

## Choosing your first cruise

By Tin Thomas (Cruise and Travel Lifestyles Magazine)



### **EVERY CRUISE LINE, ALMOST EVERY CRUISE SHIP, has its own unique style. Here are some tips to help you pick the right combination of cruise ship and destination.**

THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF CANADIANS took a cruise vacation last year. You were not among them, but there's a buzz about cruising that has you thinking about trying what so many people believe is the most exciting, value for money vacation choice there is. Where do you start?

Including those which sail from European and other ports outside North America and are marketed mainly in foreign countries – nothing to stop you choosing any of those but it's not recommended for the first-timer – there are almost 300 cruise ships to choose from today. It can be a bewildering choice.

Your first decision:

**Where do you want to cruise?** A popular choice is the Caribbean, easy to reach, the cruises usually start from ports in Florida, and you can cruise there year-round. You'll get lots of sunshine and the opportunity to visit a different island every day on some itineraries.

You can choose Europe; Mediterranean and Baltic cruises are both becoming increasingly popular. In the Mediterranean you can take a voyage into history and visit the Colosseum and other antiquities in Rome, the ruins of ancient Carthage in Tunisia, the Pyramids in Egypt, and the Acropolis in Athens. You can enjoy the culture of Florence, see the volcanoes of Etna and Vesuvius in Italy, visit the gorgeous islands of Greece.

There may be less sunshine on the northern European routes but a Baltic cruise will open up fascinating shore excursions in St. Petersburg, Oslo and Stockholm and provide an opportunity to see something of the little-known Baltic countries of Estonia, and Latvia.

Alaska is a huge summer attraction for Canadians wanting a fast look at this rarely-travelled part of the continent, the use of Vancouver as a homeport being a major factor. There are many attractive aspects to an Alaska cruise: the dramatic scenery as the ships sail through the Inside Passage and on to such spectacular areas as Glacier Bay; the opportunities to see wild life like whales, sea lions, bears, moose and eagles; the historic old towns such as Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway, with their romantic ties to the opening up of the Alaska and Yukon territories.

From the decks of ships cruising these waters there is almost always something to see. And the opportunities for shore excursions are varied and fascinating.

Active cruisers especially will find Alaska perfect for their interests. They can go kayaking, take expeditions to some of the dramatic glaciers, go flight-seeing over the ice fields in fixed wing aircraft or helicopters, and enjoy the freshest of local produce by choosing an Alaskan salmon bake.

For those who would like to extend their Alaskan visit with time ashore, several cruise lines offer cruisetours, which in addition to the cruise days package days ashore in some of the state's excellent wilderness lodges, some located in national parks with spectacular views of the rugged northern landscapes.

**Theme cruises:** There are also theme cruises to consider, cruises dedicated to one particular interest such as music of various types, dancing, cuisine, even baseball. You should also consider your on-shore interests. Do you want sightseeing, activities such as kayaking or horseback riding, tour vineyards or just shop until dropping time.

**Choosing the ship:** First choose your cruise line. Each has its own character and appeals to a different segment of the consumer market. You'll have a lively time on one of the Carnival 'Fun Ships', which appeal strongly to a younger element; life is a little more formal in the stylish ships of Holland America; Costa and MSC Cruises offer a continental flair; while the big ships of Royal Caribbean probably top the list for the number and variety of shipboard activities they offer.

The websites of all these lines carry detailed information on every ship in their fleets and for a detailed assessment, check out the Berlitz Ocean Cruising & Cruise Ships Guide for 2007.

Do you want to sail on a small ship with 400 fellow guests, or even fewer, or does the big resort-style cruise ship with several thousand shipmates appeal? Many people prefer the less crowded, more intimate vessels where shipboard friendships are more easily made; others love the much greater variety of amenities and facilities big ships offer, everything from ice-skating, rock climbing and even surfing on some ships to golf instruction, English-type pubs and wine bars on others.

Whatever you do, choose carefully. Your first cruise can lock-in your impression of cruising as a vacation option.

**Choosing your accommodation.** Your research may well indicate that a lesser stateroom on a luxury ship can cost about the same as a high-priced stateroom on a mainstream ship. Luxury ships of Seabourn, Regent Seven Seas, Silversea and a few other lines offer an all-inclusive fare. Gratuities are included, so are all alcoholic beverages and wine and some shore excursions. There are none of the little 'extras' to pay for that there are on most ships.

It used to be a choice between 'inside' staterooms with no windows and 'outside', with a porthole. The 'outside' staterooms have changed a great deal. Portholes have become rare; there are good-size windows instead. On the upper decks these become floor-to-ceiling windows on the ocean, many of them opening onto a private balcony, which has become probably the most popular new feature added to a cruise ship in many years. If you are traveling in warm climes, your balcony becomes a welcome retreat from the world, a place to take the sun, and perhaps dine with room service.

Regardless of what you pay for a stateroom, all the ship's facilities, including all its restaurants, are open to you...apart from Cunard's ships, where the stateroom you buy dictates the dining room you use.

**What do I get for my cruise fare?** Passage, accommodation, meals and entertainment. And that's a good deal - compare the price and what you get for it with land-based resort charges. Items of a personal nature are extra. This includes drinks at the bar and wine at meals (except as noted above on some luxury ships), shore excursions, laundry, medical services, spa services, fitness and sports facilities, soft drinks and bottled drinking water. Tips are extra - average around \$10-\$12 per guest per day.

**What are the differences to a land resort?** Your floating 'hotel' covers a lot of ground and can take you a different country every day. Accommodation, perhaps a little smaller than on land, is comfortable and the service is more personal. There's a huge choice of food and you can eat half a dozen times a day if you wish. There is constant evening entertainment in many parts of the ship and many more daytime activities than most resorts provide. In other words, it's wonderful value for your money.

**Are children welcome on cruise ships?** On all except one or two of the top-of-the-line luxury ships, yes. Cruise lines such as Disney, Carnival, Princess and Royal Caribbean are leaders in providing trained supervisory staff, magnificently equipped playrooms and special decks for children, and activities are usually designed to suit different age groups. Cruise ships are safe, welcoming environments for all youngsters right up to their teens when there is often a special lounge, disco and games arcade for them only.

**I have heard that there is a charge for some restaurants onboard.** Indeed. Many ships today have 'alternative' dining in restaurants separate from the main dining rooms. These often offer superb dining with white-glove service and haute cuisine or high-class steak house menus at an extra charge. The most we have come across is a \$30USD charge aboard Celebrity's larger ships for what is an unforgettable dining experience, well worth \$30 per person. You'll never find a comparable meal ashore for that price. There is nothing extra to pay in main dining rooms, apart from any bar charge you may incur.

**Can I use my cell phone, send and receive e-mails?** Definitely. Most ships have either installed WiFi capability or are installing it, same with cell phone reception. Computer rooms are common place and Crystal Cruises, Cunard Line and Seabourn Cruise Line, to name only three, provide computer classes conducted by experts.

**IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT CRUISING OR CRUISE SHIPS, SEND THEM TO US AND WE'LL GET THE ANSWERS FOR YOU.**

## **Cruise Holidays of Burlington**

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