

Fountain of youth

By Stephen Gauer

Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon was searching for the elusive Fountain of Youth when he landed on the coast of Florida back in 1513. He never found it. I think I know why. He was on the wrong boat.

Instead of a Spanish galleon, he should have booked passage on a cruise ship. This would have guaranteed a genuine fountain of youth experience. I know, because I recently went on a ten-day Florida cruise with my mother, accompanied by approximately one thousand, four hundred and ninety two old people.

Ponce, wherever he is, would probably agree that old people are fine as long as there aren't too many of them. My mother is old but makes an excellent travel companion, thanks to her generous wallet and remarkably intact, 85-year-old brain. She easily holds her own in our perennial debate, Did The Excesses Of The Sixties Ruin Me For Life Or Was I Switched At Birth With Her Real Son?

But a cruise tampers with the natural order. If you're sitting in a ship's restaurant enjoying some excellent Norwegian gravlax and Oriental-style rotisserie duck and you look around and realize you're outnumbered ten to one by people who can't get up out of their chairs without help, then something is very wrong.

The first clue that nature has been tampered with comes just hours after we pull out of Ft. Lauderdale. Three hundred people, including my mother and me, are trying to find the dining room, which has been cleverly hidden at the far end of the boat and therefore requires two elevator rides and a two-mile march down a red-carpeted corridor.

Suddenly a male voice wrapped in delicate New Jersey vowels booms out from behind us: "Follow that young man! He knows where he's going!"

I look around. Four couples, all over eighty, are following us. Mr. New Jersey is very short, completely bald, dressed head to toe in brown, and has a manic gleam in his one good eye. We grin at each other. I'm fifty two years old but now feel like a young pup.

The boat's twisted reality gets worse. After three days a strange, erotic glow begins to emanate from the two dozen female passengers who are under fifty. The plain ones look beautiful, and the two beauties look stunning. I linger for hours in the souvenir shop in order to study the perfect, unlined face of the young female cashier.

Old people cruise for obvious reasons. It's easy and requires no heavy lifting. You can eat as much as you want. There are hundreds, even thousands, of like-minded people to talk to. Conversations on the ship sprout like weeds on an over-watered front lawn. All it takes is a glance, a smile, any kind of sign that you are a fellow human being whose hearing is still good and

some old guy will start explaining why cruising was better in the old days.

I try my best. I seek out intelligent looking people and talk to them. I avoid politics, sex and religion. I bring up World War Two (“double u double u two” is how the men pronounce it). I use sophisticated interview techniques honed by decades of journalism experience. But too many conversations go like this:

Me: “May we join you for lunch?”

Lonely old guy: “Yeah.”

Me: “Thanks. It’s busy today.”

LOG: “Yeah, I was gonna wait and then I thought I might as well get it over with.”

Every night at dinner my mother and I share a table with Mary and Larry. Mary is seventy five and dresses like a dowager and looks like Margaret Dumont in the old Marx Brothers movies; Larry is eighty three and has the long lean face of a Depression survivor. They’re friendly people, but conversation is a struggle.

I mention politics. Larry tells me he was a union man in his younger days, but now votes Republican. “The last time I voted Democratic was nineteen forty eight,” he says. “You know, the clothing store guy from Missouri.”

“Truman,” I say. “Harry Truman.”

“Yeah,” he says. “You want to know the truth about liberals?”

“Sure.”

“They’re just phonies who want to spend other people’s money.”

We exchange anecdotes about food and travel. But mostly the conversation runs in fits and starts, like a tiny engine starved of gas.

“I hear they ran out of pork last night at the barbeque,” Mary says.

“Really?”

“Yeah. They had to cook more.”

“Oh.”

“Apparently it wasn’t as good as the first batch.”

“That’s too bad.”

“We didn’t go.”

Every evening after dinner, my mother and I, arm in arm like a pair of wobbly sailors, totter off to the theatre at the other end of the ship (the first rule of cruising is that wherever you want to go is at the other end of a two-mile long corridor). Here we’re entertained by comedians, magicians and a troupe of young people who sing and dance with great enthusiasm but appear to be no older than twelve.

The old folks watch and applaud politely. They’re twelve hours into their day and fading fast. Some of their faces look like death masks. I nod my head and tap my feet to the Elton John medley. I sing along sometimes, but quietly so I don’t wake up my mother, who’s fast asleep beside me. I feel young and wild and free.