All Aboard The Love Boat

February 1, 2000 By Cathy Elliott-Lopez

I'm en route from LA to Miami, where I will embark on the Center for Positive Connections' HeteroCruise. As The Love Boat theme plays like a broken record in my mind, I go through my checklist: Meds? Sunscreen? Curling Iron? Condoms?

Since my D-Day in early '95, dating has been an anxiety-filled process. Do I tell him on the first date? Will I have to do HIV 101? Here I am, a decent-looking 35-year-old redhead—Cosmo promised that this should be my prime! I've been robbed.

A particularly disappointing encounter made me decide to search for men in the same, er, boat. I keep telling myself, "Just have a good time," but I still have a wish that I might meet that special guy…

Day One: Bon voyage! In the late afternoon our ship, the M.S. Imagination, sets sail. I meet my cruise roomie, Heidi, a gal from Arizona with a warm smile and sense of humor. We unpack and venture to the lounge reserved for our all-poz group. This is the first chance for all 100 cruisers to get together. People who have only spoken in chat rooms are finally meeting each other face to face, but the conversation comes easy.

As I work my way around, I spot a man with a beard that fits my Kenny Rogers complex, but my feminist assertiveness jumps ship. Finally I go over and I'm relieved that he seems a little nervous, too. "Fred" and I strike up a talk. It's a start.

Day Two: I kiss my pre-cruise Slim-Fast diet goodbye and sample all the delicious food with Fred and Heidi. And tonight is the Captain's Dinner, the ship's prom night. Since I never get to dress up back home, I've gone all out with a dress that sets off my hair and a cute clutch to carry my night's Viracept.

When I stand on the grand staircase and see the guys in their tuxes and the women in their gowns, I think: "Damn! For a group struggling every day with this disease—to take meds, to watch our bodies change shape, to care for our kids, to pay bills—we look fucking terrific." The night is beautiful. We shake our butts in the disco til the wee hours.

Day Three: Heidi, Fred and I disembark to explore Grand Cayman Island. We take a short boat ride over to Stingray City, named for the fish that hang out at the sandbar. After getting snorkeling gear and assurance that I won't be bitten, I lower myself into the crystal-clear water. I'm in there

fooling with the breathing tube when something brushes against my side, then between my legs. Eeeek! Just my luck—a stealth bomber with gills has the hots for me.

Day Four: Viva Mexico! We arrive in Playa del Carmen, just south of Cancun. Fred and I—still feeling each other out—decide to go horseback riding, and we head into the jungle and then back out to the ocean. Once we reach the breathtaking coastline, they let us take one of the horses bareback into the turquoise water. Here I am on this gorgeous horse with this blue sky. I'm thinking, "What a photograph." I'm about to dive in the water when I see the first, um, "floater" in the water. I change my mind about the swim but let out a huge laugh, happy to be here, away from it all. Spending so much time with Fred makes me realize that though we're going to be "just friends," we're having fun doing it.

Day Five: Our last day at sea. This has been the best experience of my life since I was a kid. Maybe because I forgot about being positive for a while. But reality has crept back and I'm reminded of the pile of work in LA. Although many cruisers paired up and locked their cabin doors for the last days, Heidi and I made no love connections. But we did make incredible friendships. Hope to see you all next year when the Love Boat makes another run.

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