

## **Cruise Articles For 1st Time Cruisers**

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### **Understanding Cruise Costs**

Let's take a look at the basic components that make up the cost of a cruise, and what you should expect to pay.

#### **BASIC CRUISE COSTS**

The "base" cost of your cruise will include your accommodations as chosen for the length of the cruise, onboard entertainment and activities, meals and use of the facilities aboard the ship.

#### **PORT TAXES AND FEES**

These are the taxes and fees charged by the various government and port authorities at the ports where your ship calls, the cruise line passes these fees along to the passengers. These typically cover the cost of docking and use of the port facilities; "parking fees" for your ship if you will. And certain government authorities impose a "head tax" on cruise passengers, which is used to maintain and improve the ports infrastructure.

#### **ADDING IN THE AIR COSTS**

Air "add-ons" are an option that you may or may not choose to utilize. This is the cost of your airfare from your home city to the port where you will join the ship and your return airfare home. In most cases, when using the cruise lines' Air/Sea program, this will also include baggage handling and transportation from the airport to the ship on the day you embark and transportation back to the airport on the day you disembark your cruise.

Mini-Suites and Suites will provide you with extra space, but that space comes at a price. You'll most likely get a separate sitting area, a sleeping area or separate bedroom and many come with a much larger bathroom, whirlpool tub and walk in closets. While suites tend to be closer in size to a hotel room, check out the mini-suites with caution. Many lines mini-suites are simply standard cabins with a balcony.

#### **HOW TO READ A CRUISE AD**

You're perusing the Sunday Travel Section or surfing the Internet and see a fantastic price for a cruise. Is it too good to be true? What's not included in that price? What's hidden in the fine print?

#### **"LEAD-IN" PRICING**

Chances are, you're dreaming of a stateroom with a verandah but the price in the ad is for the lowest category of inside cabin. This is what we call "lead-in" pricing. It's intended to catch your eye and it has.

Typically, but not always, the prices you see in the ads are for "minimum inside" or the lowest grade of accommodation unless it specifically states otherwise. The number of cabins available at these prices are usually extremely limited. The price may also only be available to residents of certain states or may be a senior citizen fare.

### **READING THE FINE PRINT**

Get out that magnifying glass and read the fine print. Check to see if the price includes port charges and taxes as this can easily add over \$100.00 per person to the cost of the cruise if they are not included. Thankfully, recently enacted government regulations require the cruise lines to include the taxes in the advertised prices, or else make it clear that they are not included and display the additional costs plainly. However, regulations for travel agencies are different, and many do not include additional costs in the pricing and bury them in the fine print. In all cases, unless specifically stated otherwise, the price will not include airfare but will be "cruise only".

### **IS LESS MORE OR LESS?**

This term usually does not apply to cruises. As the lead in price is usually for an inside cabin (no window or ocean view) you may wish to consider spending a little more to make your cruise that much more enjoyable. Whereas a 7 night cruise in an inside cabin may cost you \$699.00 per person, upgrading to an outside or "ocean view" cabin can be as little as \$150-200.00 additional cost per person. Or you may wish to upgrade to a stateroom with a verandah. This will usually cost you about \$750.00 per person more for the week.

Personally, I never sail in an inside cabin unless I am forced to. The daylight makes the cabin seem larger, and I love to wake up and see where we are and what the weather is like. Let's be realistic, cabins aboard ship are not large to begin with so a little daylight can make them seem much more palatable. I always urge first-timers to take an outside cabin unless their budget absolutely prohibits. A stateroom with verandah will afford you your own semi-private place to watch the ship come in and out of port or just relax. These are especially desirable in Alaska, Panama canal and on longer voyages.

### **"NICKEL AND DIMING"**

Yes Virginia, you will incur extra costs once you board the ship. Cruise lines charge for drinks (soft and alcoholic), and then there are tips (about \$75.00 per person for a one week cruise), shopping, gambling, shore excursions (touring in port), and meals while off the ship. And then even some other extras aboard ship which are not as readily apparent.

Many cruise lines will charge you extra for that ice cream cone in the afternoon, to eat in the alternative restaurant (\$5-18.50 per person), for laundry or dry cleaning, use of the internet/e-mail/business services, the golf simulator and spa treatments.

Prepare to budget yourself for an average of \$200-300 per person in spending money for a one week cruise, more so if you like to indulge in tours, spa treatments and gambling.

**Here is a quick look at what all the little "extras" can cost:** Soda: \$1.50 Domestic Beer: \$3.50 Imported Beer: \$4.25 Cocktail: \$4.50 Glass of Wine: \$2.50-3.00 Bottle of Wine: \$18.00 and up Ice Cream Cone: \$1.50 + Shore Excursion: \$35 to \$150 Massage:

typically \$75 to \$125

Also bear in mind that most cruise lines automatically add a 15% gratuity to any drink purchase.

## **Cruising Misconceptions and Myths**

Surprisingly, the myths and misconceptions about cruising are probably the top reason why cruising is still one of travel's best kept secrets. Getting people on their first cruise is the hard part, but the number of people who continue to cruise after trying their first cruise is extremely high. All it takes is one cruise before all of the mis-conceptions are dashed. Following are some of the most stubborn myths about cruising.

### **I'LL GET SEASICK**

Yes, people do occasionally suffer from motion sickness and this is a valid concern. However, today's modern ships are all stabilized to reduce rolling (side to side motion) and designed by sophisticated computer aided design equipment to minimize pitching (up and down motion). On all of the cruises I have been on (100+), I have rarely encountered seasick passengers in all but the roughest of seas.

But you can be proactive and minimize the chances of any discomfort with many simple and inexpensive remedies.

The remedy I find simplest and most effective is using "sea bands". These are little wristlets that feature a "nub" that is positioned to strike a pressure point on the underside of your wrist. I have found them terribly effective, even in 40 foot seas! There are no side effects as they are drug free and the best part is they're inexpensive!! About \$7.00/pair. They can be found in just about any pharmacy or in the giftshop onboard.

There are several medications such as Bonine or Dramamine. I have heard these can be quite effective but I personally avoid them due to the side effects that one may experience such as drowsiness, sleeplessness or dry mouth. It is also recommended that you avoid exposure to the sun and avoid alcoholic intake. As with any medication, your physician or pharmacist is the best resource and you should definitely consult them before you plan on taking any one of these remedies.

### **I'LL BE BORED**

Cruising is not the sedentary pastime it used to be, unless that's what you choose to make of it. Every cruise ship publishes a daily newspaper and activity schedule to keep you busy and entertained while on board.

During the day you'll find numerous activities such as Bingo, trivia games, lectures on topics such as art collecting, politics, world affairs and investing not to mention the ports you'll be visiting and shopping; exercise classes, wine tastings, cooking classes, shuffleboard, card tournaments and good old-fashioned relaxing in the sun by the pool or catching up on all those first run movies you never have time for at home. Then there are other alternatives you'll find on some ships such as golf simulators, miniature golf courses, putting greens, batting cages, basketball, volleyball and tennis courts. You can

treat yourself to a day in the spa or in the ship's onboard fitness center, massages, facials, hair and nail salons, a sauna or a session with a personal trainer on the state-of-the-art exercise equipment. (But do watch out for activities that carry extra costs! More on that later).

In the evenings you have all of the bars and lounges at your disposal for mixing, mingling, dancing or people watching. There are lavish production shows and cabaret acts, comedians and the late night disco to keep you going into the wee hours.

And don't forget how much your ports of call provide for exciting diversions and discovery. You can trek off on your own or take one of the ship's pre-arranged tours.

#### I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT SHIPS: I'LL LOOK SILLY

Fear not, the majority of cruisers today are not "old salts" and you'll all be in the same proverbial boat together. There are a few basics that I think everyone should know:

**Bow:** the front or "pointy end" of the ship **Stern:** the back of the ship **Port:** the left side of the ship as you face forward **Starboard:** the right side as you face forward **Galley:** VERY important!! It's the ship's kitchen! **Bridge:** Where the ship's officers control and navigate the ship from. Usually high up and forward. It is the command center or "cockpit" of the ship if you will.

#### I WON'T BE LIKE OTHER PEOPLE

That's a good thing, everyone is unique and different. I find this to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of cruising; meeting and learning about different people. However, cruise ships tend to be very friendly places and most passengers are outgoing and sociable. But you can keep to yourself if you so choose.

#### EVERYONE ON A CRUISE IS OLD

It used to be the case and in some instances, it still is, but cruising is becoming more and more appealing to younger passengers as it gains mass appeal. According to the Cruise Lines International Association, the majority of cruisers today are between 48 and 59 with the 25 to 39 and 60+ age groupings in a virtual tie. In fact, it has recently been reported in the trade papers that the cruise lines have identified the Baby Boomers and Gen-X'ers as the most likely candidates for explosive market growth over the next five years. The cruise lines are catering to younger cruisers like never before by offering more and more variety, options and excitement.

#### CRUISING IS TOO REGIMENTED

Au contraire! Cruising has never offered more options, variety, choice and informality than it does today. The cruise lines realize that today's passengers do not want or need regimentation on their vacations because they already have an overwhelming amount of it in their daily lives. Passengers are now afforded the option to choose when, where and with whom they dine, what types of entertainment they partake in and a more varied array of shore excursions besides the normal bus tours. There is an increasing emphasis on passenger comfort in terms of dress and informality in the ambiance.

Princess, Carnival, Royal Caribbean and NCL are all leading the charge and now pushing

the envelope even further in this arena and NCL has just recently announced its new "Freestyle Cruising" concept which will offer open seating dining in the main restaurants, several alternative dining venues and an overall more loosely structured environment to encourage choice and informality.

One need not dress up every night in a tux or attend formal dinners as it had been in the past. But the cruise lines will and still do offer you the choice of a more "traditional" experience complete with assigned seating at dinner, formal nights and an extensive list of scheduled activities if you enjoy such sophistication.

### **ALL THERE IS TO DO IS EAT!**

Once again, a very common and not unfounded misconception. It used to be that a cruise revolved around eating. Early riser's Danish and coffee, a light breakfast on deck, full breakfast in the dining room, mid-morning snacks, buffet lunch on deck, hamburgers on the grill, full lunch in the dining room, afternoon snacks, ice cream and cookies, afternoon tea with pastries, hors d'ouvres, dinner, the midnight buffet and late night snacks served every day! I'm bloated just thinking about it.

With the trend towards healthier living and eating habits today, the cruise lines have changed their tune. Yes, you may still partake in all of the above offerings, but the cruise lines are also offering the public what they want -- healthier foods, lighter meals and spa cuisine. You'll now find lighter selections on the menus every night and many even list the calories, fat content, protein and other pertinent information right on the menu.

Even that bastion of cruise line traditions, the midnight buffet, has gone by the wayside on many cruise lines.

But should you choose to eat, eat, eat you can work off all of those excess calories by using the fitness centers and climbing stairs instead of using elevators. On my last NCL cruise, I did not gain one extra pound as I practiced moderation and found their new "Cooking Light" offerings to be exceptional. One must never sacrifice taste and enjoyment on a cruise when eating healthy and you want. In fact, I have found some of the healthy or "light" options to be tastier and more interesting than the standard fare.

## **Your First Cruise: What to Expect**

### **Part 1: taking you step-by-step to your cabin.**

Your cruise has been booked for months. You've spent those months anticipating this cruise, perhaps like no vacation before it. When your documents were delivered you read every word over and over, until you became concerned the cruise line representative at check-in might not be able to read them for the wear. Your entire kitchen has become magnetized because of the numerous magnets used to hold shopping lists, packing lists, and document lists hanging on your refrigerator door.

At last the day arrives. You leave home, to begin your cruise vacation. You ask yourself; What can I expect?

To begin with, as you approach the cruise terminal you can expect to see masses of

excited people handing their luggage to porters, who place the luggage in bins. When full, these bins will be loaded onto the ship, for delivery to your cabin later. When you hand the porter your luggage, don't worry; it will be delivered to your cabin. They're not going to load that luggage into a truck and drive it back to the airport. Off course, offering the porter a tip of about \$1 per bag might ensure that!

The next step is to enter the terminal building, and get in line to go through the embarkation process. You'll proceed through an x-ray machine and metal detector, just like those at the airport. (For my first few cruises I wasn't convinced these machines were actually functional. But lately, with the cruise lines tightening their policies regarding guests bringing their own liquor onboard, it appears they've purchased machines that work. As an experiment, I'd like to build a shoebox that appears to be a bomb, with wires hanging from it, and pack it in my carry-on, next to a bottle of liquor to see what happens going through the cruise line x-ray machine. I'm guessing they'd confiscate my booze and send me on my way.)

Once you've cleared the metal detector, you're ready for the check-in desk. Hopefully as you step up to register, you'll have all your cruise documents already filled in, and just hand them to the staff member, along with your identification and a credit card. Once this is done, you'll be given your "shipboard charge card." These serve as ID, and as your mechanisms for shipboard purchases. In some cases, the same card acts as the key to your cabin. Presuming that you have all the documentation, this procedure should take only a few moments.

The next step depends on your arrival time at the pier. If you're at the pier before they've begun boarding the ship, you'll be given a number or letter, and asked to wait in an Embarkation Lounge until your number/letter is called for boarding. If you arrive after initial boarding has started, you'll just follow the signs to the gangway. You'll know you're close to being onboard when you see the ship's photographers waiting to take a shot of how tattered and battered you look after the completing the embarkation process.

Now you're all set to enter the ship. Walking onboard, you'll be greeted by cruise line personnel. Some cruise lines welcome you onboard, hand you a mini-map, and dare you to find your cabin before bedtime. Others will have white-gloved attendants present to lead you to your cabin, and assist with your carry-ons.

Unless you've booked the Penthouse or Owner's suite, when you enter your cabin you'll see an area smaller than most standard hotel rooms. In fact, many cabins I've had wouldn't have room for the TV set I have in my bedroom at home. Yes, indeed, this is the luxury you've spent thousands of your vacation dollars for: to sleep in a big furnished box.

But, oddly, as you look around you're likely to find that these accommodations are quite comfortable, and quite complete. There's normally plenty of well-thought-out storage space, and after you have a few minutes to adjust to the size, the cabins do begin to feel luxurious (it must have something to do with the hallucinogenic qualities of sea air).

## **Part 2: The First Day Onboard**

You've actually managed to find your cabin before dark, so you're beginning to feel like a cruise veteran. Probably by now your cabin steward has stopped in to introduce him/herself. The steward will instruct you to call if you need anything pertaining to your cabin. By the end of the cruise you'll swear they've been hiding under your bed throughout the voyage, waiting for you to leave the room. There's simply no other way to explain why you never see them, yet every time you leave the cabin, you return to find it spotless.

And unless you memorize their face at your first meeting, whenever you happen to spot stewards in the hallways, you'll never be sure which one is yours. I once tipped four different cabin stewards before I found the right one.

There are a few "business issues" we ought to address, before your mind becomes cruise mush. If we take care of these few details now, you'll be able to lie back and enjoy the rest of the cruise. And these are important matters: They involve eating!

By now you've received your dining assignment. It will either be noted on your "shipboard charge card" or on a simple card waiting in your cabin. I recommend that you visit your assigned dining room as the first thing on your agenda. For one thing, it's a treat seeing the dining room for the first time; more importantly, it's good to know how to get there. After all, who wants to miss a meal?

If there is any kind of a problem with your dining assignment, find out where the maitre d' or restaurant manager is located, and go see them to request a change. In most cases they will do their utmost to satisfy your request. In severe cases, their "utmost" can likely be improved by the sudden appearance of a \$20 bill.

Many of the newer ships these days also have one or more alternate dining rooms or restaurants, sometimes at an additional cost. (See the CruiseMates article on alternative dining for more information.) If you've decided to sample one of these, now is a good time to make your reservation.

So now you've taken care of all these eating arrangements, but you have yet to sample the "river of food" that you've heard cruise ships offer. Well, it's time!

On embarkation day, the dining room and specialty restaurants won't be serving meals until dinner. However, there will be a full buffet set up in a casual atmosphere on the Lido deck, and in many cases, you'll be able to choose from a grill or pizzeria as well. There is no shortage of plates, cutlery or even food, so there's no need to push me over on your way by.

There's one important thing to note here. While the quality of buffets varies somewhat among the cruise lines, they are just buffets. You've probably never experienced a gourmet buffet on land, so you have no reason to expect one at sea. The food should be of good quality and freshness, but expecting a cornucopia of gourmet options will only lead to disappointment.

On your way to what I affectionately call the "food trough," bring along the ship's daily newsletter and shore excursion pamphlet, which were waiting for you in your cabin.

Between bites, you'd be wise to start choosing which (if any) of the ship's scheduled shore excursions you'd like to take in your ports of call. Some of the more popular excursions do sell out, so registering early isn't a bad idea.

Perusing the ship's newsletter will also give you an idea of all the activities the cruise director and the cruise staff have cooked up for you that day. It's entirely up to you which ones to participate in.

While you're eating and reading, and your eyes are roaming around your exciting new home, there will likely be no shortage of bar servers passing your way, offering sail-away umbrella-drink specials. These are often delicious, but RARELY free (the exception is on some of the luxury lines, where spirits are included). If you take one, expect the server to ask for your shipboard charge card. On my first cruise I think I emptied four trays of drinks, handing them to everyone nearby, before the server asked for my "card."

It was a \$200 lesson, but it wasn't a bad way to meet new friends.

There are normally drink stations of some sort in or around the buffet or pool area, where coffee, tea, ice tea and juices are offered free. Alcoholic beverages are certainly not your only option. The cruise lines also offer soft drinks. These are not free, although some cruise lines offer free soft drinks in the dining room.

So now that you've quenched your need for food and drink, it's time to explore the ship. I normally tear a deck plan out of a brochure and bring it along with me. Even though most ships supply miniature deck plans, when you get to be my age you need BIG print.

Walking through all the public rooms is one of my cruise rituals. I believe it's important to become familiar with my new surroundings. It also saves me from spending the rest of the cruise walking down the wrong hallways, and even putting my cabin key in the wrong doors (yes, it's happened to me more than once).

By the end of the stroll I've normally picked out one or two favorite spots where Mrs. Kuki knows to look for me--if I'm not in the casino.

Now the horn sounds for the mandatory lifeboat drill. I'll be back after the drill with Part 3: Let the Fun Begin!

### **Part 3: The Fun Begins**

The lifeboat drill has ended. Didn't everyone look grand, sweating profusely in their orange outfits? Now it's time for the cruise vacation to really get started.

You return to your cabin, tripping three people along the way with the dangling cords from your life vest, even though you'd been warned about this at the end of the drill.

Alas, your luggage might not have been delivered to the cabin yet. This isn't surprising when you consider that they have thousands of pieces to sort out and deliver. If (as we always do) you've packed a casual change of clothes for dinner in your carryon, along with your toiletries, it won't matter. Except for very rare exceptions, your luggage will make it to your cabin that evening.

Now it's time for the sail-away, so get up on deck for the sail-away party, or crack that bottle of champagne on your private balcony for you and your loved one. Unlike scenes you may have watched on the "Love Boat," there are no streamers or confetti flying through the air in celebration. Still, there's a special atmosphere that still gives me "moose bumps" as the ship pulls away from the pier.

Now you're off to the dining room for the first full dinner of your cruise. In the past, this would mean meeting the table-mates and waiters with whom you'd be spending dinners for the rest of the cruise. But more recently, with the advent of NCL's "Freestyle Dining," and Princess' "Personal Choice Dining," this tradition is starting to change. On NCL, you can choose your dining companions and times. Princess offers this option too, along with the traditional possibility of assigned dining times and tables.

When I'm not traveling with a CruiseMates group, I enjoy meeting my new table-mates, and I certainly enjoy spending the duration of the cruise getting to know them and the wait staff. On a recent cruise that offered open seating, I requested the same table most nights just so I could enjoy the same staff. But this is a personal preference. I'm sure many others will prefer free and open seating. It's like asking which traditional dining time is better. There is no correct answer!

In the dining room, you can order whatever you like, and as much of it as you want. If you order a dish and don't care for it, just send it back and order something else. If a dish isn't prepared the way you like, send it back. This is NOT a place to be shy! From your perspective, and from the staff's, it is better to remedy your dissatisfaction on the spot than to let it build up inside to the point where it ruins your vacation.

Having said that, don't expect many cruise lines to offer five-star Michelin dinners in their dining room. You are sure to have some meals you'll think are excellent, and some you may rate very good. But keep in mind this is a big operation that feeds up to 1,000 people per seating. The food is prepared banquet style, and cruisers must take that into consideration. You do, however, have a right to expect good food, excellent service and good friends--a combination that makes for a wonderful dining experience!

When you leave the dining room, you'll normally find a variety of activities from which to choose: showrooms with large-scale entertainment, lounges with cabaret acts or ballroom dancing, piano bars where you can sing along, discos for the late-night crowd, and casinos for games of chance. There's nothing quite as romantic as a stroll on the promenade deck, watching the glistening stars and moon with your loved one by your side. On the flip side, many relationships have started just this way.

After an evening of fun in the lounges or the casino, there's always another opportunity to eat again. Depending on the ship, this can vary from 24-hour restaurants, to midnight buffets, to finger foods passed around in the public rooms, to 24-hour room service. So far, no one is charging extra for these services.

It's hard to believe all this can happen in just one day, but it does. And when you return to your cabin each evening, the bed is turned down, a chocolate is left on your pillow and a copy of the ship's newsletter listing all the possibilities for tomorrow is waiting for you.

I have tried to describe in real terms what you can expect on a cruise. But sometimes cruisers may take the cruise lines' advertising too literally and expect nothing less than perfection. Heck, even I know when I fill up my car with gasoline, I'm not really putting a tiger in my tank.

When a cruise line promises to "exceed your expectations," don't take it to mean you should raise your expectations. I believe it's more important to expect great value for your vacation dollars. Then you surely won't be disappointed.

One cruise line ad you can believe says "It's like no vacation on earth." In my view, that applies to all cruises, and couldn't be more true!