

# Meet Me In St. Maarten

The high seas may seem an odd place to woo sports fans, but the Cardinals have been making waves for years.

By Shaun Assael | Photographs by Joe Fornabaio

Shortstop Brendan Ryan takes a swing at shuffleboard with help from Fredbird and fans.



The cruise allows fans to get on deck with their heroes.

### The *Celebrity Summit*, a

gleaming, 11-story ocean liner, sits docked in San Juan, Puerto Rico, waiting for its 2,300 guests to board. Among the cruisers are several dozen wearing St. Louis Cardinals jerseys. They eye one another knowingly, like kids on the first day of camp.

Thirteen million vacationers worldwide spent more than \$20 billion cruising in 2009, and it seems like every celebrity with a new album, book or movie is jumping aboard the trend. John Mayer hosted a “Mayercraft” cruise to Mexico last year; political junkies listened to Karl Rove muse through the Mediterranean; and fans of the film *Twilight* will soon get to drink Bloody Marys with the cast off the coast of Alaska.

But the Cardinals hold one of the longest records for partying at sea, having hosted a cruise nearly every year since Todd Worrell was the National League’s top rookie, in 1986. Considering that the Phillies didn’t launch the Phantastic Voyage until they won the World Series in 2008, and that the Rangers scrubbed their cruise last year following four straight losing seasons, the Cards’ oceangoing streak is impressive. So in the spirit of research—to find out why this team owns not only the NL Central but also the Caribbean—I’m cruisin’ with the Cards a few weeks before spring training.

Yes, it’s a tough job, but someone has to do it.

After checking in, I head to my stateroom, which boasts a bottle of champagne, a Cardinals teddy bear and a note stating that our first-night dinner will start at 8:30. It’s on my way to eat that I meet Preston King Johnson IV, standing in the lounge outside the ship’s stately art deco dining room. His grin stretches from ear to ear. Nodding to his jersey as I try to get my sea legs, I say, “Cards fan, huh?”

“Watch every game,” he replies. “Now I’m here with the team.” He nods to a table of players and their wives in a section reserved for our group. “It’s my first fan cruise.”

There’s something about Johnson—the big mouth of teeth, the polished bald head, the way he assertively booms, “Call me P.K.”—that tells me he’s a bull in this gently swaying china shop. And sure enough, he comes over to me after chatting up Cardinals shortstop Brendan Ryan and says, “I think I insulted him.”

“How?”

“I asked him why he had 13 errors last year.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“It turns out he had only nine.”

**Day 2 St. Maarten** After a restless first night at sea, I awake to a thunderous clang. Opening the curtain, I see we’ve arrived at our first stop,

the island of St. Maarten. Unfortunately, no one told me that my room is directly over the gangplank. Dressed in plaid skivvies, I’m completely visible to the disembarking passengers—not a pretty sight.

After a shower, I attend a breakfast meet and greet with the five representatives of the Cardinals organization onboard: shortstop Ryan, assistant GM John Abbamondi, reliever Kyle McClellan and two retired fan favorites, catcher Mike Matheny and outfielder/first baseman John Mabry. In exchange for an all-expenses-paid vacation, they’ll do Q&As, conduct baseball clinics and sign lots of autographs. (Superstars like Ozzie Smith used to go on the cruise, but nowadays it’s tough to get players with eight-figure salaries, such as Albert Pujols and Matt Holliday, to trade private time for a free trip.)

Sitting with a walking cane in the front row of the breakfast session is Mike Hoenig, who goes by the nickname Blind Mike. This is his 12th cruise, and over the years he has chatted up Stan Musial (“His wife sat me next to his good ear”), wrangled an invitation to the owner’s box at

Busch Stadium, and traded recipes with pitcher/restaurateur Jeff Suppan. “You really feel you know these people beyond baseball,” says Hoenig, a project manager at the University of Iowa. He tracks the Cardinals’ stats using voice recognition software on his computer.

At the Q&A’s, Hoenig is always called on first. Rising, he shares an anecdote about a friend who’s suffering with a mental illness; it’s his way of easing into a delicate question about Khalil Greene, the shortstop who missed a big chunk of 2009, his only season as a Cardinal, because of a social anxiety disorder. What follows is part Dr. Phil and part clubhouse confidential. “To see him struggle was very, very tough,” says Ryan. “They were trying like heck to get him the right help. He sent us text messages, telling us to keep it up while he was away. It brought us together as a team.” Hoenig thanks Ryan for his honesty, and the session moves on to other topics: Mark McGwire’s hiring as hitting coach, the signing of Holliday to the richest deal in team history, news about a possible Pujols contract extension.

Later, Abbamondi finds himself thinking about Hoenig’s question. A fit and trim 38-year-old former Navy flight officer, Abbamondi knew the Cardinals’ storied history when he took his job in 2007: how they were the only NL team west of the Mississippi until 1958; how their TV ratings always win their time slot in St. Louis; how Busch Stadium fans applaud opponents who play smartly.

It took Hoenig’s question about Greene, though, to show Abbamondi how much fans view the team through the prism of their own lives.

#### ROAD NUMBERS

# 36

Number of away games (out of 41) the **Vancouver Canucks** played outside their own time zone last season.

Walking a St. Maarten beach later that afternoon in flip-flops and a T-shirt, he asks, “Did you notice how many questions started with ‘us’ and ‘we’? I never understood until now how personal this is for them.”

**Day 3 Dominica** There’s an art to picking the right players to go on a fan cruise. In 2008, Carolyn Chamberlain, a travel agent from East Peoria, Ill., was trying to climb aboard a banana boat in the Dominican Republic when it tipped over, tossing

her into the water and trapping her underneath. Cards utilityman Joe Mather dove in after her. “He saved my life,” the 73-year-old Chamberlain says. This year she’s thrilled to see Matheny, a former Gold Glove catcher who’s pushing 40 but still looks fit enough to play. He suns with his wife by day, then works the dining room at night, stopping at each table to chat. Spying him by the pool deck as the ship bobs at the dock, Chamberlain lets her gaze linger on his lower back. “Some days I feel 103,” she says. “But some days I feel 43.”

She’s thinking of playing bingo when a couple of Cardinals cruisers reroute her to a whale-watching trip that leaves from town. Just like that she finds herself wedged on a tour boat between McClellan and his wife, Bridget. The 25-year-old setup man is coming off a solid season, except for one Cardinal sin: On Oct. 2, he blew a 6-1 lead and cost starter Adam Wainwright his 20th win—and maybe the Cy Young Award, which went to Giants phenom Tim Lincecum. McClellan grew up near St. Louis in a family of Cardinals season ticket-holders, and his grandfather still checks bags at Busch on game days. These fans are his peeps. “I would’ve killed to go on something like this when I was a kid,” he says.

After the boat sails five miles out to sea, leaving Dominica’s rain forests behind in a canopy of clouds, the first mate takes out a sonar device to listen for whale sounds. Soon he points eagerly into the near distance, and four humpback whales leap up, spouting water and cracking their tails. As the McClellans reach for their camera, Chamberlain turns to the wide-eyed reliever. “Sure beats bingo,” she quips.

**Day 4 Grenada** You have to wonder why a team with a 43,975-seat ballpark would go to all this trouble for 67 fans. But Cards VP Mike Hall, who helped arrange the trip, insists the cruise is not only about the fans onboard. “When they get home they’ll tell their neighbors and friends that the Cardinals they met are just regular guys,” he says. “And then those people will tell their friends. It’s about making more loyal fans.”

Exhibit A: John Redman, who was floored when a friend phoned out of the blue last fall to say, “Dude, you’re not going to believe this. The Cardinals have a fan cruise!” A lineman for a local power company, Redman lives in the small town of Herrick, Ill. (pop. 498). He has a lacquered tree stump in the shape of a cardinal in his game room and the St. Louis logo embroidered into the headrests of his



After fun in the sun, Cardinals Nation dresses for dinner.

Cardinals-red pickup truck. “My friends say I’m a little extreme,” he says. A little? He dropped \$1,500 on tickets for two seats behind the Redbirds’ dugout for the final home game last season.

Now, for about the same price (the basic rate for the cruise is \$1,500 per person, not including airfare), he has a stateroom that opens onto a veranda from which he can watch the Atlantic shimmer at night. Returning from a day tour through Grenada, where schoolkids in crisp uniforms fill the port area with music, he figures it can’t get much better.

Or can it?

Before dinner, there’s time for a poker tourney, and Redman finds himself in a showdown with

McClellan. Big league hitters might be able to shake off the stare of the 6'2", 215-pound righthander, but not Redman. He's a wreck, hoping that if anyone notices his hands shaking they'll figure it's sea sickness and not the aces over 10s he's covering.

Pushing all his chips to the middle of the table, Redman flips the two pair. McClellan answers with three eights. Exhaling, Redman says, "I'm glad it's you who took me out." And he means it. McClellan gives him a double-tap bro hug. "It's gonna take me awhile to unwind from this when I get home," Redman says, his face blushing the color of his strawberry piña colada.

**Day 5 Tobago** Debbie Bohne, a St. Louis nurse, has celebrated her birthday by cruising with the Cardinals every year since she turned 30, in 1986. She ticks off a list of highlights, which includes the time legendary broadcaster



Onboard, fans can get everything from autographs to tips on how to throw a fastball like McClellan to a dance lesson from Fredbird.

Jack Buck brought down the house with his impersonation of Michael Jackson. But her fondest memory comes from that first cruise. "A bunch of us went shopping in Jamaica, and when we got back we noticed four members of our group were missing. Well, the ship was about to leave. So we got Ozzie Smith and Willie McGee, and they ran out and looked through every shop

stories about the best and worst places to live. On the basketball court, a few of the guys are doing more trash-talking than playing. Nearby, P.K. is sleeping in the sun while Blind Mike tries his hand at shuffleboard. Providing the soundtrack is a calypso band performing an island version of Travis Tritt's "It's a Great Day to Be Alive."

## By the pool, players' wives are swapping stories about the best and worst places to live.

in the town. They finally found the ladies in a jewelry shop and dragged them back just in time."

Bohne is telling this story on the aft deck of the *Summit*, surrounded by friends brought along to help her celebrate her 54th birthday. One friend toasts: "To Ozzie and Willie." The nurse's eyes sparkle from behind her wide-rimmed glasses.

"To Ozzie and Willie!"

By the pool, the players' wives are swapping



**Day 6 At Sea** As the *Summit* cruises back toward San Juan at 15 knots (about 17 mph), causing the first real chop of the trip, the Cardinals' mascot, Fredbird, is busting a move to a steel drum band. The Cards don't let Fredbird do interviews, but a few hours earlier team employee Tim Faulkner put his tongue squarely in his cheek when he said, "Fred doesn't get a lot of chances to sunbathe in St. Louis. And he loves to shop."

Standing on the edge of the dance floor, Cindy and Cecil Blansett do their best imitation of Faulkner, er, Fredbird. The married Army engineers from Conway, Ark., travel 400 miles to St. Louis each weekend the Cards are home. Says Cindy, "When we first heard about this cruise, we saved our money and said, 'We'll try it once.' " That was six cruises ago.

Like Hoenig, the Blansetts care so much about the Cardinals because they cherish the friends they make while watching the team play. These fans could go anywhere for vacation, but it's hard to separate a baseball believer from faith and loyalty. If you can mix in rum punch and calypso, you've taken the American pastime to a new level.

Wins and losses do matter, of course. This year's group is about a third the size of past ones, mostly because of the economy but maybe partly because St. Louis got swept in the playoffs last October. Judging by these members of Cardinals Nation, though, a team's record matters less than the effort it puts into making fans feel important. Which is why, at the goodbye dinner this evening, Pat Blassie and John Berra, owners of the St. Louis travel agency Altair, rise to lead their group in an annual ritual. The dining room is filled with hundreds of guests in sequins and suits. They all stop clanging their silverware when Blassie shouts, "One, two, three ... " And we rise to sing, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

Yep, a whole new level. 🌐

Would you pay to cruise with your favorite team?  
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