

Travel via the Moon

Submitted by the Editor in honor of the adventurous spirit of AGCM Moon Mullen, USN (Ret)

Cruises Are Starting To Curry Favor With Travelers Tired Of Airlines

Consumers Affairs Report by Gary Guthrie Sep 25, 2023

If you've flown anywhere in the last year, you know what a drag flying has become. Long lines, cancellations, unruly passengers, and having to pay for everything except a visit to the bathroom has given cruise lines an opportunity to bring back the joy of taking a trip.

According to new research from Future Market Insights, cruising is growing 12% a year. The reason cruising is taking a chink out of airlines' armor is because it incorporates all the aspects consumers want in tourism – transportation, accommodation, attractions, and hospitality.

What's behind this trend?

The researchers said one of the key aspects influencing the cruise business is a change in thinking. "Several businesses are emerging, offering a range of amenities to draw clients to meet the need for maritime cross-border travel," they wrote.

And these companies are putting ships on the seas like there's no tomorrow. In December 2022, 239 ships entered commercial service, a 15-fold year-over-year increase.

MSC Cruises, with 13 ships and 50,326 beds, is ranked first on the list of ships at sea; then Carnival (17 ships, 54,364 berths); and Royal Caribbean (20 ships, 71,800 berths).

Cruising is no longer a '70s "Love Boat" thing, either, but loaded with things airlines can't provide. Cruise companies these days offer in-room spa treatments, skydiving simulators, pickle ball, and Pilates. And many sweeten the deal with hundreds in on-board credit, lots of dining choices, and free drinks.

Travel experts give their thumbs ups

Consumer Affairs asked travel aficionados and experts both why they think cruising is turning into a travel favorite. Here's what they had to say:

It's a better deal than flying. When you factor in everything that's included – food and drink, entertainment, rooms, etc. – cruising is about ten times cheaper than air travel because it uses bigger vessels with a higher capacity, Alexandra Dubakova, Travel Expert and CMO of FreeTour.com told Consumer Affairs.

"You get to explore the sea, tour different countries, enjoy different dining experiences, engage in other activities, and shop around, making cruising more fun and enjoyable," Dubakova said.

If you need a thumbnail idea of what the daily cost of a cruise plays out to be, Cruise Critic Executive Editor, Chris Gray Faust, told us that \$75 is the average. "It's hard to think of a land-based option that's comparable – especially when you consider what that cost includes."

However, consumers trying to "cheap out" might find themselves disappointed. "The cruising 'experience' is not a standard thing," Dubakova reminds cruise newbies.

"Your cruising experience will depend on what you choose, so do not be tempted with the cheapest deal. Know what experience you are looking for before hunting for deals."

Relaxation and low price. What's not to like?

One cruise option many don't know about are "repositioning" cruises. Because the cruise lines have to take their boats from the Caribbean back to Europe in late spring for journeys there, most offer repositioning cruises at hard-to-believe prices.

For example, Consumer Affairs saw a 14-day repositioning cruise from Ft. Lauderdale to Rome for under \$800 (interior room).

Besides the plus of the price, you're also relaxing on the ocean for the first seven days before you hit the Azores, and then, you're off to Spain, then Italy.

It's not an 'old people's' thing anymore

If you have a preconceived notion that cruises are nothing but fading baby boomers, you might have to rethink your position. The average cruise passenger these days is 47 years old, with the three largest demographic groups being: 40 to 49 – 15%; 50 to 59 – 18%; and 60 to 69 – 19%.

The first words out of travel guru Rocky Trifari's mouth were "Unlike air travel, you only need to unpack once on a cruise." Whew, that's a relief.

"From that point on, your hotel essentially moves with you even if you visit multiple destinations. This effectively eliminates the potentially stressful hassle of constantly repacking and unpacking if you have an itinerary that involves visiting more than one destination."

Opposed to flying, Trifari gives a thumbs-up to the social aspect of cruising, "If you are fortunate enough to meet some new friends aboard the ship, you can spend the rest of the time visiting various destinations with a group of travelers you've gotten to know on board."

However, cruises are not perfect

Now that you've heard the pluses, you need to know the minuses of cruising.

Who's in charge? You're not in charge of the itinerary – you're going where the ship's going. If you want to go to Mexico City or Switzerland, you're better off flying.

If you want to spend a few days at a certain place, you're not likely to get that, either. Cruises try to hit as many places as they can and it's usually a day in a port and you're gone. That means, if you want to absorb Barcelona from A-Z, you should plan to go there 3-4 days before you set sail.

A la carte can eat you alive. You'd be smart to get all the perks you can up front, too. Anything not included is expensive, such as internet or cocktails.

"Those with sea sickness should be warned that cruises often travel through rough waters, depending on the time of year and conditions," David Triana, avid cruiser and account executive with Delight Labs, said.

It's also wise to confirm all the details upfront. In Consumer Affairs reviews of travel agencies, we found a number of complaints about promise vs. performance. Many of those concerned travelers not getting everything they thought they'd get. Our number one takeaway is to get everything you think you're supposed to get upfront, detailed in an email, before you put the charge on your credit card.

Finally, big ships can be overwhelming. If a big ship in the middle of the Atlantic with thousands of others seems a bit too much, first-time cruisers might want to try and go the river cruise route.

