

Raising hell in the sun: Goths go on cruises

Contributed by Annie Lok
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Members of a subculture known more for doom and gloom and pale faces challenge stereotypes (and have a great time) on

an annual tropical outing called GothCruise...

For his trips to Bermuda, Mexico and the Caribbean, Larry McFall, or Lobster, as his friends call him, packs items from his “closet of doom” and “drawer of death.”

His luggage is more odd than ominous: Utilikilts (a cross between a kilt and a tool belt), rock band T-shirts (usually black), body paint, devil horns and theatrical costume glue constitute a significant portion of what Lobster wears on these journeys, during which the 39-year-old goth often fields requests from grandmothers who want their picture taken with the man dressed as Satan.

“It’s not the evil, dark, soul-catching Satan,” Lobster said, explaining his character. “It’s just the Satan who’s tired and needs a drink.”

Lobster is actually a graphic designer from Fort Worth, Texas, who lives the goth life and, once a year, joins his fellow members of that dark subculture for a most mainstream diversion: a tropical cruise.

For his trips, cruising side by side with young couples in pastels and retirees in Hawaiian shirts, he covers his body in red paint, pastes nearly a dozen horns on his bald head and, for the dance parties, dons a kilt.

What started as one cruise-loving goth’s desire to bring a like-minded contingent along on a relaxing vacation has become a growing annual event called GothCruise. On these trips, a group of people more closely associated with dark eyeliner and doom than with sunbathing and fruity drinks challenge common conceptions others have about them.

“People would initiate conversations with us, and they realize we’re generally well-spoken, mild-mannered people,” said Angel Weller, the originator and organizer of the cruises. “And then they say, ‘Oh wait a minute. These guys just dress funny.’ ”

The goth subculture arose among fans of 1980s gothic punk rock bands like Siouxsie and the Banshees and postpunk bands

like Joy Division. Genres within the subculture have developed in the last two decades, spawning such categories as “Victorian steam punk” and “cybergoth.”

These days, goths can be broadly characterized by fashion-head-to-toe black, velvet capes, and PVC corsets-and a taste for dark, harsh rock or electronic music.

The incongruousness of goths enjoying a sun-soaked sail to paradisiacal islands is not lost on its participants.

“Where is the most unlikely place where you find a goth?” asked Bob Westphal, 47, a Tampa resident who has also traveled on all four GothCruises. “What is the most unlikely thing you could think of a goth doing?”

These goths eat at the buffets, run up tabs at the cigar bar and venture onshore with their digital cameras to pose at waterfalls, colonial sites and, yes, beaches. Favored onboard activities include “scare-aoke” (when GothCruise members take over the mic at the karaoke bar) and making “goth soup,” (sitting in the hot tub, but without the black satin and body paint).

Those who have gone on the trips, many of whom are in their 30s, say that they don’t fit the stereotype of brooding goth because they grew out of it as they entered the working world. Weller said 60 percent of those who have signed up are part of an online group called CorpGoth.

These “corporate” goths are in their 20s and older, have mainstream jobs in big companies and have found ways to maintain their goth lifestyle while being accepted professionally.

Most see the GothCruises as simply a vacation with friends they met through a large, loose network, many of whom they only see once or twice a year. Some have even brought their young children along.

“We wore black lipstick in the ’80s, but now we’re grown up,” said Megan Green, a 39-year-old graphic designer for Merrill Lynch who found out about the cruise through CorpGoth.

Weller acknowledged that her like-minded vacationers are perhaps an unusual minority among goths. The travelers “are not poster children for the gothic subculture,” said Weller, a 36-year-old technical writer who lives in Tampa, Fla.

“We’re not the freakiest people you’ll ever see.”

But many on the GothCruise do raise eyebrows with their stomper boots and black T-shirts during the day and Victorian gowns for formal evenings. Some, like Lobster, bring special outfits for the private dance parties that are the only official goth-themed events on the cruises, when DJs play Bauhaus, the Cure and New Order.

Reactions to their appearance range from the oft-repeated question "Are you in a band?" to terrified stares, to one older woman who asked Lobster whether he and his friends worshipped the devil (no). Mostly, GothCruise-goers say, the reactions are positive. The ship's crew and staff snap pictures of them. The goth sightseers become sights themselves.

Other times, comments about their neon pink hair or studded collars work as icebreakers with non-goth passengers.

Paul Bresock, a 36-year-old mechanical engineer from San Diego said fellow cruise passengers would approach him with

compliments. They told him, "You guys are having so much fun. I wish I could let loose like that," he said.

Weller said she came up with the idea for the group cruise during an event called Convergence-an annual weekend-long gathering for hundreds of goths from all over the country, who come together for gothic music, dancing, art and, most important, socializing. She had been on cruises with her husband and enjoyed them.

She thought the experience could only be improved by bringing a crowd of her friends along.

During the 2003 Convergence, while drinking with friends in a Las Vegas hotel room, Weller brought up the topic, and her companions agreed that they should take their reunion out to sea.

"None of us wanted to be the only freaks on the boat," Weller said.

Contrary to ideas about goths being unfriendly, GothCruise has included many who did not consider themselves fixtures in the goth scene. Lobster, for example, came onto the first GothCruise as part of a deal he made with a friend he wanted to take to the countercultural Burning Man festival.

Since then, however, Lobster has been hooked and loves putting on floor-length gowns and feather boas for the cruises' formal dinners. He has also taken up the online role-playing game World of Warcraft, a more traditional goth activity that his fellow vacationers enjoy.

But there is one quintessential cruise ship experience he isn't ready to explore.

"Shuffleboard? No," he said. "I'll do that when I'm 80."

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