

TRAVEL TALK - LET'S TAKE A CRUISE!

By Chase Binder

Every so often—say, every other year or so—I get Bud to take a cruise. It's not that he doesn't love mounds of delicious food, or unpacking once and seeing scads of great destinations, or having a dizzying number of activities and entertainment options available from dawn to dusk. It's just that he's an old-fashioned landlubber. He finds great comfort in having his feet on dry land.

Not to boast, but I've been pretty successful. We've enjoyed two blissful Transatlantic sailings, a scenically stunning cruise up the coast of Norway, a sunny Mediterranean cruise, a fascinating cruise around the Baltic Sea—to name a few. Each one has been a great experience, but each one has also required meticulous planning and attention to detail.

I always start with destination. Although we know some uber-dedicated cruisers who hop on the same ship for the same itinerary time and again, we are of a different ilk. For Bud to get on a ship, there has to be a compelling itinerary, a series of destinations that are best seen by sea instead of by land. Cruise lines and third-party booking websites like cruisesonly.com or cruises.com get this, and the first search component they offer is destination. I begin at a third-party website, pick a destination, then see what cruise lines ply the waters in that area of the world.

The cruise line itself is the next critical choice. Some, like Norwegian Cruise Lines or Carnival, have reputations for mass-market appeal. Massive ships, a seemingly impossible number of passengers, vast buffets—all at fabulous prices. Oth-



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ers, like Crystal and Seabourne, aim for a sophisticated, well-travelled clientele who enjoy exclusivity and are willing to pay for it. The former tend to have larger ships, the latter go small and intimate. All this being said, most lines have learned how to manage throngs of people. There may be 5,000 on board with you, but it probably won't feel like it. Can't decide or want more detailed info? Join a free review website like cruisecritic.com and get into some real-time conversations with actual passengers.

Now comes timing. When to go? How long to be afloat? In general, cruises of a week or less appeal to younger vacationers as well as families restricted to school vacations. If you are looking for a tranquil experience, never ever book a Caribbean cruise on a school vacation week (normally third and/or fourth week of February) or at college spring break time (often the third week in March). Cruises of ten days or longer appeal to older pas-

sengers, and once you get into two weeks or more, virtually everyone on board is retired—and this can set the tone for the cruise, no matter how young and peppy the cruise staff may be.

The cruise industry also has "seasons". Generally, ships ply the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas and Europe in the summer, the Caribbean in the winter. This means the fleets must be repositioned twice a year. In June, they head from Florida home ports over to Barcelona and other European ports. In November, they come back. Since the ships are sailing anyway, the prices on these repositioning itineraries can run 40-60% below normal. The catch? You have 5-6 days at sea, crossing the Atlantic. Bud and I love these relaxing days—we take our Kindles, find loungers, and enjoy serene afternoons napping and reading. Sound appealing? Visit repositioningcruise.com for more info.

The final two keys to success are comfort and budget. Bud can be a bit claustrophobic, so I always book stern cabins—the balconies are large enough to accommodate two loungers as well as a table and chairs for games of cards or dominoes. But others we know, true cruise addicts, always book "inside" (i.e. no windows) cabins at the lowest possible price. For example, a 17-day Barcelona to New Orleans repositioning cruise cost us \$1300 pp for a stern balcony, but an inside cabin went for \$635 pp. If you use your cabin solely for sleeping and spend the rest of your day enjoying the ship, that works! Your cruise price will include your cabin and all meals—but anything

and everything else will cost dearly. We avoid obvious ploys like "art auctions," "sales" on jewelry or high-end clothing/accessories, and booking "specialty" dining rooms. Managing bar bills, internet fees, spa costs and general tipping takes some research and planning. Check for promotions that might include all tips (can save \$3-400), alcoholic drink packages, two-for one spa offers and such. We often book our own shore excursions, saving *lots* of money and getting more individualized experiences (visit cruisecritic.com for tips and contacts info). Always join the cruise line's loyalty program—it often gets you access to free cocktail parties and other special events, plus earns you discounts on future cruises.

Lastly, it pays to arrive at your departure port a day or two early, especially if you are leaving from a foreign port. If you miss a connection, the ship *will* leave without you! As for our next cruise, we're booked in November on a new repositioning itinerary for Celebrity's Millennium-class Infinity—a full transit of the Panama Canal departing from Florida and finishing up in Valparaiso, Chile. How better to visit the countries along the northwest coast of South America...and what fun to see the new Panama Canal?



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