

JUST IMAGINE...



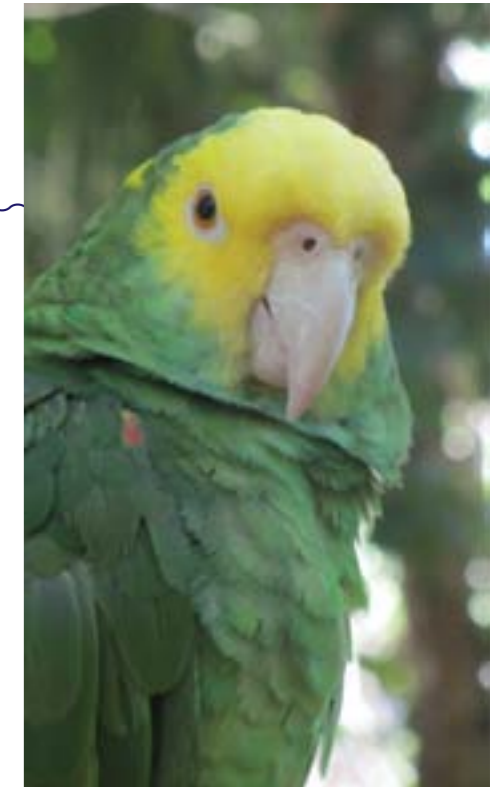
Sea turtles at Xcaret (Mexico) and wild Grand Cayman Amazons were among countless 2012 cruise highlights.



The Carnival Conquest

PARROT LOVER'S CRUISE

BY DAVID WOOLCOCK
PHOTOS BY DAVID & VICKI WOOLCOCK



Yellow-headed Amazon on exhibit at Xcaret (Mexico)

JUST IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT; waking up to a beautiful sunrise over the ocean, eating breakfast whilst flying fish and dolphins entertain you, spending the morning observing beautiful parrots in the wild, a barbecue lunch on a tropical beach, palm trees gently swaying in the warm sea breeze, taking a leisurely swim in the afternoon, before joining friends for a sumptuous meal in a five star restaurant as the sun gently sets. Then it's off to see a show! If only you could be helping to conserve parrots at the same time your life would be perfect – but it can! Just join us for the 2013 Parrot Lover's Cruise.

If the above all sounds like an idyllic holiday then just remember, that is only one day – on the Parrot Lover's Cruise you will have seven such days to remember and treasure forever.

Allow me to tell you more about the 2012 Parrot Lover's Cruise as it might encourage you to dig out your passport, dust off your camera and make plans to join the 2013 cruise.

The cruise departed from the beautiful and vibrant port of New Orleans. As

we boarded the Carnival Conquest, its vast size and opulent decoration were far beyond my expectations. Glass elevators and stunning staircases gave access to all fourteen decks of this most magnificent of vessels. The cabins, or staterooms as they are known, were exceptionally well equipped, spacious and luxurious. As a first time cruiser I confess I was a little apprehensive about making such a trip, but once onboard all my fears and apprehension melted away as I rapidly settled into the cruising lifestyle.

The first evening onboard, the parrot lover's all got together for an icebreaker that enabled us to get to know each other and to renew old friendships. This was the fourth Parrot Lover's Cruise for some!

The next two days were what the cruise line calls "Fun Days at Sea", and in truth they were just that. As we sailed the ocean between New Orleans and our first port of call, Montego Bay, we were free to enjoy all of the facilities that the ship afforded us; everything from pools, bars, restaurants, sundecks and a gymnasium, to shops, a beauty spa and even a casino. During the afternoons of these first two days we were treated

to presentations from Phoebe Green-Linden, Dr Scott Echols and Pat Anderson, all true experts in their fields and without exception, inspirational people.

As we awoke the following morning we could see the coast of Jamaica. By 9am we had docked and were in Montego Bay. This day we were free to do whatever we pleased. We could remain onboard the Conquest and simply soak up the Caribbean sun or we could partake in any one of a number of excursions laid on by the cruise line.

The next day was the first of the special Parrot Lover's excursions arranged by Carol Cipriano, the inspiration behind the Parrot Lover's Cruise back in 2009. To this day Carol runs each and every one with skill, efficiency and great attention to detail. I had been eagerly anticipating this excursion for the chance to see Grand Cayman Parrots in the wild. By 7am we had arrived just offshore and were swiftly transferred by small boat to the island itself. Grand Cayman is only about eighteen miles in length but what it lacks in size it more than makes up for in natural beauty. Two coaches then took us on the short

drive to the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Gardens. Excitement was growing as we neared the entrance to the gardens, we were all anxious to see the Grand Cayman Parrot in the wild but realistic enough to realise that there were no guarantees. We should not have worried. As we got out of the coaches we were met in the car park by Stuart Mailer, a field officer of the National Trust for the Cayman Islands. Stuart pointed us in the direction of a tree near the entrance to the Botanic Gardens where three of these most beautiful of Amazon Parrots observed us as we arrived! The day was off to a cracking start! Stuart showed us around the Botanic Gardens and told us of the ongoing work to protect the Grand Cayman Parrot and its close relative the Cayman Brac Parrot which lives on the neighbouring, smaller island of Cayman Brac. The gardens were truly stunning, boasting some of the rarest orchids on the planet and some of the most beautiful trees and plants that you can imagine. Birds were everywhere we looked and Stuart was expert at identifying them and pointing them out to us. Woodpeckers, Mockingbirds, Bananquits and even the endemic Vitelline Warbler made an appearance. We were lucky enough to see several more Grand Cayman Parrots as we toured the gardens. Stuart then introduced Paul Watler, The Environmental Programmes Manager of the National Trust for the Cayman Islands who told us about

the conservation programmes that are ongoing on the islands. One of which is a highly successful project to protect and conserve the endemic Blue Iguana. The captive breeding centre for this large and very impressive reptile is situated within the Botanic Gardens and the animals themselves can often be encountered as you walk through the gardens.

On leaving the Botanic Gardens we made our way, for a late lunch, to Seven Mile Beach where a sumptuous barbecue awaited us. Seven Mile Beach is truly a Caribbean Paradise. A palm fringed, white sand beach, on the edge of the beautiful Caribbean sea, what more could you want? We even had time for a swim after lunch before returning to the ship. The day we spent on Grand Cayman will always be a treasured memory for me, and, I know, many others.

Overnight the ship steamed on to Mexico. By morning we had arrived at the Island of Cozumel. The excursion that Carol had arranged for the Parrot Lover's meant that we were to take a small ferry from Cozumel back to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico – our destination was Mexico's largest theme park Xcaret.

Xcaret has something for everyone. It was created to promote love and respect for nature and Mexico's cultural heritage. If you want to learn about Mayan history and culture, see traditional Mexican

horsemanship or swim in underground caverns you can do it all here and plenty more besides. What we came to see were the macaws! Xcaret is famous for its free flying macaws and the breeding and release programme for Scarlets.

Our guide, Fernando Mendoza, very kindly gave us a behind the scenes tour of their facility. We saw the breeding aviaries for the Scarlet and Military Macaws and an enormous pre release enclosure that contained fifty Scarlet Macaws that were soon to be released into the wild. Everyone was then given the opportunity to work with one of the free flying macaws in a large training aviary. By now the whole party were carrying beaming smiles, but it was to get even better. Fernando offered everyone the chance to carry a macaw to a special release point within the park. With macaw on hand, everyone made their way to the dais. On the blow of a whistle all the macaws took flight en masse, as part of the 12 noon "Free Flight of Macaws" show. It was a breathtaking spectacle only surpassed by the ecstatic smiles on the faces of the group.

After that our tour wasn't even over!



Cruise participants got a chance to work with macaws from the release program at Xcaret in Mexico.



We then met Gabriela who specialised in the hand rearing of the birds at Xcaret. She gave us a tour of the hand rearing facility and introduced us to some young Scarlet and Military Macaws that she was raising. "Oohs!" and "aahs!" abounded during that part of the tour! Xcaret had bred more than a hundred Scarlet Macaws during 2012. After such an exciting morning, and much discussion over lunch, we were then free to roam Xcaret to discover more of its delights. Their turtle breeding facility was truly impressive and a personal highlight for me. You could see the tiny turtle hatchlings in the first of a series of crystal clear pools. Walking on, you could see their progression with older turtles in each successive pool. Finally you were awed by the massive full grown adults. It would be very easy to spend several days at Xcaret enjoying everything that it has to offer, but sadly our time was limited.

Our final full day was another "Fun Day at Sea" whilst the ship sailed back to New Orleans. It was on this

day that I gave a presentation to the cruisers during the afternoon, and they graciously listened. Following on from my talk was a silent auction where all manner of, often unique, parrot related items were offered. I was amazed and humbled by the kindness and generosity shown to the World Parrot Trust by the cruise goers; particularly as I know just how much we can achieve as a result of their support.

When we debarked at New Orleans it was the end of a marvellous journey, upon which we had made many new friends, found inspiration, and above all helped the parrots.



David Woolcock is Curator at Paradise Park, Hayle, Cornwall, UK. He was one of the founders of the World Parrot Trust in 1989 and remains a valued Trustee to this day.



Back on board, the silent auction is full of enticing parrot-related items.

2013 PARROT LOVER'S CRUISE
 October 26 - November 2
 Sailing from San Juan, Puerto Rico

5TH ANNUAL trip of a lifetime

Before you even disembark, start with a shore excursion to see critically endangered Puerto Rican Amazons and learn from the scientists working to save them.

Then hop aboard the ship for departure from San Juan, Puerto Rico. You'll be visiting St. Croix, St. Kitts, Dominica, Grenada, and St. Thomas.

Speakers include World Parrot Trust Director Jamie Gilardi, parrot enrichment expert Robin Shewokis and more speakers to be announced.

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