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THE TEN LEADING MYTHS ABOUT CRUISING

For most of the 94% of the population that has never cruised before, the purchase of a cruise can be a confusing experience. How do you pick the best ship, the best itinerary, the best cabin? Most importantly, how do you get the best price? Here are ten cruise myths that need some debunking:

1 - The Best way to choose a cruise is to consider the cruise line's overall reputation.

Helpful, but not always the best way. A number of major First Class cruise lines, for instance, have ships in their fleet that simply are substandard. New ships and ships built in the early 1970's have little in common. The Enchantment of the Seas is a very different ship than the Nordic Empress. The Pacific Princess has little in common with the Grand Princess.

Pay attention to the individual ships ratings, as well as the line's general reputation. Unlike 747's that all come out of the same factory at Boeing, ships vary in almost every detail. One line is still sailing two ships that suffer from structural designs that cause constant rattling of dishes in the dining room. Another line with midship engines produces low-level engine hum audible throughout every cabin on every ship in the fleet. Another well-known ship was prevented from sailing by public health officials because of unsanitary conditions.

2 - If you can wait until a few weeks before the cruise, you will get the best price.

Not at all. The practice of last-minute discounting has dramatically changed in recent years. Passengers who book the first 20-40% of the cabins almost always get the best price. Most lines now have policies that would require them to go back and issue any new discounts to all passengers previously booked.

Booking at the last minute generally means you will get the worst available cabins and the worst airline schedule. Late bookers are also the last to be upgraded.

3 - Cabins in the center of the ship are the most desirable.

Often true - but not always. A number of modern cruise liners have mid-ship mounted engines. On some ships, the midship cabins above these engines create significant vibration.

4 - The "Norwegian Line" has the best ships.

There is, in fact, no cruise line that named The Norwegian Line. There is a Caribbean cruise line called Norwegian Cruise Line. NCL is very mainstream and certainly can't be considered a top-rated line. Royal Caribbean has Norwegian officers and is often confused with NCL. Crystal and Seabourn, two lines that are

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rated at or near the top in the large and small deluxe ship categories respectively, have Norwegian officers on the deck.

5 - Late seating in the dining room is more popular than Main seating because it gives you more time in port.

On many itineraries such as Alaska, Panama Canal, and some European cruises, Main seating fills up much more quickly than late seating. In fact, the vast majority of cruise lines schedule shore excursions to return to the ship in time to enable guests on the first seating to have time to get ready for dinner.

6 - Certain travel agents can get you upgraded to a higher category of cabin.

In fact, many lines offer automatic upgrade programs available at the time of booking.. Other lines do not upgrade but, instead, offer deeper discounts.

Most cruise lines will offer full fare passengers who booked months in advance, first priority on upgrades. Other upgrades are offered to passengers who have had a biographical profile sent to the cruise line by their travel agent.

Upgrades occur most often because of circumstances. Although agents like to get credit for upgrades, the fact is that they are almost always initiated by the cruise line.

On a number of ships, upgrades are available for a minimum fee of \$15-\$20. The consumer would be better advised to concentrate on securing the best cruise pricing. Look for an agency that guarantees its rates in writing and has a built-in price protection clause.

7 - You get the best prices if you buy your cruise from a cruise agency in Florida.

This was true for a very long time. Florida agencies received an extra 5% commission on their sales, more than agencies in other states. They would take this extra commission and "rebate" it to customers using their 800 number. Most of the major lines ended the practice of paying the extra 5% in January. There is no longer a price advantage in dealing with Florida agencies.

8 - Because they sail into U.S. Ports, all cruise ships have to meet the same safety requirements.

They are subject to some of the same inspections but don't confuse that with safety conformity. Different types of crews have different kinds of safety records and training. Fire protection equipment and the handling of life boat drills are not standardized. The training and background of ships doctors varies from line to line. Ask your agent to make you aware of differences.

9 - All Caribbean cruise ships basically offer the same shore excursions.

As a matter of fact, they don't. One line, for instance, offers literally twice the number of shore excursions as it's largest competitor in the Eastern and Western Caribbean. Another line is tied in with the Professional Golf Association and offers far more golfing options than its competitors. Certain lines have on-board certified dive programs.

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10 - Cruising is strictly for retired travelers who are not active. Men are going to be bored.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Several major cruise ships sail with an average passenger age of 35-40. Other ships are more formal, elegant, and far dressier than average. The average age on these ships is 60-65. There are ships that do not require coats and ties in the dining room, have no bingo, and allow guests to dine when and with whom they want. Other ships are more structured.

Some lines have absolutely wonderful on-board children's programs developed by educators and doctors with a full-time, dedicated staff. But there are ships that are "adults only" where children are clearly not welcome.

While it is true that studies show that, among those who have not cruised, men are often fearful of boredom, it is not a perception that lingers after the experience. In fact, 96.4% of the people who take their first cruise, repeat the experience within thirty-six months. This is the largest "repeat factor" in the travel industry. The general level of satisfaction with the cruising far exceeds that of any other type of travel experience.

If you purchase a package to St. Thomas that includes a charter flight from O'Hare on an airline you've never heard of, a van transfer to a hotel, and a room, it's going to cost you from \$1200-\$1800 unless you use a budget motel.

For \$1200-\$1400, you can set sail on your choice of Caribbean itineraries on a brand-new luxury cruise ship with lavish entertainment, fine dining, a room with a King-size bed and amenities such as in-room television, as well as port lectures, an on-board casino, and the ability to relax without having to ask your mate "where are we going to have dinner tonight"?

Best of all, the price includes your flights on a well known airline as well as meet and greet service when you arrive. Best of all, your glamorous resort does something highly unusual. It floats from place to place. You can go to bed off Aruba, and wake up in St. Thomas. No, you won't be bored.

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