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Cruising: Tips for
smooth sailing

For the cheats
among us:
“No-fax” and
“no-spam” rules,
please!

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The Fun of a Cruise (and the Economics)

You want to take a cruise? Terrific. You will have the time of your life. With planning, you might have the finest vacation of your life!

Start Planning

The first questions are where and what. These come before the question of when. While any cruise provides enjoyment and relaxation, a few provide enduring personal stimulation and satisfaction. These are the cruises that make a difference in your life. For example, if you are interested in Russian history, a cruise through the Baltic to St. Petersburg is for you. If you always have wanted to visit England, why not pick a cruise that starts from Southampton, adding a week or two to visit London and the beautiful English countryside. Perhaps you want to visit a particular U.S. city. If so, pick a cruise that leaves and returns from that city. Prior to our cruise to Alaska, we added extra days to visit Seattle where we discovered a place of endless intellectual, cultural and athletic opportunities. Discovery of Seattle was worth the price of admission. All major cities of embarkation in the U.S.—Ft. Lauderdale, Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Miami, San Francisco and New Orleans—provide first-class attractions to keep you busy for days. On the other hand, if a

cruising destination is your top priority, allow time to enjoy the departure city as well. You will have fun during those extra days while also winding down from stress and acclimating to a new time zone and to new weather.

After deciding where, consider what you want to do on the cruise. Standard cruises offer many on-board programs, such as classes about cooking, ice carving, playing cards and improving health through exercise. Often, lectures are available, such as by financial planners, writers, and experts on the areas to be visited. Alaskan cruises, for example, often carry Park Service professionals on board to narrate the trip and to answer your questions.

The best are theme cruises sponsored by an organization that you appreciate. Museums, symphonies, and colleges often sponsor charter trips for alumni, faculty and students. The learning opportunities on board these charters are excellent, and your enjoyment and appreciation are enhanced by the presence of other passengers who share the same interests.

One example of an outstanding personal experience was a recent cruise to Alaska sponsored by “A Prairie Home Companion,” the national weekly radio broadcast carried by most public radio stations. This cruise combined the

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experiences of visiting Seattle, seeing the glaciers, and visiting Juneau, Sitka and Ketchikan while sharing the beauty and adventure with top musicians and lecturers. Among the many on-board events were writers' and actors' workshops, training in the use of voice to communicate and to tell stories, lectures and narrations by naturalists, and musical experiences—starting as early as 11 a.m. and ending long after midnight. Everyone on the cruise enjoyed each other because we all are fans of the radio show and of its leader, Garrison Keillor.

Cruises such as that one sponsored by "A Prairie Home Companion" or by a university usually are not listed on the schedules of the major cruise lines. Instead, they are available through the sponsoring organization and its travel agents. Therefore, encountering such a cruising opportunity involves luck and labor. Luck is the coincidence of hearing about the opportunity and having the time and inclination to pursue it. Labor is the active search for your ideal cruise by checking the Internet, asking your cultural organizations for upcoming opportunities, or just getting on the phone to see what's up. (For example,

with both luck and perseverance, you might find a cruise line representative who will tell you about scheduled private charters.)

Cruising Tips

As a result of planning for our cruise to Alaska as well as for a Caribbean cruise two years earlier, I offer several opinions about the business of scheduling a cruise.

Size Doesn't Matter That Much

The price of a cruise varies by the size and location of your stateroom. While we opted for an upper deck room with a balcony, we found many people just as happy as we were with less elaborate accommodations. Unlike the early days of the twentieth century, everyone eats together and parties together, regardless of the amount paid for a stateroom. If your budget is limited, go for the bargain space. You will have as much fun as everyone else.

You Are Unlikely To Need Travel Insurance

Committing to a cruise has financial risk. You make multiple payments, the last approximately two months before departure. Most payments are nonrefundable. For that reason, agents and cruise lines recommend purchase of travel cancellation insurance—in effect a hybrid short-term life and health insurance contract. In evaluating these not-inexpensive contracts, consider this hypothesis: if you travel frequently, you may not need to acquire travel cancellation insurance. Over several trips, perhaps as few as five, the premiums saved will equal the cost of one unlikely cancellation. On the other hand, if the cruise is a once-in-a-lifetime event and if the cost is a significant portion of your annual income, then by all means

purchase the insurance.

Book Flights and Hotels As Late As Possible

A component of the cost of a cruise is airline fares to departure and from arrival cities. My approach is to purchase the lowest possible fare at the last possible moment. In case of cancellation, these fares are not refundable. However, many airlines will credit all or a portion of the fare to a future flight taken within a limited time period, like within one year from the date of cancellation. (Note: credit is not available to no-shows. You have to cancel the flight in advance.) Another decision is hotel reservations. I assume that hotel space will be available until the last minute, though I might not obtain the best space. Hence, I make hotel reservations only a day or two before departure. My search starts with Internet services, such as Priceline.com or Hotels.com. Occasionally, deeply discounted space is available at the last minute. If not, I either pay the quoted rate or I call the local chamber of commerce for referrals to the many hotels not included in Internet services. A final detail is airport and hotel transfers. Taxi fares for two or more persons usually are less than the price of transfer programs offered by cruise lines, and many hotels offer free transfer services.

That Goes for Shore Excursions, Too

Following receipt of final payment, perhaps five weeks before departure, cruise lines begin to promote shore excursions with prices ranging from \$50 to something short of \$1,000. If you believe that a shore excursion

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The Cheats Among Us

ASTOUNDING as it may seem, every reader of this newsletter knows someone, or knows someone who knows someone, who stretches the limit of ethical communication to force his or her personal interests upon us. These are the people who distort to cleverly get our attention, to make us perceive more value than exists, and who crash through our locked front doors with the crowbars of modern media.

Americans have learned to tolerate and to handle junk mail, and we occasionally find usefulness in a junk mail advertisement for inexpensive printed checks, labels with our home addresses, coupons for a restaurant, or sales promotions at nearby retailers. These bother us a bit, but they are easy to throw out, and we experience no expense to receive them. They merely show up in our mailboxes.

New methods of mass promotion are inexpensive for the promoter, but costly for the recipient. For example, the fax machine of WP&M receives enough junk each year to consume two reams of copy paper. Though the cost is minor, the gall of these people to send unsolicited information at our expense tends to break down this calm exterior and to make me want to hit someone. Of course, the sender is not clearly identified, at least not with an address to which I could travel to make my complaint in person. Presumably, if you and I were to meet a purveyor of faxed junk at a party, we would perceive a civil and courteous individual, nicely dressed, possibly with an important title like “vice president of sales” or “director of computer design.” Yet they build their careers on volume and distortion, for every fax I receive appears to emanate from a legitimate source. Examples are: “your personnel department,” “corporate headquarters,” “company incentive department,” and other phantom locations that could be mistaken for an authentic division of

a company. “Cruise to the Bahamas,” “Spend Two Nights in Orlando,” “Get the Lowest Mortgage Rate in Town,” and “Fly to St. Louis” are among the messages conveyed. Someone must like to receive them. Someone must respond. Otherwise, these murky mass machinations would cease, but I still ruminate and steam, desperately wanting to flip a switch which will turn them off.

Other marketers are responsible for distorted packaging. *Consumers Reports* picks up and publishes five or six of these distorted or silly efforts every month. Some are plain vicious, like the credit card that would levy fees of \$257 per year whether the holder charged up to his limit of \$300—or charged nothing at all! The same issue of *Consumers Reports* carried a photograph of a large box of Melba Snacks. The plastic bag containing the snacks was removed and set to the side revealing content of 60 percent air, 40 percent snacks. Is this not a lie? Is this not an attempt to deceive? A lot of packaging by otherwise reputable suppliers misleads the buyer into thinking he is acquiring more than he is. I am one of the dummies. Last month, I purchased a small plastic container of ibuprofen that could have held at least 50 tablets. Inside were ten. Friends tell me that this is normal marketing, that the issue is attractiveness and shelf space. “But,” says I, “could they not fill up the required extra space, the space needed for ‘marketing purposes,’ with product?” Pringles does it. Lays does it. Campbell’s does it. Wheaties does it. Why not Melba Snacks?

The most insidious of the new marketing schemes is spam, junk mail on e-mail systems.

Promoters will do anything to get messages into e-mail boxes and to mislead the reader into opening messages he or she does not want. The

volume of these messages is increasing exponentially with two important costs to the recipient. The first cost is time. The second is the potential to fill up available space in an e-mail in box, thereby preventing new messages from entering. For us, a routine message might be 3 to 5 KB of information. Now we are seeing spam with 80 to 100 KB of information. We still can manage this, but if we are away from the office for a week, with spam messages piling up every day, the amount of space consumed is huge and likely to exceed our limit.

Talk about disrespect. If you explain to a sales person that you are not interested in his product, he will stop calling. (Usually!) If you tell your computer that you do not want to receive specified messages, the spam folks still persist. They do it by distortion. For example, we have placed the word “Viagra” on the list of subjects to be blocked by our spam blocking program. Knowing this, the spammers change the spelling: “VIZAGRA.” This is the crowbar that gets through the door. No door is strong enough, wide enough and smart enough to stop it. Does this not make you wonder who these people are, why they invade privacy, and why they ignore dictums of civilized business relationships?



Society’s challenge to control unsolicited faxes and spam e-mail messages is daunting. The first challenge

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is especially attractive, or if you feel that a shore excursion might sell out, then you should purchase in advance. An example of a potential sell-out is a helicopter tour because helicopter space is self-evidently limited. Most other tours by bus, boat, trolley or carriage will be available either up to the night before or on the day of arrival, and private on-shore vendors can arrange almost anything on the spot. By delaying purchase, you are not committed to an activity that might later seem unattractive, if only because you would rather sleep in.

Read Up

Thorough! Repeat: thorough advance planning will increase your enjoyment. At a minimum, cruise

ship travelers should read travel guides about the areas and cities to be visited. None is better than *Lonely Planet*. Additional reading helps. For example, the books *Alaska*, *Hawaii*, and *Caribbean*, by James Michener, are superb introductions to those cruising grounds. A subject search at the local library will do the job. (I wish I had telephoned a newspaper or chamber of commerce in the communities we visited. I would have asked for a personal recommendation, such as "If you were visiting [your community] for less than a day, what would you do?")

DO NOT be like the two cruisers escorted by a Juneau taxi driver. The first visitor—on disembarking—asked: "What is the altitude here?" The second, a mainland U.S. resident,

asked him: "What is the exchange rate?"

Enjoy!

Cruise ship food and hotel services are superb. With everything from in-room movies to evening Las Vegas-style shows, no one is shortchanged on entertainment. The swimming pools, spas, exercise room and walking/running tracks are fine. Special lectures and demonstrations are fun and interesting. For some, a few hours in the casino might be profitable; and the jewelry, clothing and art shops have what you need or want. These diversions, plus time gazing at the sea or reading and relaxing, will make the cruising experience worth your while. If you find the perfect cruise, the ideal trip that combines your desires for learning and entertainment, you will have "the best time" of your life.

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is the fundamental right to free speech. No person wants government to tell him or her what to say or how to say it. The subject arises periodically in the broadcast media, such as with radio shows that attract listeners by transmitting off-color humor. In this medium, however, we have access to a powerful control: the off switch. Using the off switch on a fax machine

or e-mail program is not so easy. The absence of an off switch was a problem when we received unsolicited telephone marketing calls. Implementation of state and federal no-call lists has gone a long way to ameliorate this problem. The next challenge, the hardest of all, is to develop no-fax and no-spam lists, then to design programs that will identify the perpetrators, determine

which are the most insidious by volume and by content, and then send someone to their front doors with fines of tens of thousands of dollars.

Meantime, let me declare: If you are in the business of sending unsolicited spam and faxes, do not identify yourself to me because, if you do, action against you will not be far behind.

Good night, Dorothy. You done good.

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