

TRAVEL

Cruises no longer primarily for the elite

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There was time, propagated by movies showing wealthy travelers in sumptuous staterooms, when it appeared that cruises were principally the province of the financially elite. Many people still feel that way. It hasn't been true, however, for some time, and currently, with the economic recession, cruise lines are offering discounts that make many cruises cheaper than many other kinds of vacations.

The cost of a cruise — for those who have not gone on one — includes the ship transportation to the designated ports of call, lodging, all the food you can eat (available around the clock), various forms of entertainment and games aboard ship, and hours ashore at ports of call in countries you may not have visited before.

Some cruise lines are offering 7-night cruises for less than \$300 per person in a two-person inside stateroom, under \$400 for an ocean view room, and \$650 for a room with a balcony. Even adding port charges and taxes to that amount and the usual \$10 per day gratuity per person, compare the total with an alternative seven-day vacation cost for a flight, train or auto, seven nights in a hotel, two or three meals a day at restaurants, and fees for tickets to shows, concerts, or movies. Surprise: a cruise is cheaper.

The Norwegian Cruise Line recently offered an 11-night transatlantic cruise at \$474 per person for an inside cabin for two plus a \$100 ship's shopping credit for the cabin. This special departed from the Port of Miami with stops in the Azores and Spain before arriving at Dover, England. For comparison, its ocean view cabins were \$704 per person with \$200 ship's credit, \$899 for a balcony cabin with \$300 credit, and for those who have not been hit (yet) by the recession, \$1,214 and \$600 credit for a mini-suite and \$1,799 and \$1,000 credit for a full suite. All bargains, if you figure the cost of 11 nights for two people at a good resort.

I'm not a frequent "cruiser," having been on fewer than six over the years, but my conclusions above were supported by a couple across the dining table from me on a recent cruise to the eastern Caribbean. "We've been on over 50 cruises," they told me, verifying the comparative cost value vis-à-vis non-cruise vacations.

Both the Port of Miami and Port Everglades at Fort Lauderdale offer Floridians a plethora of cruise lines and cruises,



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The U.S. Virgin Islands is a popular destination for cruise ships from Florida.

principally to the eastern and western Caribbean, the Panama Canal, Mexico, the Bahamas, and some South American countries. A panoply of three- to seven-day and longer cruises provides plenty of options. Prices vary from cruise line to cruise line for the same lengths of time. Some cruises don't offer shipboard credits, but usually they range from \$30 to hundreds of dollars per cabin, used to pay for anything purchased aboard ship in the souvenir and specialty shops, pubs, specialty restaurants with a cover or meal charge (the settings and food are sometimes a bit more exotic than in the "free" buffets and dining rooms that are included in the fare), and even for the end-of-the cruise combined gratuities to the cabin attendants, maitre'd, servers and others who, almost invariably, courteously and promptly take care of your every need and even whim.

Cruise itineraries state the days at sea and the days and hours at the ports of call. Aboard ship a variety of games and entertainment are available at all hours of the day and night, with the latter highlighted, for those interested, by the inevitable Las Vegas-type casino. With the exception of some lines and ships that stress informality, at least one night is devoted to a formal dinner, in which the ship's officers are hosts in their best uniforms and guests are encouraged to

wear tuxedos and formal gowns. Many guests do. Many others — myself included — bring along a suit or an appropriate blazer and slacks for these occasions. Otherwise, clothing for the tropics and a good pair of walking shoes is sufficient.

From Fort Myers, the trip by car takes about two hours. Give it plenty of time, however. The usual cruise departure time is 4 p.m. Cruise lines generally require all passengers to be on board at least two hours before departure. Boarding begins at noon. Ordinarily, a large crowd gathers before noon (these cruise ships accommodate 2,000 and 3,000 passengers and more), insofar as many passengers have come by plane and other transportation from various parts of country, the hemisphere, and even from Europe and the Far East. I've tried to arrive in time to board at about 1 p.m., when the waiting line has thinned out. Even giving yourself a four-hour leeway when leaving home is a boon for those of us in Southwest Florida, considering the travel day or days, including an overnight hotel in the port city, needed by many of the passengers. If you do drive to the port, garages adjacent to your pier and ship have been charging \$20 per day. Add that to your budget.

If you've not been on a cruise in recent years, security has become tighter. Baggage and passengers are required to pass

through screening detectors, as at airports. Ships do not permit passengers to bring alcoholic beverages aboard, wine and liquor included. If you have any in hand or in your luggage, and it is found at boarding, the ship will hold it in escrow for you until you depart. The same holds for alcoholic purchases made at ports of call. Coincidentally, the minimum cost of a bottle of wine in a cruise ship's dining areas usually runs close to \$30 and cocktails in the pubs are about \$7 and up. Soft drinks are also frequently extra.

If you are an adult seeking a few days of complete peace and quiet and a restful time in one of the ship's pools, Jacuzzis or deck chairs, you may wish to book your cruise when school is in session and there are few youngsters or teenagers on board. Most ships encourage family groups. Some cruises are for adults only, some for singles, others for specific gender, age, or lifestyle orientations.

So, you'd like to explore the possibility of taking a cruise?

The most efficient way is to Google some of the cruise lines, travel companies, and booking agents. Or, to get started, just type in "cruises." The Web sites show the lines, the ships, the itineraries and dates, and the costs of various classes of cabins. When you find a cruise that fits your schedule, interests, and budget, you can log on to information about the ship itself, including its history, personnel, and even a cutaway of the decks, cabin locations, and amenities. Some of the many cruise lines that depart from Port Miami and Port Everglades are Princess, Carnival, Celebrity, Norwegian, Royal Caribbean, Holland-America, Cunard and Costa.

And once you Google some of the travel companies such as American Vacation Center, Dunhill Vacation News, Vacations to Go, Orbitz, Expedia, and Travelzoo, you'll find your in-box the recipient of almost daily e-mails advertising cruise bargains. I've found, after locating a desired cruise, that it saves time and work to ask a travel agent to follow up and negotiate the best price, recommend the best cabin location, obtain senior and/or military discounts and on-board credits, and send me the required travel and boarding documents.

Magic Journeys Travel (based in Daytona) has been of excellent help. You will, of course, need your passport insofar as your cruise includes foreign countries. Other identification may suffice if your tour includes only U.S. possessions. ■



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