

Guides

Sites

*Shira Levine is an experienced travel writer who has covered everything from post-revolution Chiapas to “Gringolandia” Costa Rica. She’s indulged in the wines of Argentina, sampled cevapcici along coastal Croatia, and luxuriated in Dubai and Iceland. Yet she still must fight the urge against becoming The Ugly American. Her column will help you avoid the pitfalls of loud T-shirts and even louder complaining, while uncovering the latest and greatest chic travel opportunities.*

#### **Cruising and Accidentally Liking It**

Three nights and four days aboard a cruise ship has never appealed to me. It

seemed to me about as fun as riding in the back of a Greyhound alongside a recently released prisoner. The concept of an “entertainment deck,” or a floating vessel with a hot and cold buffet in its below-deck bowels seemed more contaminating than relaxing. After witnessing one too many conga line YouTube videos from friends and relatives, I thought, “not my bag.” Except as it turns out, it is.

I was invited onboard the maiden voyage of the newly refurbished five-mast, 637-foot [Club Med 2](#). The voyage was to take us along the Mediterranean with ports of call in Nice, Cannes, Portofino and St Tropez. While on the high seas I discovered I am indeed guilty of loving life at sea in a large all-inclusive cruise ship, but only if it’s done right.

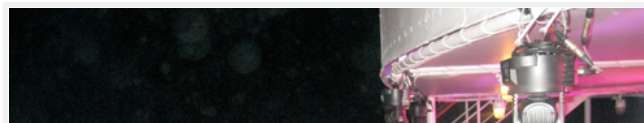
“Done Right” includes a 4pm aperitif. When with the French, drink like the French. A rose’ on the rocks makes for a nice daytime buzz by the pool. However, I found my American palate couldn’t stand anything with *menthe verte*, a green peppermint syrup common in both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. I quickly became accustomed to the daily afternoon aperitif, along with dips in the pool apres-breakfast, apres-lunch, and at midnight. What’s not to like about Kir Royale toasts and oysters at sunset? What can I say? It turns out the option to do nothing, something, anything, and everything isn’t something to scoff at. This is my kind of *joie de vivre*.

Beyond the sophisticated boozing-while-living-large aspect, a cruise trip needn’t be the cheesy all-inclusive singles or manic family event many of us imagine. With careful research and planning, a cruise can be a cultured adventure and tailored precisely to your interests.

**Do your research.** Read reviews. Think hard about the sorts of people you’d like to be stuck with (err...sailing with) on the high seas. Consider the ship’s size (smaller=more intimate) and number of passengers. Research recent renovations, the ship’s chef, and other characteristics important to you. Club Med 2 recently underwent a \$4 million renovation and reimagining. They’ve polished away a reputation of the ship-as-meat-market. Instead, expect an affordable, yet luxurious, customized experience. The rooms onboard the Club Med 2 are large and contemporarily styled, meaning the occasional rainy day won’t be spent sulking in a claustrophobic closet with shag carpet.

#### **Do what you want when you want.**

Cruises are known for hyper-scheduling social events and activities. If you’ve done



your research, at least you're surrounded by likeminded people. Choose to socialize with them, or choose to do you own thing. Even if you have no intention of meeting people, the more aligned you are with other passengers, the more likely you won't mind running into them every meal, every day. Each cruise essentially caters to a certain kind of person; make sure your boat hasn't left without you.



**Book based on the excursions.** It's nice to get off the boat and explore, so pick an excursion based on parts of the world you'd like to experience. A few hours are all I needed for a little flavor and some shopping in Portofino and St Tropez. (I found the latter horrifyingly touristy; the former adorable but sleepy.) When given the freedom to come and go, it's amazing how much can be seen in a short time without feeling rushed. After a few hours I found I missed life on the boat.

**Come to terms with the entertainment deck and calendar.** By day it's fabulous with waterskiing, jet skiing, fishing, kayaking and spa to schedule. Even the early evening cocktail hours are stunning with their color-coordinated themes. Admittedly I enjoyed the overall effect and commitment to "White Night" and "Black Night" (passengers wear all-white or all-black to the party). But the after-dinner entertainment is, apparently, unavoidably cheesy. Don't expect to see Alvin Ailey-worthy talent on a cruise ship. Instead, consider it opportunity, when even the least social passengers bond over the quality of (or lack of) entertainment. On "Black Night," a half-naked modern dancer slinked around and into the pool; sexy enough for the women to cluck and the men to gawk.

**A few tips on Spotting Cheese.** Captain-themed dinners and photo opps are lame, in my opinion (though my parents may beg to differ). That gesture to be seated at the Captain's table? It may mean you are a difficult passenger, and the "honor" is designed to distract and appease you. Don't be that wasted person who finally lets loose on the entertainment deck the last night of the cruise. Gossip travels fast and far when at sea. The woman who whips off her pashmina and turns it into a between-the-legs dance accessory is always remembered. On the other hand, the shaded view of Cannes, paired with a mimosa, should erase any lingering guilt over the night before.

Find more information on the Club Med 2 [Here](#).

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The Club Med 2, with 70 summer destinations, ain't so bad. Images Shira Levine

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## Reader Comments (8)

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jill  
August 12, 2009

I had no desire before to go on a cruise, but this article is pretty convincing!! Sadly, dramamine + alcohol don't mix & I don't wanna have to choose between barfing my brains over the side of the boat for 5 days straight, or being the only sober loser in the place...tough call!!



shiralevine  
August 12, 2009

Unfortunately, I suffer from seasickness and carsickness too. I don't know if it was the size of the boat that made the difference, but while I packed Dramamine (I hate it) and those pressure point bracelets for just in case, I never ever needed them. I really never felt sick and was able to drink alcohol which is a rarity when at sea. (I once threw up on a cruise in Jamaica and fearfully jumped off a 60 foot cliff to shake my body of the nausea.) I would use me as a benchmark for cruise ship nausea because I have garnered notoriety for throwing up in nearly every country I visit.



vstaf  
August 12, 2009

This is really a nice article. Maybe I will try it out myself. I don't like loud T-shirts nor loud complaining, but the way I see it there's an even bigger problem: people that wear socks and sandals!



shiralevine  
August 12, 2009

on european cruises sometimes you see the wrong people wearing a thong and going topless.



tigershark61  
August 12, 2009

Hello,

I'm new to the site but not to cruising.

Your article is right on target. You can do what you want on a cruise. Kick back on the ship, do a shore excursion or go off on your own. Depending on what cruise line you take, you can eat by yourself, with someone different each night or at a set table. Another advantage is that if you cruise to a foreign country and are not sure about the food, you won't starve! I too get seasick on smaller boats (Makes it hard being a scuba diver LOL) but most cruise ships have very good stabilizers and you don't feel it. We were on a cruise in the Mediterranean Sea during a pretty good storm. If not for the fact that we could see the lightning and wind through the windows, we would never have known. (They eventually closed the curtains though lol). As far as the loud t-shirts, the socks and sandals (you'd think that they look in a mirror before stepping out in that getup!!), you will find that anywhere there is more than 100 people around.

And as for the euro thing, it kinda goes with the territory lol. though it's not as bad as being at Oriental Beach (An optional beach on St. Maarten) and having some 70 year old naked man roll up on you and set on the bar stool next to you :P (Makes you think about the stool you're sitting on, huh!!)

Anyway, thought I'd put my two cents worth in. Hope it helps.



gordon  
August 13, 2009

Recently took my first cruise. Loved it. The freedom to not do any of the scheduled things was just as important as having those things provided for those who want them. This cruise was a great mixture of people, young and old, from all over.

Enjoyed the shore visits in Mexico -- a great guide who took us around the \*real\* parts of towns, not just the tourist stuff, and was very knowledgeable about the area, its history, etc.

On board, I enjoyed the buffets -- wide variety of food throughout the day and into the evening (it faded to nothing but pizza and ice cream late at night, though).

Huge ship, rode so smoothly it was difficult to tell which direction it was going when we weren't within view of shore. No danger of sea sickness on that one.



nicole s  
August 14, 2009

I used to think cruises were something for "other people" and weren't my bag. That was until I took a trip with my family to Alaska and we cruised our way through the countryside. It was an amazing and awesome experience. As a former backpacker who knows what it's like to cram in as many cities and sites as possible into a single trip, a cruise was luxury! We were able to see so many villages and towns and it felt like every morning you simply walked out the front door of your house and onto a vast new land.

Late at night the boat cruised down waterways absent of human life. It was the moon, stars, water and distant shadows of land. Super peaceful! And in the mornings I jogged on the track that went around the top of the ship, with nothing but nature surrounding me. Running against the direction the boat was heading made for a bit of a headtrip.

We even visited one town that was only accessible via boat or aircraft. It's nice to be reminded that not everyone lives in a world with the hustle and bustle of Times Sq and it reminded me of the diversity of the US.

I am indeed now wary of traveling on cruise ships because of the environmental havoc they wreak. If they could straighten this out, I would definitely consider a trip of this sort again!



Nivetha  
November 02,  
2009

I think shiralevine is correct.. Me too think the same...