

Travel Tales

by

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Things to Do Before You Cruise: Part 2

In this two-part series, we are discussing ideas on things to do before you go cruising, that will noticeably improve your cruise experience. Some cruise writers advocate undertaking these tasks during your first few hours on board. I think that almost always you should do these chores ashore, beforehand. This month we will cover shore excursions, classes, phone and Internet access, and ship's library books.

Shore Excursions: Some writers advise booking shore excursions with the purser in the first few hours on board. In fact, popular excursions often book up before the ship sails, especially the cheap ones that offer good value (my favorites). Hence pre-booking before sailing is wise. Read the brochure description carefully, and avoid cheap tours that are just walks around downtown, ending in a shop. You can do that on your own. But a reasonably priced tour of several hard-to-reach attractions may be worthwhile. Don't hesitate to call the cruise line and ask for advice, since they may steer you away from the tours which have gotten poor reviews. Learn to understand what I call "PR speak." When a cruise line PR or sales rep gently says, "you might enjoy the trip to the native village more than the museum tour," that may well be code for "our passengers have been complaining mightily about that tiny, boring, flea-bitten museum and we are about to junk that tour." Have a look at on-line resources like www.cruise critic.com -- use the "search Cruise Critic" box to search for your particular excursion, such as "Curacao cave excursion."



The “Central Park” on Allure of the Seas is an attraction that needs no booking, but shore excursions should be booked in advance.

Even better, talk to a friend or an experienced travel agent who has been on the actual excursions you are contemplating, and can match you up with the right experience. Laurie Martz, a CLIA Master Cruise Counsellor (and President, Travel and Tours Unlimited, PO Box 354, Westminster, MD 21158, www.traveltoursunlimited.com, laurie@traveltoursunlimited.com, 410-876-6123, 800-795-5399) gave some good advice: “First time cruisers may want to use ship excursions exclusively, until they get the feel of what is on offer. Shore excursion bookings usually open up four to six months before sailing.” She continued, “Note that if you book a tour independently as a group over the Internet, you may have problems if the ship arrives late or changes its schedule. There may be some safety issues, too. I have found helicopter tours being sold on the dock by local operators, even on days when the more safety-conscious ship’s tour operators have cancelled such tours due to poor flying conditions. Importantly, if you are on a ship’s tour, the ship will wait for you if you are late. But if you are on your own private tour, you are in fact ‘on your own’!”

Classes: Most on-board classes (cooking, computers, dance, handicrafts, etc.) can be booked in advance, and this is advisable, to avoid disappointment. Oddly, some classes on some lines are not pre-bookable or even announced in the ship’s daily program! We observed this on a recent Holland America Line trip through the Caribbean, where the very popular computer classes were not announced or bookable, and we had to arrive 20-30 minutes in advance and stand in line. Annoying but worth it. Laurie Martz states that, “A very popular class these days is the Celebrity Cruise Lines “i-Lounge” put on by Apple Computers. This is the only Apple store afloat, and lots of passengers thinking about buying Apple products sign up in advance to give the items a trial run.”

Internet and Phone Access: Internet and phone costs on most ships are ridiculously high, and so I avoid using those facilities. Some writers advocate making all your calls and Internet searches at the dock just before leaving. I don’t think that is practical. I just ask crew members at each port stop where they go for cheap or free Internet Wi-Fi spots, Internet cafes, and phone

access, and take their advice. In general, developing countries will have lots of Internet cafes, so you can save weight and leave your laptop at home if your ship goes to those locations.

Library Books: Many of the best books in the ship's library disappear in the first few hours, and my wife Susan (ex-Library of Congress for 33 years) and I raid the library immediately upon boarding. There is a way to avoid this hassle, though, and again that involves preparing ahead of time. Get one of those book readers like a Kindle, Nook, Sony Reader or similar, and load them up before the cruise with all the books you have been wanting to read.

As an ex-Boy Scout and Sea Scout, I know that "Be Prepared" is a great motto, and comes from that great man, Lord BP himself, Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting. In cruising, this motto can be translated into: "Be Pre-pared and Be Pre-booked!"

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