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THE MOST IMPORTANT CRUISE VACATION DECISIONS

By Richard Turen

Selecting The Right Cruise Line

It is important to begin the process of making your reservation by keeping an open mind. Some of what you have heard from friends or, perhaps, read on the Internet is tainted information. The information you receive from your travel agent may be tainted as well. Look for signs that you are being steered toward a particular line with little regard for your personal profile or input. Certain cruise lines pay agents far more commission than others.

If you want to sail on the very best ships, with the very best itineraries, you may be dealing with names that are unfamiliar to you. Seabourn, Cunard, Silversea, and Radisson Diamond are four of the top lines in the deluxe category. Most of the highest-rated cruise lines operate small ships with fewer than 400 guests. The top-rated large-ship cruise line is Crystal. If you are looking for a less expensive cruise with more than 1,000 fellow passengers, then think of the first class lines such as Celebrity, Holland America, Princess, and Royal Caribbean. If you are thinking about saving as much money as possible, then moderately priced lines such as Carnival, Costa, or Norwegian Cruise Line might suit your needs. The least expensive cruise ships belong to Premier Cruise line.

But before you decide on any cruise line, make certain that you and your cruise consultant have discussed cost and the type of clientele the various lines attract. The "Jerk Factor" can be relatively high on the budget lines.

Selecting the Time to Sail

Here is a quick guide to some of the major cruise itineraries and the best and worst time to travel based on weather and cost:

Alaska –

Avoid May, early June, and late September bargain offers. The \$100 or so dollars you will save by going to Alaska in the off-season simply isn't worth the increased chance of constant rain showers and daytime temperatures in the fifties or sixties. June 10th through September 10th is the "Season". We would advise you to stick with it.

Caribbean –

Although the ships go full, August 20th through Mid-October is Hurricane Season. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't travel then because the temperatures are warm and the rates are going to be extremely favorable. Just know that you are increasing your odds of weather misfortune and itinerary alterations.

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The Caribbean Cruise Season runs from mid-November through the second week in April. But prices go up for sailing's that operating from the 15th of January through early April. That's when the ships generally sell out.

Getting the Best Price –

Price is difficult to talk about –so let us be direct. Since our inception, ten years ago, our underlying philosophy has been that “Providing the Best Service Requires Providing the Lowest Price”. We will match or beat the published discount price on any cruise line worldwide. In addition, members of our Royal Cruising Society receive exclusive benefits such as complimentary limousine service to the airport, gift certificates from nationally known restaurants and specialty stores, and pre-paid gratuities. Members of The Royal Cruising Society receive these benefits in addition to, not in place of, our “Lowest Price” Guarantee. You are well advised to take advantage of Royal Cruising Society membership (Currently priced at \$35 per couple).

If you are going to be sailing during prime season, try to book at least six to eight months out in order to be quoted the lowest rates. Most lines now gradually raise their prices as the date of sailing approaches. The “last-Minute Deal” is pretty much a creature of the past. Those who book first get the best rates, particularly those who are among the first forty percent to reserve a cabin. The vast majority of lines currently have a policy that requires them to go back and offer lower rates to passengers previously booked if there is any last-minute discounting on a weak sailing.

You should be aware that Churchill & Turen Ltd. is the only Cruise firm in the Midwest to “Guarantee” its cruise prices in writing. If the price comes down, we will always protect your price, without exception.

Choosing Your Cabin

If you are cruising for the very first time, it is probably not wise to select an inside cabin without any windows. Who knows what your reaction will be to a week without any natural light? Instead, try to reserve one of the less expensive outside cabins. You can save money by not insisting on one of the upper decks. Aside from snob appeal and the fact that it is easier to get to the top deck swimming pool, being on an upper deck has few advantages. In fact, one could argue that lower decks give you more riding stability.

There are certain itineraries where having an outside balcony makes a lot of sense. Cruising within Europe, the Orient and through the Panama Canal are examples of places where having a balcony for daytime relaxation has to be considered a wise investment?

Generally speaking, we are less enthusiastic about recommending balcony or veranda cabins on Caribbean sailing's, particularly those out of San Juan. Other itineraries where you might want to think about saving money on your cabin are Alaska, the Panama Canal, Bermuda, Mexico and Transatlantic crossings.

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Try to pay particular attention to what is directly above your cabin. Sometimes the more expensive decks are under public lounges where people gather late at night. Always avoid staying in a cabin directly under a jogging track. Aft cabins are usually a better choice than those that are far forward and over the anchor. It's ok to be near the elevator but never book a cabin that adjoins an elevator shaft.

Don't be concerned about being on the bottom deck. Remember – there are many decks below that where the crew sleeps and supplies are stored. All passenger decks are always above the water line.

Will You Be Upgraded?

This is an area of consumer confusion. There is the feeling that some travel consultants can get you an upgrade while others just can't. In fact, most cruise upgrades are automatically offered at the time the initial reservation is made. They are offered to all travel agents by certain lines. Carnival is one line that markets cabins in this manner.

Travel agents have almost nothing to do with most upgrades. An upgrade is usually just another way to describe a discount.

There are, of course, genuine upgrades that are sometimes offered to clients of firms that give a particular cruise line a lot of business. But this happens far less often than you might imagine because the cruise lines are very concerned about offending the majority of their passengers.

The very best way to assure yourself of an upgrade is to have your agent prepare a VIP Advisory. This is a short biographical introduction. Your agent will send it to the sales department of the cruise line requesting special treatment on a VIP basis. Top Executives of Fortune 500 firms are often accorded this treatment and it often results in a legitimate upgrade. If you qualify, you might consider having a brief biography prepared at the time of booking.

The most frequent complimentary upgrades are offered to those in the entertainment and communications fields, and executives who can demonstrate that they are in a position to develop a large group or sustained revenue for the line.

Should You Purchase the Cruise line's Insurance?

It depends. Most cruise line insurance policies give you protection from their own heavy cancellation fees which normally kick in within sixty days of sailing. But these policies often do not allow you to cancel for any reason. You must have a valid medical reason and you must not have a "pre-existing" medical condition.

There are a number of private insurance companies that sell comprehensive travel insurance. By "comprehensive" we mean cancellation protection as well as medical coverage while you are traveling. These policies are constantly being upgraded and some now waive the "pre-existing condition" clause if you sign up for the insurance within fourteen days of making your cruise deposit.

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When examining a travel insurance policy, there is one quick way to judge the coverage. Look up the amount of emergency medical/evacuation coverage. If it's not in the \$50,000 range, you might want to look elsewhere.

We wouldn't let our own family go on an extended trip outside the United States without comprehensive travel insurance. Yes, it is expensive, rates now approach 5 ½ of the total trip cost, but it is necessary. You are gambling against some rather poor odds if you decline medical insurance.

Complete details regarding the cruise line's insurance is available in the individual brochures. Some, like Holland America and Windstar, offer "for any reason" cancellation coverage. Most make you deal with a third party insurance carrier. When it comes to insurance, or a lack of it, expect that all rules, as stated in the cruise line brochure, will be strictly enforced regarding penalties. Cruise lines show zero sympathy for passengers who have not taken out insurance.

Pre-Cruise Hotel Programs

This one is easy. If you are sailing on a Caribbean cruise between Thanksgiving and Easter, we urge you to strongly consider a one or two-night pre-cruise hotel package. Legions of Chicago area travelers have been stranded at O'Hare as a result of weather-related cancellations or delays. When this happens, the cruise line will do little to help you. You will be left on your own to try to arrange alternative flights from the airport. If your flight is delayed, the cruise line is under no obligation to hold the ship for you. That decision, and it is a business decision, lies solely in the hands of the ships captain.

The peace of mind you will achieve by flying down to Miami or San Juan a day or two early is well worth the minimum additional cost. In all cases, the free airfare provided by the cruise line will still apply and you will receive complimentary round-trip transfers between the airport and your hotel and then between the hotel and the pier. This is a win-win situation.

We trust that this information has been helpful. We look forward to the privilege of assisting you with your cruise arrangements.

Choosing The Cruise Line's Air/Sea Program

The vast majority of cruise lines offer an air/sea program that includes round-trip airfare to and from the ship as well as transfers. Cruise lines wait until approximately thirty days before a cruise to turn over the names of their paid-in-full passengers from each gateway city to the airline with whom they have a contract on that date. You should accept the fact that you may not get a non-stop flight if you simply accept the air/sea assignment. One of the downsides of airline air programs is that seats are often not bookable within thirty days of a flight. The aisle seat you prefer may not be available. On busy weekends, your agent may not even be able to secure two seats together.

There are two ways around this. First, you can always purchase your own air ticket. This usually costs more and the airline will not generally include transfers if you do your own air. Should your flight be delayed causing you to miss the ship, the cruise line will not take any responsibility.

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One of the best ways to avoid these problems is to ask for an air deviation. This allows your agent to request a preferred flight assignment immediately in writing. The air deviation request is usually returned to the agent within two weeks. The cruise line will either grant the request, in which case there is a \$35-\$50 per person extra charge, or reject the request. If the request is rejected you have lost nothing.

Unfortunately, air deviations are usually not permitted during busy holiday periods such as Spring break, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

The chances are good, in fact well over 90%, that you will thoroughly enjoy your cruise experience and decide to repeat it. But do make note of the fact that cruise lines report that fully 90%+ of all complaints they receive from angry guests have to do with transportation to or from the ship – not the cruise experience itself. That's why we recommend that you carefully consider an "air strategy" with your consultant.

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