
Ever Considered Cruising?

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by Colleen Conway-Clement, Canada Is your idea of cruise ship vacation a bunch of retired people playing shuffleboard and going from buffet to buffet? If so, think again! Today's cruises have come a long way and offer something for nearly everyone, from young families, to singles, couples of all ages looking for romance, and yes, for seniors, too.

My first cruise was on my honeymoon. My husband had never been to Europe, and I'd been several times. I wanted to find a way for him to see Europe, but with all the preparations for the wedding, I did not have time to plan an itinerary, make arrangements for accommodations, train travel, etc.

A Mediterranean cruise became the perfect solution for us.

We didn't have to worry about being bored or "stuck" on the ship. In fact, just the opposite was true. There was so much to do, it became impossible to do it all. The afternoon we boarded was a good chance to explore the ship, although, if you are fighting jetlag from a transatlantic flight, this might be best left until the next day!

There are ships today to suit just about every taste and budget, some are small and intimate but most are huge! In fact, they are like floating cities, complete with a restaurant, theatre, cinema, library, bars/lounges, casino, swimming pool, gym, spa and shops!

The first full day of a cruise is usually a day "At Sea". This is a great way to recover from a flight and a chance to acquaint yourself with all the ship has to offer! A daily program is available (usually delivered to your cabin, but if not, drop by the Purser's desk to obtain one) outlining the day's activities, as well as weather, dress code for dinner and any special events.

Some of the activities you might expect to be offered on a ship are:

- an art show
- trivia competition
- karaoke
- poolside events
- drink/bar demonstrations
- sports, such as golf simulator or basketball
- table tennis (ping pong)
- board games
- card classes or games (e.g. Bridge)
- a tour of the galley (kitchen), bridge or engine room

and so many more! One ship I was on even offered cooking classes!! Most activities are free. If there is a surcharge, it

will generally be noted in the days' programme. Some of the larger ships have "extreme" activities, such as a Rock Climbing wall right on the ship!

Now all that was just on board! We haven't even talked about the ports yet. In our case of the Mediterranean, it was a great way to visit several ports and countries in a short amount of time, while only having to unpack once! On our first cruise, which sailed from Genoa, Italy, we stopped in 3 Italian cities, Malta, Turkey, and 4 stops in Greece.

The biggest benefit of cruising, in my opinion, is that it's a great way to visit places you might otherwise never go to. Some of the more "off-the-beaten-track" places that we've visited, have included Malta, Tunisia, Morocco, Gibraltar and Sicily. All were fantastic and I'll never forget them!!

Most ships will offer "shore excursions" which are organized tours for those passengers who wish to participate.

The prices and descriptions of each tour will be outlined in a brochure and there will generally be a lecture from the Tour Co-ordinator talking about each excursion. (this lecture is generally repeated on the ship's channel on the television in your cabin).

Once again, the excursions offered will suit just about everyone's taste and budget. There are family activities, "adventure" tours (i.e. off-roading in a jeep, sea-kayaking, climbing, diving, etc), historical/cultural tours and so much more.

Some excursions do book up quickly (as they have limited space), so if you really want to go on one, you should book shortly after getting on board. Many cruise lines even offer you the chance to book your excursions prior to sailing.

Travelling for a special occasion? No problem. Most cruise lines can arrange something special for a birthday or anniversary. This can be something at your dinner table, or for an extra fee, you can arrange to have something ready in your cabin upon embarkation

The dining and service on the cruises I've been on have been impeccable. The cabin stewards are amazing people. They somehow sense when you've left your cabin for a meal or to go on shore. When you arrive back, you'll find your cabin completely cleaned, neat and tidy!

They will also begin to learn your habits and know when you need fresh towels, or a bucket of ice brought to the room. The dining is another experience. Most ships will offer a main dining room with 2 seatings for dinner.

Early dinner is generally around 6pm and late dinner around 8-8:30pm. Dinner is generally 5 courses, all of which are wonderful. The menu is posted each morning outside the dining room. As for seating at dinner, you get to choose whether you would like a large or small table.

Many cruise lines will try to seat together guests who are a similar age and language/nationality. Of course, this is not always possible, and sometimes that makes for interesting dining as well.

If you are a sociable person, you'll find yourself looking forward to seeing your dining companions and comparing the adventures you engaged in during the day.

Breakfast and dinner are also both offered in the main dining room, although the seating is open. You can generally find breakfast, lunch and dinner offered in most "casual" restaurants as well, if you don't want to eat at a set time every day. The quality of the meals in the casual restaurants is good, but in the dining room, it is spectacular!!

If you are celebrating a special occasion, or if the ship is not full, it may be possible to get a table for two. My husband and I had this on one cruise that visited the California and the Pacific Coast of Mexico, and it was wonderful.

Despite the fact that modern ships are enormous, I've always found it possible to still find a private spot on deck.

A spot where you can snuggle up to your loved on and watch the sunset, or see the moon's reflection on the open water at night and enjoy the fresh sea air.

Well, I hope this has given you an idea of what a cruise is like and how it really can suit anyone. For those of you who **STILL** want to play shuffleboard and hit the buffet table, you'll be happy to know they are still available!

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