

Travel Tales

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

Things to Do Before You Cruise: Part 1

Congratulations! You're going on a cruise – that's great. This two-part article will give you some ideas on things you can do before you depart for your cruise vacation, to make it more enjoyable. To help you, I will draw on my cruising experience and on discussions I had with Laurie Martz, President of Travel and Tours Unlimited, (PO Box 354, Westminster, MD 21158, www.traveltoursunlimited.com, laurie@traveltoursunlimited.com, 410-876-6123, 800-795-5399), and a CLIA (Cruise Line International Association, Inc.) Master Cruise Counsellor. Off we go!

Find a parking place: It may sound odd to talk about parking when you are going on a ship, but many people these days drive to the departure dock. Unfortunately, the parking provided by most cruise lines right beside the dock is quite expensive per day. The solution: check out the chain motels (e.g. Holiday Inn Express, Ramada, Quality Inn, etc.) that are near the port. Many of these will allow overnight guests to park free for a week or ten days while on a cruise, and a few will charge a modest amount. This can also work if you are flying to your port; park your car near the airport at a chain motel that you have made an arrangement with.

Medications: Be sure to bring plenty of your prescription meds (including an extra two weeks supply in case you get stranded somewhere), and a typed or handwritten doctor's prescription. Bring plenty of sun block, mosquito repellent, toothpaste and other items that will cost five times more aboard ship than they will in your local shop.

Document copies: Make a copy of your documents, including your passport(s), credit cards, driver's license, itinerary, cruise and air tickets, and keep them in a separate place from your wallet or purse. Put a copy of the itinerary, including your full name, telephone, email, cruise ship and cabin number, inside your checked air luggage, on top of your stuff.

Specialty restaurants: Most cruise ships now have one to four specialty restaurants with high end food and service, and charge an extra \$25 to \$35 per person to have dinner at each restaurant. Usually these are worth the price. These restaurants are of course in addition to the normal, included, food service in the main dining room or buffet. Some writers suggest booking your table(s) shortly after arriving on board. In fact, on almost all major lines it is now possible to book these tables well in advance of boarding, by using the line's website, "cruise enhancement phone line," or via your travel agent.

According to Laurie Martz, "Many specialty restaurants are now so popular that they book up before the ship sails, especially at the most desirable times. You can usually make specialty

restaurant and other experience bookings – like on-board ice-skating shows, Broadway-style shows, Cirque de Soleil-type shows – as soon as you have paid your cruise deposit or sometimes your final payment.” She also notes that, “Special occasions like birthdays and anniversaries should be registered in advance of cruising. Most lines will give you a free cake, and of course the waiters will come out and sing ‘Happy Birthday’ for you. And your travel agent may be able to get you a small gift or voucher for a purchase. But Carnival Cruise Lines is now charging \$10 for a small cake and \$16 for a large one, so this may be a trend to watch out for.”



The Canyon Ranch Spa on various cruise ships should be booked well in advance.

Dining Room: Some cruise writers suggest seeing the main dining room maître d’ in the afternoon before the first dinner on board, to secure a table at the time you want. In my experience you would be well advised to book your table before the cruise. Many cruises have two sittings, at about 6:00 or 6:30 pm and at about 8:00 or 8:30 pm, and the earlier time (which I like) often books up faster. I also suggest specifying the size of table you want. I always cruise with my wife Susan, and we don’t like being stuck at a 4-person table for an entire cruise, listening to repeated stories.

We prefer a round table of 6, 8 or 10, so we can meet various people, avoid sitting next to any “bores” every night, and so we don’t feel guilty if we disappear to the specialty restaurants or the Captain’s table for one or more nights of the cruise.

Your seating preference can be recorded via phone call to the line, on the planning website, via a printed form sent you from the line, or via your travel agent. I do advise going to the maître d’ immediately upon boarding, and checking to make sure that your preferences have been correctly pre-registered. Make him your friend (no tip necessary, just ask him to remember your name and tell him if you have cruised on that line before), in case your table is problematic and you want to move urgently.

At your first dinner, get to know your table waiter. Learn his name, ask him where he is from, and ask him if any unique dishes from his country could be made as a special custom treat for your table. You will get great service, and he will remember you forever.



The Royal Boxes on Cunard's Queen Victoria should be booked in advance, if you want to be treated like royalty.

Tell the rels: Of course the most important thing to do before you cruise is to run around and tell all your relatives, neighbors and friends that you are going on a cruise, and they are not! That's the whole point, right?

* * *

Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring, Maryland and Port Vila, Vanuatu, has sailed on every ocean, and is a member of the Descendants of Pirates and Privateers.

* * *

#end#