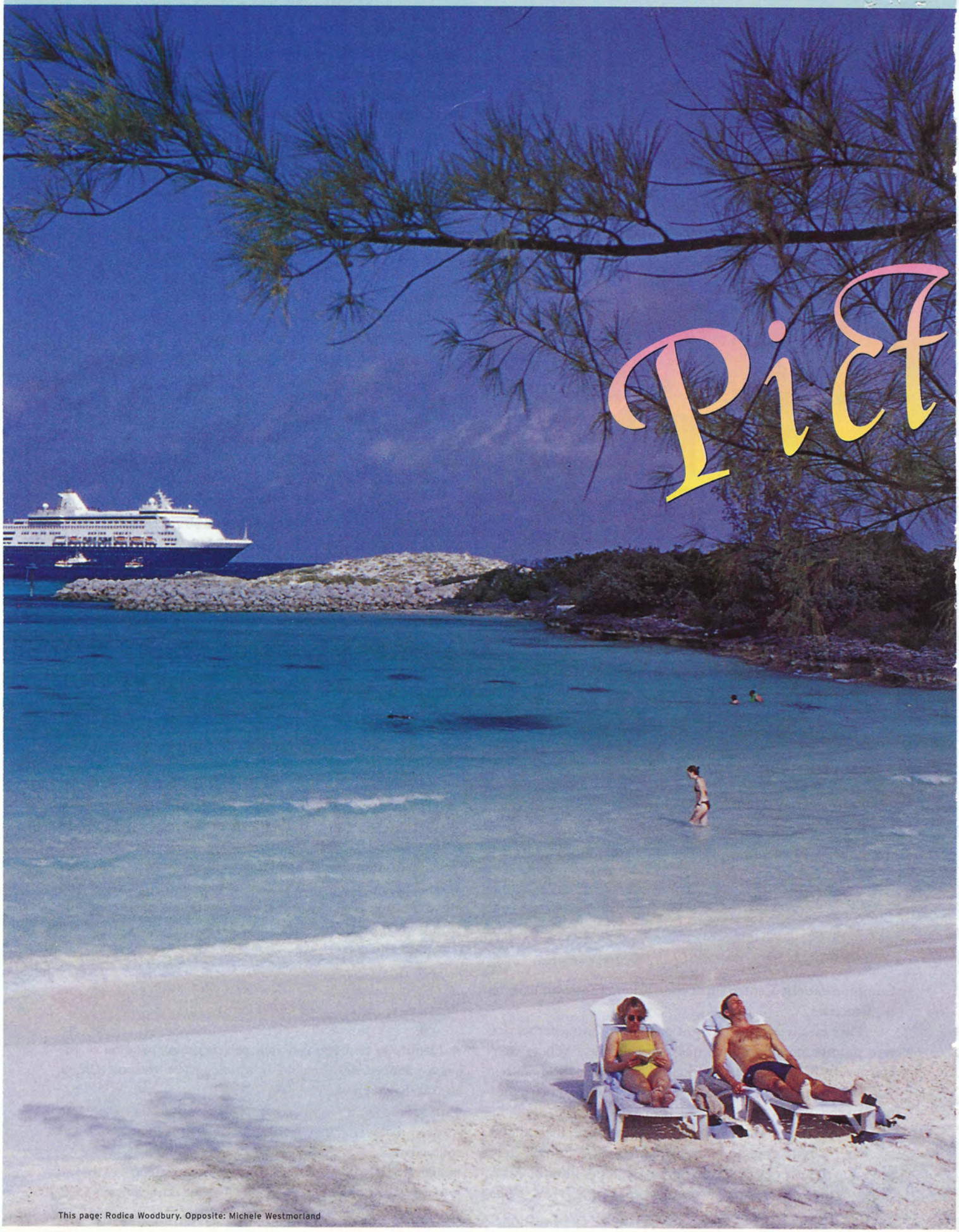
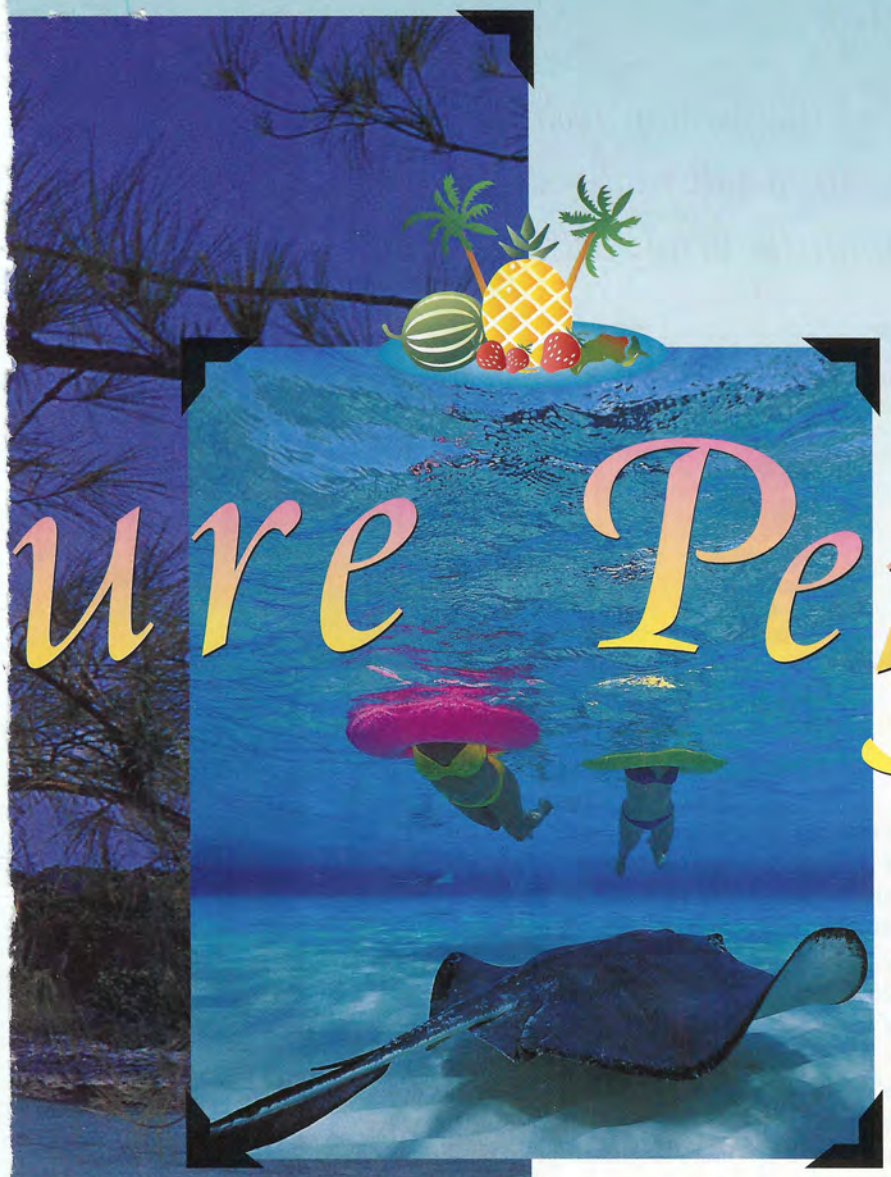


This page: Rodica Woodbury. Opposite: Michele Westmorland



ure Perfect

Opposite: Half Moon Cay, Little San Salvador Island.
Left: Stingray City, Cayman Islands

Swim with the stingrays, walk among Mayan ruins, or just laze in the sun on a weeklong Caribbean cruise.

By Rodica Woodbury

Like stealth fighters, the squadron of dark disks moved effortlessly toward us through the aquamarine waters. They surrounded our small boat and hovered, casting large shadows on the white sand. The captain dropped anchor and climbed down the ladder with a bucket of squid. The stingrays swam to his outstretched hands and gently pulled the pieces away.

When curiosity trumped our timidity, we stepped down into the shallow bathlike sea a few miles off the Cayman Islands. The rays came right up to us and brushed our legs with their surprisingly soft wings. They obviously had no fear. I snorkeled out across the sandbar, and the rays followed closely by my side, veered off, then swooped back as if playing a game. When a ray lifted a wing, I ran my hand along its velvety underside, a touch I never dreamed I would experience. It was hard to leave these enchanted waters, and as our excursion boat slowly moved off the sandbar, we watched with awe as the rays swiftly disappeared into the deep blue yonder.

I stopped at the photo of the woman reclined poolside on her lounge chair, a tall frothy drink with a little pink umbrella beside her.

Bon Voyage

It all started with the brochure that fell out of the mailbox, its pages flipped open by the wind to a photo of water so impossibly blue it looked like a Crayola color. Lanky palms fanned a pastel-hued island harbor. Anchored offshore, a majestic cruise ship gleamed in the sunshine. "Waiting to cater to your every whim," read the caption. I raised a cynical eyebrow but turned the page as I walked out of the cold November drizzle and into the house.

The next picture showed a group of people celebrating over a sumptuous dinner. I glanced down at my own table strewn with the dinner dishes. *Waiting to be washed by me*, I wrote in my head. I lingered over the photo of a cabin steward placing chocolates on the pillow of a neatly turned down bed. I smiled at the family holding hands in the water as they spied on an undersea world. I sighed over the couple standing at the deck rail, silhouetted against a magenta sunset. But I stopped dead at the photo of the woman reclined poolside in her lounge chair, a tall frothy drink with a little pink umbrella beside her. She was tanned, relaxed, and obviously enjoying the moment. She was . . . *soon to be me*, I fantasized, almost feeling the Caribbean sun on my face.

"Mom, remember how you said maybe we could do something fun during Spring Break?" interrupted my clairvoyant eight-year-old daughter, Emily. And then, there we were, in sunny Fort Lauderdale: My husband Chuck, Emily, and I stepping aboard Holland America's ms *Veendam* for a weeklong cruise through the western Caribbean. As if by magic, the pages from the brochure sprang to life. The welcome band played, balloons danced in the doorway, and a receiving line of smiling crew greeted us. "My name is Firman," said the young man who led us down the hall to our cabin. "I am your personal cabin steward. You may call on me at any time for any reason." *No one has ever uttered those words to me before in my entire life,* I thought.

Quickly we finished the only obligatory chore of the week—unpacking—and then found our way to the aft deck and joined guests and crew for the festive bon voyage party. As the steel drum band played, a warm breeze danced through the scene and flung the happy notes around us like confetti.

After our welcome dinner that evening, the children on board were invited to Club HAL (the cruise line's shipboard program for passengers five to 17) to meet the counselors and each other. Right away, a girl named Alexa befriended Emily, and the two remained inseparable for the rest of the cruise, starting with a promise to find each other on the beach at Half Moon Cay the next morning.

Island in the Sun

When the first speck of land appeared on the horizon, we raced to the deck to watch it magically turn into the tropical paradise of Little San Salvador Island. An arc of glowing sapphire water rimmed the sugar-white sand beach of Half Moon Cay. "It looks like it has a blue light bulb inside it," Emily exclaimed.

Holland America owns the Bahamian island but has developed only a small part of it—just 45 out of 2,400 acres—and it felt like our private world for the day. Along with passengers of all ages, we played like children on the beach, jumping in and out of the 80-degree water, sprawling in lounge chairs, and savoring hot barbecue and cold melon. At the end of the day, we returned to the ship completely relaxed.

At sea the next day, I followed a leisurely breakfast in the main dining room with a pedicure in the spa, a few laps in the Lido Deck pool, a stroll around the deck, and a delicious

Left and middle: Rodica Woodbury. Right: Michael J. Pettypool

Opposite: Sunny days—the ms *Veendam's* Lido Deck Pool, a warm welcome to the Cayman Islands, Cozumel Beach.
Above: The ruins of Tulum.
Left: Cozumel's market.

light lunch. Emily was off making puppets with her Club HAL pals for the afternoon. Chuck had retreated to the library to read up on the regional history. And I headed for the aft deck, where I claimed a lounge chair by the pool, angling it with near mathematical precision into the sun. The bar steward brought over the rum concoction of the day, pink umbrella in place. As I took the first delicious sip, I made a toast to this moment of brochure bliss.

A New Dawn

As our coach followed the Yucatán highway bound for the Mayan ruins at Tulum, our delightful local guide, Juan, proudly shared a few details about his Mexican home state. We were fascinated to learn that the fresh water of the Yucatán is all underground and that you can take diving tours of the aquifers. We also learned that some of the world's finest honey comes from this area and that the locally grown chiles, heralded as the hottest peppers on earth, are exported, as are jumbo shrimp, octopus, and vanilla beans.

At the entrance to Tulum, Juan explained that these ruins, some dating back to the 6th century, had gained national park status only in 1996. Because it was the only Mayan city built on the coast, Tulum enjoyed the most beautiful setting. Indeed, as we walked across the rolling grounds to the ancient stone ruins, looking out over the dazzling blue Caribbean Sea, we couldn't have agreed more.

The Mayans, who designed their structures to align with celestial bodies, held great seasonal celebrations and sacrifices during the solstices and equinoxes. Emily led the way up the 40 or so steps to the top of the Temple of the Descending God, and pointed out receded stones that were

Top: Jan Buchofsky-Houser Middle: Dave G. Houser

Above: Street vendors in Playa del Carmen. **Right:** The shipboard Chocolate Extravaganza. **Opposite:** Key West highlights—a local fisherman, Hemingway's house, the lighthouse.

mere echoes of ancient pathways that connected the other buildings. "From up here, it looks like a map," she observed. *A map into long ago*, I thought, and imagined a prosperous people who both feared and feted the marriage of water, sun, and sky in this exquisite corner of the world.

A several-mile ferry ride brought us back to our ship, which was docked at the Cozumel pier, in time to change and head into town. We strolled the seaside promenade past lively restaurants, cafés, and the famous Carlos 'n Charlie's Cantina, where the evening was just starting to heat up, judging by the energy level of the dancing silhouettes on the balcony. After shopping for gifts and buying a colorful clay parrot for Emily, we joined the local residents in the main plaza as the warm cloak of evening settled softly around the shoulders of Cozumel.

Delicious Nights

Yupi and Yos, our dinner waiters, welcomed us warmly to our beautifully set table each night. They pampered Emily shamelessly: With great ceremony they'd simultaneously place a Shirley Temple before her, a napkin on her lap, and a young cruiser's menu in her hand. Of the four-course

Top: Rodica Woodbury. Middle: Courtesy of Holland America Westours Inc.

We strolled the length of historic palm- and flower-lined Whitehead Street, past the photogenic Key West Lighthouse Museum.

meals Chuck and I enjoyed, our favorite dishes were the seafood mixed grill, chilled pineapple soup, escalope of venison, and Alaskan king crab. For dessert we strayed to the Grand Marnier mousse and crêpes suzette.

While Club HAL entertained our little social butterfly in the evenings, Chuck and I sipped after-dinner drinks in the piano bar, enjoyed quiet swims, or strolled the Promenade Deck as the wake of the ship danced beneath a black velvet sky dripping with stars. In the Reubens Lounge one night, Rockin' Rolldies was the featured entertainment, a fun return to the '50s, '60s, and '70s with a passengers-only cast. Along with the packed house, we sang and clapped our way through all the hits, and cheered on Club HAL's rendition of "Surfin' U.S.A."

And then there was the invitation to the midnight Chocolate Extravaganza—the "viewing" was at 11:30 P.M., and I do believe the entire passenger list came to honor the creators of these amazing edible masterpieces. All made of chocolate, there was a cowboy astride a bucking bronco, a huge basket filled with strawberries, love birds in a cage, intricate roses, truffles of every variety, and cakes rich enough to challenge even the most insatiable sweet tooth. We "oohed," "aahed," snapped pictures, and discreetly drooled before piling our plates high.

Hunting Treasure

Key West rolled out its sun-splashed welcome mat of palms, pastel-colored buildings, curio shops and chic boutiques, and a dozen fascinating museums. We chose to spend this last day on our own and set off to visit the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum, a celebration of the eccentric local hero's treasure-diving adventures.

I told Emily about the island's notorious history of pirates and shipwrecks, and about fearless Fisher's search for lost treasure. The museum exhibits tell jaw-dropping true tales of the dangers he and his team encountered while diving for the thick braids of gold, the emeralds, and the hundreds of other jewels that sparkle in the museum's cases.

We strolled most of the length of historic palm- and flower-lined Whitehead Street, past the photogenic Key West Lighthouse Museum, and the entrance to the Harry S. Truman Little White House. While Chuck and Emily savored key lime ices, I visited the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum in all its tropical, ceiling-fanned splendor. When a tour group climbed down from his writing studio loft, I stole a few minutes there by myself to thank "Papa" for his own legacy of treasures, the stories I had so enjoyed over the years.

Our final night aboard ship was bittersweet as we exchanged addresses with new friends, thanked our indulgent crew, and selected our favorite pictures from the ship's photo gallery.

Now when I look at photos in Caribbean cruise brochures, I see my husband snorkeling in neon waters. There's my little girl standing tall on ancient stones. Here we are, toasting with our dinner partners the magical day we shared on a Cayman Island sandbar. And whose hand is that reaching for one more chocolate truffle?

When I turn the page to the woman reclined poolside on her lounge chair, I can recite the caption by heart: "For a single sublime week, she lived happily ever after." ⬭

Left to Right: Dave G. Houser