

An emergency nurse goes to sea

By Shannon Wilson,
RN, BN, Clinical Nurse Educator

Some would call it a sense of adventure, some would say it was insanity and others would say it was a good change. I called it my mid-life crisis. I woke up one day in July 2004 and decided I needed a change. In a matter of five months, I had sold my house, bought a condo, moved, quit my job and ran away to a life at sea. After 24 years of pediatric nursing with the last nine years in emergency, it was a bit of an adjustment to board a cruise ship and start caring for adults.

My adventure started in San Pedro, which is the cruise ship harbour just outside L.A. I boarded the ship with two bags and a lot of questions. From the first week on board, I knew to expect the unexpected. I had a suitcase full of clothes that I would not need and all the wrong colour of socks and shoes for the uniform. My week of orientation included the company standards, firefighting, lifeboat drills, opening and closing the fire doors and the ecologically friendly “save the waves” program. There was very little time to learn the medical stuff until after orientation when I was on my own.

The cruise ships are equipped with a fully functional ICU, resuscitation room and two wardrooms for overnight patients as required. The company I work for has two doctors and three nurses on the ship at any given time. We have x-ray capability (I’m a good photographer, but lousy aim), and a limited lab for blood tests. There are also kits for pregnancy tests, strep tests, flu tests, alcohol levels and cardiac enzymes. Therefore, diagnostics are available, but slightly limited. One passenger who stands out in my memory is a lady who exhibited all the signs of a stroke. She could respond to her name, could not speak, and gradually deteriorated to full resuscitation mode. We stabilized her, then off-loaded her in the middle of the

night. The coast guard matches speed with the ship and one of the side doors is opened. We then pass the patients to the coast guard and a doc and nurse accompany them shore side and rejoin the ship the next day. We don’t often find out what happened with a patient once they are offloaded but, in this case, she was fine and it turned out to be an overdose of her many medications. Another time, a lady called to say her husband was just sitting there staring at her and totally unresponsive. She couldn’t get any response out of him at all. That is until they were informed of the charges to see the doctor, and then he was miraculously cured and started speaking to her again.

We provide medical care for all crew members. With more than 60 nationalities represented among the crew, it can be challenging to communicate and very interesting getting to know people. Some crew members are frequent fliers and learn quickly to manipulate the system. One “princess” would routinely come down with an ailment prior to her shift and recover when in port. Her last episode consisted of being totally unresponsive until given a vitamin B Complex injection at which time she managed a response to the point of bending the needle in her butt.

The resuscitations are really what we are there for. The knowledge to save a life and the equipment to do it is essential on these ships. Much like any city, 9-1-1 calls will activate an emergency response. The bridge officers are the dispatchers for 9-1-1 calls. They take the call then phone or beep the nurse on duty. We then call the room to get more details, if

we can, but the call often comes from elsewhere on the ship and we need to make an assessment at the scene. Our mobile unit consists of a wheelchair and an Alpha bag, which is a large backpack filled to capacity with everything required to save a life and stabilize a patient when outside the medical facility. Occasionally, it is a legitimate call, but often it is not. I have handled 9-1-1 calls for requests for Tums, Tylenol and condoms. Even the legitimate-sounding calls often turn out to be false alarms. Unconscious patients on the sports deck up and playing by the time we arrive, heart attack victims discovering relief with a Tums and extremely sick passengers suddenly cured when they find out there are charges for medical care. If the nurse on call requires further assistance, or if it is a code situation, then “Alpha, Alpha, Alpha” is paged overhead and that activates the entire medical team and the stretcher team to the location. When on call, we usually sleep in our scrubs ready for action. When not on call, we may still be asked to help and it is a different story. It is one thing to help



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with a resuscitation in your scrubs and shoes with no bra, no underwear and no socks but, when the firemen, paramedics, security and coast guard comes on the scene, you feel a little self-conscious.

One of the most unusual calls we received was a young lady who took a direct hit to her bosom with a basketball. It must have been a forceful hit as her implant burst. Another time, we had a very drunk but happy young man who put his fist through the slot machine after losing hundreds of dollars. He lost several hundred more by the time we were done stitching and dressing his wounds.

In spite of some limitations and dress restrictions, you can have a very active social life. You can go to the shows, crew parties or bingo. You can go to the lounges and dance or just go shopping or to the gym. There is a library, internet café and video library as well.

When mixing with the passengers, you must be ready for any type of question. Some of the more entertaining questions that I have heard about are listed here.


1. Does the crew sleep on board? (No, we swim ashore each night)
2. Does this elevator go to the front of the ship? (After Ensenada some passengers think so)

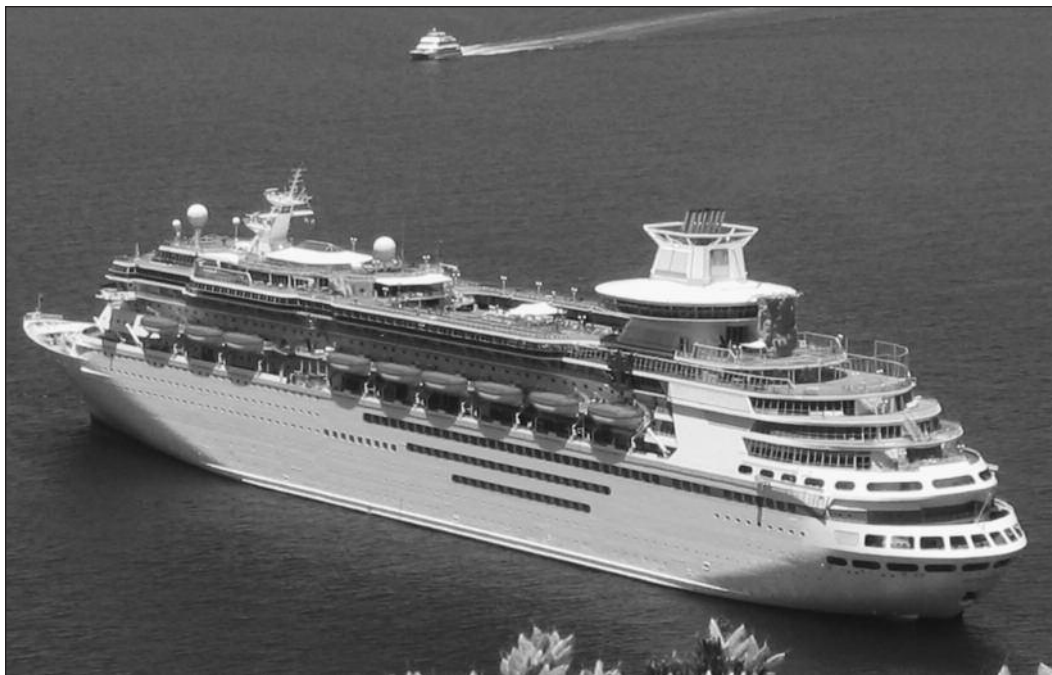
3. Do these stairs go up or down? (Yep)
4. What do they do with the ice carvings after they have melted?
5. Does the ship generate its own electricity? (No, we run a long extension cord from L.A.)
6. Do you have to get off the ship to take a shore excursion?
7. If the photos aren't marked, how do we know which ones are ours? (Um, look at the face, buddy)
8. Is the swimming pool salt water or fresh water? When answered that it was salt water, the reply was "Oh that explains the waves".
9. One passenger in the cabin phoned the purser when still in port asking why he paid so much for an ocean view stateroom and all he could see was the parking lot and a bunch of cars. The purser replied, "Because we don't usually take the parking lot with us when we sail".
10. One lady phoned the purser's desk because she couldn't get out of the cabin. One door went into the closet and the other one into the bathroom. When the purser told her to use the door in between those two, the reply was "I can't open that door, it has a 'Please do not disturb' sign on it".

The days off in port are the reason I signed on. This job is a great way to work your way around the world if you plan it

right. A lot of the nurses prefer to shop; I preferred to tour the ports of call. Many of my adventures happened shore side. One day, in Catalina, I decided to go for a hike up in the hills. It was a great hike straight up for more than an hour. It was very hot up in the hills and I could feel the heat coming up at me from the ground as well as overhead. I had a litre of water with me and no hat. I was on my own, on an unknown trail, in an uninhabited area and I found out at the top of the mountain that my cell phone was not getting a signal. Then, upon exiting the trail back at the bottom, I spotted a sign warning hikers of rattlesnakes in the area. Normally, I'm a very safety conscious traveller but, in this case, I was lucky to return to the ship without incident. Another day, I rented a crew bike for the sum of \$3.00. I was getting a great workout climbing a hill and the pedal started to wobble. I decided it would be advisable to come down before the pedal fell off altogether. It seized up on the next turn of the wheel. I started coasting back to the ship only to find out that the brakes were very worn and not working too well. I had to exert an incredible force on the brakes in order for them to even slow the bike down. Then, as I was coasting the last small hill, the gear casing and pedal fell off completely. I walked the bike back to the ship and spent a glorious afternoon

reading my book up on the deck in the sun. It's a much safer pastime for me. Funny thing, when I returned the bike key to the crew office they gave me my money back.

Working on a cruise ship can be tedious at times and restrictive. However, the positive aspects of the job far outweigh the few restrictions and problems. I recommend the move for anyone with a sense of adventure and a desire to do something different. 



Shannon Wilson's workplace on the water.