

STRUM IN THE SUN!



Bella vista: Cruising past the pretty shores of St Maarten and, inset,

Peter strikes a chord with tutor Ross Nickerson

PERUSING the internet — as you do — I came across an interesting advert. 'Banjo cruise,' it said.

What could be more delightful? Cruising the Caribbean with fellow banjoists on an enormous modern ocean liner, picking up tips on how to play the five-string instrument.

Then having one-to-one instruction from the famed U.S. banjo teacher Ross Nickerson; living like a prince while enjoying the camaraderie of fellow amateur musicians; and seeing the islands of St Thomas, St Maarten and Puerto Rico as well as secluded, private Labadee Bay on the north coast of Haiti.

But would they relish my hit-and-miss rendition of John Hardy, about the Appalachian gunman hanged for a shooting in 19th-century West Virginia? Or would they think it is I who should be shot for ruining this fine old song?

Perhaps they'd help me get over my difficulties with the tricky (for me) bluegrass instrumental Cripple Creek. And the banjo novice's biggest hurdle: how to coordinate left (fretting) and right (picking) hands?

Virgin Atlantic's flight into Miami was on time, comfortable and — a big plus — they let my banjo travel in the cabin rather than the hold.

Liberty of the Seas carries more than 4,000 passengers and crew. Wouldn't it be overcrowded, with queues for eating, drinking and all entertainments? Actually, it wasn't. We were easily absorbed into its vast bulk. Banjo tuition was scheduled for the four days we'd be at sea — two on the way south and two on the way home.

by Peter McKay

Ross specialises in teaching the bluegrass type of banjo-picking. A patient, modest man in his 40s, he has more than 20 years' experience on the banjo and markets a range of teach-yourself-to-play books, CDs and DVDs.

His dozen or so pupils on this voyage were a mixed bunch, all American with the exception of myself and a retired Canadian businessman.

We ranged in ability from complete novice (the businessman and a nurse) through not-quite-novices (myself) to near-professionals, such as an IT professor and a music-teaching lady from Connecticut.

We assembled in a windowless, more or less soundproof conference room on Deck 2 and split into three groups. Ross darted between, offering tips and instruction.

I cannot say the resulting sounds were always pleasing to the ear.

The competing banjoists — all playing, or trying to play, different tunes — would have been any sensitive musician's concept of Hell.

In quieter moments, Ross gave us the benefit of his great ability and played for us, inspiring us all to practise, practise and practise again.

But there was still plenty of time to savour the ship's attractions. I opted for 40 minutes' gym on Deck 11 prior to tuition and a dry martini at Deck 11's Plaza Bar before dinner at the Boticelli.

Others ran around the ship on the special track, tried the Flow- rider surf machine on Deck 13,

The Mail's irrepressible columnist packs his banjo and heads to the rhythmic Caribbean for the cruise of a lifetime

scrambled up the nearby rock-climbing wall, had a swim, went ice-skating or simply dozed in the sun. Lotus-eating types perched with their drinks in the huge Jacuzzi.

There were live theatre shows and a cinema, a shopping mall, a spoil-yourself spa and the Connoisseur Club, where young American Ivy League types assembled after dinner to drink cognac and smoke enormous cigars.

But for me, nothing beat the mystery of the dark, restless ocean sliding beneath our bows, stars brighter than you've ever seen them on land.

St Thomas and St Maarten were charmingly low-key — less brash, perhaps, than their cousins in the West Indies — but for me the greatest surprise was beautiful San Juan, Puerto Rico. We walked off the ship straight into hilly streets lined with elegant, pastel-coloured houses.

I'd always imagined Puerto Rico to be a poor, slummy country which locals were only too happy to leave for the mean streets of New York. Remember the bitter lyric of America from West Side Story? 'I like the city of San Juan/I know a boat you can get on./Hundreds

of flowers in full bloom/Hundreds of people in each room!' But San Juan and Puerto Rico generally are places I must visit properly one day. Afterwards, before cruising back to Miami, it was Labadee, Haiti.

ROYAL Caribbean has its own private bay here. It's set up for a variety of water sports, with restaurants, shops and cabanas on the shore, all within walking distance of the mooring jetty.

I wondered if it was tasteful to enjoy a day amid such luxury on poor, earthquake-battered Haiti, but Labadee contributes much-needed millions to Haiti's economy, without inflicting any obvious damage.

Finally, a day in Miami, now one of America's buzziest cities. I sat by a hotel pool thinking of what I've been taught. Hold the banjo lightly, but comfortably. Strike the string boldly, not hesitatingly. Anchor your right hand so that you'll always know which string your thumb and first and second finger are going to strike. Watch your left hand. Fret the strings lightly but firmly. Trust



your right hand knows what it's doing.

The five-string banjo is tricky at first. You wonder if you'll ever produce a recognisable sound on it. Then, quite quickly, you do just that. Your digital recorder replays something sounding more or less right.

A thrilling moment. But they say you need to practise something for 10,000 hours before you can really do it well.

Ten thousand hours! I can't wait for my next banjo cruise.

TRAVEL FACTS

SISTER ship Freedom of the Seas does a similar seven-night cruise from Port Canaveral, Florida, calling at Bahamas, St Thomas and St Maarten, from £1,297 pp based on inside stateroom including accommodation, meals and entertainment on board, return flights from Heathrow, one night pre-hotel accommodation and transfers, 0844 493 2061, royalcaribbean.co.uk Banjo Cruises are booked separately through banjoteacher.com. See website for the next available trip.

WEB WISDOM
Want to pick up a new hobby — or just relax on the ocean waves? Find the cruise that's right for you at travelmail.co.uk