

Tips for First-Time Cruisers

by Kristin L. Wiemer

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Like many individuals, I was hesitant about my first cruise for many reasons. Will I get seasick? Will I feel trapped on the boat – bored after just one day? How small are the cabins? Well, after many cruises, those guarded thoughts have been replaced with delightful memories of shimmering turquoise waters, exotic ports of call, a warm and attentive staff, and a colossal ship that is more than three football fields long. For those that haven't cruised and have similar questions, I'm going to share with you some tips, tricks and trivia that will ease your concerns and put you on course for smooth sailing.

What's included?

Generally, your ticket price for a cruise includes your stateroom, all the food you could possibly eat and port taxes. Most travel agencies will book a package deal to include airfare and transportation to and from the port if you like the whole deal together. Additional expenses include off ship excursions, visits to the ship spa, drinks (except for tap water, tea and coffee), and tipping the staff at the end of the cruise.

Boarding the ship

Your ticket and boarding papers will indicate what time the ship begins boarding. I recommend you arrive an hour or two before that to get a jump on the crowd. The cruise lines generally let you board early and that will give you time to find your stateroom and explore the ship from bow to stern before heading to the top deck for a frozen concoction and the official send off to sea.

A room with a view

It is kind of like real estate. Location, location, location. I highly recommend a stateroom with a balcony. While everyone says you are never in the room so the room doesn't matter, the truth is that for the times you are in your stateroom a balcony has its rewards for a few extra dollars. Consider these tempting situations: A morning sunrise or evening sunset. A scrumptious omelet for two while gazing out at the mountainous terrain of St. Lucia. Or, at the very least, a quiet place to read that mystery novel you've been eager to finish. A balcony cabin with large sliding glass doors also helps to open up the stateroom, giving it the illusion of more space.

Seasick worries

Today's gigantic, state-of-the-art cruise ships are built with stabilizers that minimize the motion of the ship, particularly if you encounter rougher waters. On a calm day, you'll hardly even notice the boat moving unless you go up deck. If you are more susceptible to motion sickness than others, an over-the-counter remedy will take care of the "queasies."

Will I be bored?

Absolutely not. In addition to the myriad of activities offered aboard the ship including bingo, poolside entertainment, karaoke, wine tastings, and children's programs to name just a few, every port offers even more to do. Whether you pick an organized shore

excursion or you choose to rent a car and head out on your own, you are sure to return to the ship a satisfied and perhaps exhausted traveler. From snorkeling and walking tours to mountain hikes and helicopter tours, there are hundreds of excursions from which you can choose.

Most Important, remember to relax

To my surprise, I found that the most stressful element of the cruise was deciding what to do first, what not to miss, and trying to do everything prescribed by the daily ship itinerary. If you are traveling with a group or a large family, deciding what to do can add stress to a perfectly designed vacation. Take it slow and don't forget to relax. Lounge by the pool or take a nap in your cabin. It really is okay -- you are on vacation.

Whether your destination is Alaska, the Caribbean, or Europe, a cruise is a unique and thrilling vacation option. How else can you visit five or six different islands or foreign cities and only have to unpack once? From exquisite islands to international landmarks and mountainous glaciers, a cruise vacation offers a sneak preview into locations around the world that maybe you wouldn't visit on your own. With a few simple tricks and some early planning it's easy to experience smooth sailing whether you're on a romantic getaway for two or a summer vacation with the entire family.