually predated Westphal's GothCruise by more than a decade and is the bigger and more highly charged of the two. The

Gothic Cruise — whose most recent voyage traveled through the Western Caribbean aboard *Carnival Liberty* last September — took root way back in 1991, the brainchild of travel agent Zaida Brown, a longtime goth who splits her time between Ohio and Florida. Brown says the idea originated while taking her first Caribbean cruise.

"My choices were getting burned in the sun — goths don't like to go outside — and playing bingo," she recounts. "I asked the purser, 'Do I look like the type of person who likes bingo?' So my boyfriend and I decided to get some other goths and cruise together." The first attempt attracted just a few couples, but by the third cruise 40 goths had joined in, "and it just kept growing and growing," Brown says. Eventually her groups were numbering more than 200 passengers a year. Brown says that few of them have previously taken a regular cruise, but that about half return for subsequent Gothic Cruises.

During a jam-packed week's voyage, Gothic Cruisers can expect a cutting-edge fashion show sponsored by *Gothic Beauty Magazine* ("the Vogue of the gothic world," Brown says); a screening of the cult-favorite *Rocky Horror Picture Show*; Gotharaoke (goth karaoke); three PG-rated on-deck dance parties (all held after dark, of course); and three private parties, which run nearly till dawn and where the outfits can get outlandish and racy. The most lavish is the Masquerade Ball, in which the goths dress up in Victorian or Renaissance finery, enhanced by corsets, makeup, tattoos, and often wild hairstyles; the vampire look is also big these days. Cruise line formal dinners offer another occasion to go all out, though one cruiser says he "tries not to scare the waiters."

After initially supplying her own CDs for cruise line DJs to play, Brown now brings aboard several live bands — going by names like Covenant, VNV Nation, Combichrist, System Syn, and Funker Vogt — as well as her own DJs for each cruise. ("Most cruise line DJs play hip hop and rap, and goths do not like hip hop and rap," Brown notes). What they

do like is gothic music, actually a catch-all term for a variety of musical subgenres that may include "goth," "gothic," "industrial," "EBM" (European body music), and "darkwave." Some styles are "harsh with screeching guitars and screaming vocals," Brown explains, while others are "easier to dance to and the singers actually sing."

When not performing, band members often mingle with their fans. "It's not like these are billion-dollar bands like

The Gothic Cruise





Pat Thelen/Warmy

dark crossings

GothCruise: (800) 210-9444 ext. 77308;
www.gothcruise.com

GothCruise 8: Puttin' on the Ritz, is scheduled to sail on *Celebrity Summit*, October 23-29, 2011, from New York City to Bermuda, St. Thomas, and San Juan.

Annual Gothic Cruise and Masquerade Ball: (813) 325-7435;
www.gothiccruise.com

The next Gothic Cruise and Masquerade Ball is set for October 8, 2011, sailing roundtrip from Port Canaveral and visiting Nassau, San Juan, St. Thomas, and Great Stirrup Cay aboard *Norwegian Sun*.

Metallica," says Long Island, New York's Kevin Drolet, who has sailed on three Gothic Cruises. "They're hanging out at the pool, approachable, just regular musicians doing what they love."

While typical Gothic Cruisers often turned goth as teenagers, Brown says they now average in their early 30s, are college educated, and can afford to splurge on cruise vacations and sometimes elaborate fashion. "Some of the costumes cost a fortune," marvels Spike Pittman, a 40-year-old Navy veteran who runs a graphics shop for the Defense Department in Norfolk, Virginia. "I brought two 48-pound suitcases, and I didn't even have any hoop skirts."

Pittman says the Gothic Cruisers consider themselves "ambassadors for their community" and want to combat stereotypes that they're antisocial. "We're a very nonjudgmental group," he maintains. "We're accepting of other people and very diverse. Being 'goth' is really whatever you want it to be."

And what's the reaction of all the non-goth cruisers aboard — whom goths call "norms"? "At first we may get some sneers and snarls," Pittman admits. "When you're dressed like a vampire in a sea of Hawaiian shirts, you're going to stand out. But by the end they're begging to get into our private events." Brown points out that some non-goths — including one group of avid fishermen — have never actually signed up for the Gothic Cruise (required to attend the private events), but regularly book the same voyages so they can join in on the open deck parties. And, she adds, as many as a quarter of her official groups are non-goths as well, who come mainly because they like the music and the people.



Jessica Lackey, who, with her husband, Rogue, heads up the Florida-based darkwave band the Critxshadows, which performed on the 2010 Gothic Cruise, says other passengers are "mostly nice, mostly just curious, but some do have negative misconceptions about us. They think we must be satanic because of the way we look, but really the only thing that separates us from them is our dress. My husband and I are practicing Catholics, and our music is positive."

Gothic dress can be a challenge, though, for the outdoor pool, while the late nights can interfere with taking shore excursions. "Goths don't like tans, so you have all these people wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants and hats," says Callie Latimer, who is in the military in Arkansas and sailed on the most recent Gothic Cruise. "A lot of people sleep through breakfast — and sometimes lunch." Pittman, in turn, quips that "during the day I wear my SPF 9000." And Kevin Drolet admits that "sometimes it's difficult when it gets to 100 degrees and you're all in black. Sure, you'd be more comfortable in white shoes, T-shirts, and shorts — but in the end it's all about solidarity with the group."

As GothCruiser Sean Lewis puts it, "The social scene on board is really the biggest attraction. You come for the music — and stay for the people. You come to realize you've found a group you belong to."