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Travel Time WITH CHASE BINDER | PRE-CRUISE BOOKING

In February I wrote about how today's cruise industry came to be. Interesting, but does it help a traveler select, book, and experience the "perfect" cruise? More info is needed and as promised last month, I am here to help!

But I'm going to start in an unexpected place—booking pre-cruise accommodations/experiences. Why? Back in the 1990's Bud and I booked a cruise out of San Juan. We assumed all would go well, but... not! Our outbound flight was delayed by an ice storm, resulting in a miserable night on an airport floor, lost luggage, general angst and virtually zero help from the cruise line. By the time we got into our cabin, we were annoyed and exhausted.

One key to avoiding the stress? Arrive at the departure port city at least one to two days early (three if it's an interesting city). There are a few ways to do this. Most cruise lines offer pre- and post- excursions. They have the advantages of being convenient and (mostly) worry free. Alas, they also can be expensive, lack flexibility and have some knotty cancellation requirements. Check out the fine print!

But Bud and I have an independent streak. We like to not only make our own choices of accommodations and itineraries, but also like to change our minds on the fly if we feel like it. We don't like being herded onto a crowded bus and always look for the best price.

So, what do we do? Let's take our Mediterranean cruise coming up in October. We've decided to start with three nights in Venice. It's an interesting destination and all six in our travel group want to experience the city before it sinks altogether (perhaps not funny!). Plus, we'll be able to recover from the long international flights and it will give us plenty of wiggle room before embarking if there's a travel snafu.

We start by looking at accommodation choices. In Venice, this can be tricky because the city is actually a group of 126 islands separated by canals, open water and 472 bridges. Access to central hotels (normally our first choice) is limited. There's an extensive ferry system, but you can still end up lugging your bags through cobblestone streets and over pedestrian bridges. Not fun.



CHASE BINDER

Our search begins online. We look for boutique hotels with large, airy rooms and included breakfasts. Google's "sponsor-based" search engine immediately brings up third party websites like hotels.com, tripadvisor.com, trivago.com, reservations.com and others that pay Google to load on your search page first. Exploring options on these sites will give you a good idea of pricing and location as well as reviews. Several sites have interactive maps that allow you to cruise the streets virtually and get info on any hotel with one click.

But we never, ever book through one of these sites! Why? They often have costly and unfavorable cancellation requirements and actual availability can be inaccurate. Many of these sites block a certain number of rooms. Once their limit is reached, it shows no availability, even

though there may be plenty of rooms open. And while they do often show a "discounted" price, the hotel may have specials that are far better.

After a lot of research, we found a lovely boutique hotel just a few steps from the major ferry line that connects us to the entire city and the airport. But the third-party websites showed no availability. We solved that problem by finding the hotel's own website, emailing the manager directly and asking for three superior rooms with terraces and views of St. Mark's Place. Within a few hours we not only had the exact rooms we wanted, but at a better price. We also started an extremely helpful dialogue with the manager, who explained what ferry lines to use, what type of tickets to buy (3-day passes) and much more.

Even better, he didn't require a deposit—just a credit card number to hold the reservation until the afternoon of the day we arrive. No hefty cancellation penalty. This is quite common in Europe when booking directly through the hotel itself.

So, we're all set! We'll have a relaxing few days to explore Venice from a comfortable and convenient base and will be able to board our ship all rested and able to start our cruise with enthusiasm.

How did we select this particular Mediterranean cruise? I'm saving that for next month's column.