



## Cruise Control

Sorting through your options for a luxury cruise can be dizzying. Here's how to enjoy low stress on the high seas. BY HILLARY GERONEMUS

**CUNARD, A TRAILBLAZER IN THE CRUISE INDUSTRY,** used a slogan in the 1930s that still says it all: "Getting there is half the fun." Fortunately for today's traveler, most luxury lines have taken this sentiment to heart, creating a sophisticated experience that bears little resemblance to the buffets, tropical decor and conga lines so often associated with cruises. To make sure your next trip is nothing but smooth sailing, follow these tips.

### **FIGURE OUT WHICH DETAILS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU**

If you're looking for intimacy and an opportunity to visit off-the-beaten-path ports, select a small-ship line, like SeaDream or Windstar. Is flexible dining a priority? With the exception of Crystal, all luxury cruise lines have an open-seating option in the main dining room, so you can choose when to have dinner. And those who can't go five minutes without checking their BlackBerrys can access Wi-Fi throughout Crystal, Seabourn, Silversea and Windstar ships. Nonsmokers will like Oceania, SeaDream and Windstar, which prohibit smoking in most pub-

#### USE A TRAVEL CONSULTANT

Talented agents will assess what kind of cruise matches your needs and desires. They'll tell you which cabins have the best views coming into port and which are the most spacious despite being in a standard category. You should work with a consultant who belongs to a consortium, like **Virtuoso** (866-401-7974; [virtuoso.com](http://virtuoso.com)), a by-invitation group of 6,000-plus advisers, more than 600 of whom specialize in cruises; the more-than-5,000-

agent-strong Signature Travel Network (800-339-0868; [signaturetravelnetwork.com](http://signaturetravelnetwork.com)); or Ensemble Travel (866-350-7460; [ensembletravel.com](http://ensembletravel.com)), with 1,100 agencies. VIP treatment that includes private concerts and catered onshore lunches can be arranged. (Working with an American Express Platinum card concierge will get you similar perks.) Use an agent to book your flights, too. That way, if a problem, such as a canceled flight or a missed connection, arises, someone will help you catch up to the ship.

#### BRING THE FAMILY

Cruises are no longer for just the tired and the retired. Rather, the age of the average passenger is now forty-nine, a 13 percent drop in the past four years that is due in part to increased family travel. Costa, Cunard and Holland America have full-time kids' programs, while Regent limits its activities to sailings that appeal more to families (usually during holidays and summer vacations). Crystal has plenty of kid-friendly venues, including a high-tech video arcade and an arts-and-crafts room. Ship staff will often go the extra mile for children, delivering cookies at bedtime or, in Seabourn's case, customizing a bathrobe for one young guest's teddy bear. For family trips, book a suite instead of two separate cabins, recommends Kimberly Wilson Wetty, a president of Valerie Wilson Travel; in some cases you'll even save money. Seabourn will convert its suites into double suites at a 10 percent savings on the regular price of two rooms.

#### IF YOU LIKE A CRUISE LINE, STICK WITH IT

Most luxury lines automatically enroll guests in loyalty programs, enabling them to earn a multitude of rewards. The more you sail, the more benefits you accrue. Costa travelers, who earn points for days sailed and money spent on board, can use them to obtain shipboard discounts and perks, like advance boarding. Those who join Crystal for five sailings receive a \$150 shipboard credit (\$200 for those staying in a penthouse). And if you spend more than seventy-five nights on Regent cruises, you receive priority restaurant and spa reservations as well as early disembarkation on trips that end in certain ports. Only 140 nights aboard

Seabourn ships earns you a complimentary fourteen-day adventure, whereas you need 500 with Silversea for the same bonus. Windstar alumni get savings of up to 50 percent on all their future sailings. And members of the SeaDream Club hear about cruises before the information is released to the general public, so they have first crack at making reservations.

#### **CONSIDER THE ITINERARY**

To attract intrepid travelers, many cruise lines are expanding their horizons. Costa island-hops in the Seychelles; Seabourn calls at Oman; Silversea voyages to Taiwan, Gambia and Mozambique. But even the most exotic destination is less appealing if you have to head back to the ship before sundown. Crystal, Regent and Silversea offer the ultimate in overnight stays with their mid-cruise inland excursions, which last several days. And Silversea's Personalized Voyages allows even those who can't commit to an entire itinerary to pick the cities in which they want to start and end their trip as long as they're on board at least five nights.

#### **DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR ANYTHING—AND WE MEAN ANYTHING**

Taking a cue from high-end hotels, luxury cruise lines are adopting a sky's-the-limit approach to service. Private bridge tours? Come on up. Chocolate soufflés every night? Piece of cake. For one chartered sailing, SeaDream outfitted an entire ship with a guest's photography. A picky passenger on Crystal once demanded that a suite's carpet be changed to another color—and it was. Aware that one couple who collected souvenirs for their grandkids would have to miss some ports, a Crystal staff member found items for the children at those stops.

#### **LOOK FOR VALUE-ADDED AMENITIES**

Ships big and small have recruited celebrity chefs as consultants. Crystal works with Nobu Matsuhisa; Cunard, Todd English; Oceania, Jacques Pépin; and Seabourn, Charlie Palmer. High-profile lecturers and hands-on classes can further enrich your time at sea. Attend a Cordon Bleu cooking workshop aboard a Regent ship; learn a foreign language with Crystal. The most tantalizing extra touch may be an over-the-top shore excursion, such as a private tour of the Ferragamo headquarters, in Tuscany (Silversea), or a flight in a Russian MiG jet (Crystal). "No matter the ship, the best way to see a port city is with a private tour operator," says Paul Niskanen, a Cruise Masters consultant. "You're guaranteed an experienced guide who can give you one-on-one attention." Plan such a trip with your travel consultant, or contact the ship's concierge directly. X