

Angels on the Seas



On a chilly, blustery day somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico, I sat on the deck of a cruise ship watching two young women in orange T-shirts lift a wheelchair-bound teenager out of his seat, carry him up a flight of stairs, and slide down a water slide with him. I watched as his face reflected pure glee at the bottom of the slide. The ladies lifted him out of the water and carefully placed him back in his wheelchair. Then they did the whole thing again. All to give this boy a chance to enjoy an activity that most kids take for granted.

For five days I watched these orange-clad men and women place the needs of special children ahead of their own needs. I watched them engage with the children, play with them, hug them, sing to them, swim with them, eat with them, calm and soothe them, and keep them safe from dangers. I watched them do all of these things with unfailing enthusiasm, endless cheerful energy, and obvious love for children not their own. One of whom was my own son.

Who ARE these people, these Angels in Orange?

They are *volunteer* members of an organization called [Autism on the Seas](#) (AotS). Putting it simply, AotS gives families of special needs children a chance to enjoy a cruise with as little hassle and worry as possible. In collaboration with Royal Caribbean International (and other cruise lines), AotS offers cruise vacation services to accommodate adults and families living with special needs children, including Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, and all other cognitive, intellectual, or developmental disabilities.

How did I learn about this organization?

After going on a 3-night cruise in 2016, my husband and I concluded that we would never do it again with Peter unless we had help. Navigating the ship, the lines, the elevators, and keeping him safe was stressful. We had no free time to enjoy the ship's activities because one of us would have to stay with Peter. Meals were a disaster. Upon our return, I did some research to see if

there were any services available to help families in similar situations. That's when I stumbled across the Autism on the Seas website. I read the [testimonials](#) and thought, "Hey, this might be a possibility if we ever do another cruise." I didn't have long to wait! In early 2017, my parents announced that they wanted to treat the extended family to another cruise during the holidays. I explained AotS to them, and we booked our New Year's Eve 5-night cruise through the AotS travel agency. I crossed my fingers, hoping we had made the right decision.

What services do they offer?

Below is a summary of what AotS offers. These services are available to ALL members of your party, whether or not they are special needs. We were a party of 18 (extended family), and everyone could take advantage of AotS services if they chose to do so.

- **Priority boarding and disembarkation:** This is a HUGE deal. There were 2000+ travelers on our ship. Imagine the long lines to board (providing documentation, getting IDs made, securing payment information, etc.). Peter would have had a meltdown for sure! Instead, we found the orange shirts and balloons and were neatly escorted to the front of the line. From the parking lot to the main deck of the ship took less than 30 minutes. Amazing! On the last day we were led directly off the ship to customs – again, no long lines.
- **Private Muster drill:** If you have cruised before, you know what a headache this can be. Multiply that stress by about 300 when you have a child with autism who is sensitive to noise and commotion. AotS provided a PRIVATE muster drill for us, away from all the other passengers.
- **Qualified, experienced staff:** Our cruise had 2 Group Leaders and 6 Staff members. All AotS Staff are professional volunteers who have degrees relating to child development, behavior therapy, and/or special education. Did you see that word: VOLUNTEERS?? These amazing people do NOT get paid for what they do! Families pay a per-person service fee (only the families with the special needs children) to cover AotS services. That's it. Families may tip the staff at the end of the cruise, and one would hope that everyone does that. AotS staff deserve medals, not just tips!
- **One-on-one Services:** We opted to pay a little extra for a one-on-one therapist for Peter. Our person, Nicole, was absolutely wonderful! She spent nearly every moment with our family, helping at every meal and every event. She stayed with Peter on the ship so the rest of us could enjoy a tour of Key West, FL. She took care of him during respite sessions and accompanied us on excursions. She got into the pool with him and kept him entertained. Her help was invaluable! Being able to leave the table at breakfast or lunch to go to the buffet might not sound like such a big deal, but it was to us! Nicole would stay with Peter at the table while we got our food. On the last morning, we arrived at the table to find that she had already gotten Peter's breakfast all prepared for him, ready and waiting. She had learned his likes and dislikes and that made all of us happy!
- **Daily respite sessions:** Most mornings and afternoons, parents could take their children to the Respite Room and then have several hours of free time on their own! We were secure in the knowledge that Peter was safe and happy – he had toys and games and super fun people to play with!
- **Private venue sessions:** The AotS group reserved private sessions in the swimming pool, the rock climbing wall, and had reserved seating for all the shows. All of these included Staff assistance. This allowed the families to participate without worrying about crowded areas or disturbing other passengers. During the Rock Wall session, we left Peter in Respite while the teenagers and men in our family had a go on the wall! We particularly loved the private family photo session with a ship photographer. We were able to get some amazing photos of our extended family with minimal hassle!
- **Reserved seating at every meal and assistance at mealtime:** AotS had a reserved room in the Windjammer (buffet) and reserved tables at formal dinners. Nicole sat by Peter even during formal dinners, taking care of his needs, so that we could enjoy adult conversation with our extended family.
- **Excursions:** In Cozumel, the AotS group went to a private resort to enjoy the beautiful beach, swimming pool, and snorkeling. Assistance at other excursions was available as well.

Hidden Services

While the above provides an official list of services (and you can see more on the website), it doesn't include the most important services of all:

- **Peace of Mind:** We had no qualms about leaving Peter in the care of the amazing AotS staff! We were also secure in the knowledge that logistics for excursions and other events were handled with skill.
- **Freedom:** We had many hours of "free time" during which we could enjoy the ship's activities and the company of family without worrying about Peter. We welcomed the New Year with cheers and a glass of champagne!
- **Amazing Memories:** We will never forget Peter's smile in the pool, or his joyous laughter on the water slide. We will never forget the hugs and smiles he gave to Nicole and the other AotS staff members. We will never forget Team Orange!

Thank You, Autism on the Seas!

This cruise was an amazing experience thanks to the Staff from Autism on the Seas! Guys, we think you should change your name to *Angels on the Seas*, because that is the truth! Where else would you find 9 people willing to spend their vacations taking care of special needs children on a volunteer basis? The world needs more people like you guys. Our family thanks all of you for the amazing work that you do to make the world a better place.



Perfectly Peter is meant to be a way for **our family** to share information about autism with **your family**.



I am Laura, and I am the mother of three boys ages 18, 14, and 8. Our youngest, Peter, was diagnosed with autism before the age of 2. We have been on this path – this crazy, confusing, heartbreaking, and enlightening journey – for many years now. Along the way we have learned a thing or two that might benefit families who join us on this road.

I intend to share what we have learned – the good *and* the bad – so that families in similar situations may find their way along the path just that tiny bit easier. Please allow our family to help yours, and know that you are not alone.

<https://perfectlypeter.wordpress.com/2018/01/04/angels-on-the-seas/>