

Did the Cruise Experience but Thanks, I'll Take My Luxury Resort Any Day

By David M. Brudney, ISHC, June 2007

My brother has been after me for years to take my first cruise. He and my sister-in-law have taken 17 cruises, every one of them a fun-filled, entertaining experience.

For more than three decades, friends, colleagues and even clients have raved about cruises and have been reassuring me repeatedly how much I would enjoy one.

The numbers, I must say, are pretty impressive: more than 12.6 million passengers - - about 10.6 million from North America - - will cruise this year, an increase of 4 percent over last year, according to the Cruise Lines International Association. And the industry continues to add new ships in order to meet and grow that demand.

Why I've put off taking my first cruise?

Sea Sickness Fear. Never done well on boats on any kind

Disaster Films. Watched "Titanic" and "Poseidon" too many times

Competition for Hotels. Did not want to contribute to any further loss of market share for my beloved hotel industry

Timing is everything. A group of friends asked us to join them on a weeklong cruise to Alaska. Alaska has always been a destination of great interest for Karen and me. Since the senior citizen battle cry appears to be, "Do it now!", we booked passage on one of what's classified as a premium cruise lines, a marvelous ship with all the bells and whistles, large enough to accommodate nearly 3,000 passengers.

My thinking here was that the bigger the airplane, the better the flight, so if I'm committed to being at sea for a week, I wanted the biggest ship possible.

Let's Get to the Good News First

Here's a list of what I enjoyed or impressed me the most:

Staterooms. Very impressed with overall space planning and FF&E. Marveled at the bathroom - - so little room, yet everything fit, everything worked, very efficiently.

Hotels with little or no bathroom sink or overhead shelf space could really benefit from how our cruise line placed thin metal railings on the outside of each overhead shelf enabling me to store and get to all of my items quickly and safely. Very good: TV reception, overhead reading lights for the bed, closet space, safe and desk.

Overall food/food service. So much is made about the quality and quantity of food served on cruises, I have to give them high marks here. Given the natural tendency most passengers must have - - non-stop eating is part of the package - - I thought the portion sizes at dinner were perfect. The desserts were very good, but not excellent. Loved the option of having hot dogs, hamburgers, fries and pizza slices almost anytime. Particularly enjoyed room service breakfast (sour milk spoiled one, however).

Entertainment. Two of the nightly professional theatrical productions were outstanding - - one, in particular, an off-Broadway quality tribute to the great piano composers of popular music. Singers, dancers, staging and costumes: 5 star. State-of-the-art theater: 5 star, too. An added bonus was our late night visits to the lobby piano bar where we were entertained in great fashion by a gifted singer.

Logistics. Our cruise line did a marvelous job of facilitating such a large group near seamlessly from ship to train, train to hotel, bus to next hotel and bus and train back to our final destination. Passengers were greeted by smiling, personable cruise line staff, packets with hotel room keys handed out with ease and with the lone exception of when boarding the ship initially, our luggage was there in our rooms every time.

And Now for the Bad News

First off, in fairness to the cruise lines, I study and evaluate hotels, resorts and conference centers for a living and have been doing so for more than four decades. Hence, I have very strong opinions on lodging products, management, customer service and, of course, Sales and marketing.

It would be impossible for me, therefore, to spend a week on a cruise ship - - business or pleasure - - without doing some kind of critique. Here's my "bad news" list:

People Mass. No matter how big a cruise ship can be, no matter how great the bells and whistles, the access to food, entertainment and recreation, any ship can become small when you board nearly 3,000 passengers and take them all to sea for a week. Somehow, I thought with such a large ship, with so many decks and venues, I would not be subjected to crowds or crowding. I realized after less than two days at sea, any sized ship can be very confining. By day two I found myself having to deal with unexpected and unwanted "planning ahead" issues: how to avoid the long lines at the breakfast and lunch buffets and that dreaded search for any empty tables.

Herdling. Probably unavoidable with such a critical mass and with so many day tours, etc., but passengers had to begin feeling like cattle after a week of being

herded. I did. Herding everywhere: entering dining and entertainment venues, boarding and reboarding the ship, loading and unloading of buses and trains. The long lines, the annoying, all-too-frequent boarding and departing delays, the transfers from bus to train and train to bus - - hey, who needs a cruise? I get plenty of that every time I fly!

The “herding” experience produced flashbacks from my “hurry up and wait” days during basic training at Lackland Air Force Base and registering for classes at San Francisco State. And during the endless wait for our number to be called before the final ship departure, I (even) thought about my grandfather and what he must have experienced in the Great Hall at Ellis Island when he first arrived in America.

Granted, I don’t like crowds and granted I will do almost anything to avoid standing in line, but waiting to board the ship initially and waiting to leave the ship at the cruise’s end were experiences I could very well have done without. Confined to a large “holding area” dockside with only enough chairs to accommodate half of us, we were forced to wait more than two hours before we could board. Waiting there, nothing to do, so eager to begin that much anticipated cruise experience, I looked around and saw the faces of my soon-to-be fellow passengers. Not a smile could be found anywhere.

Unfortunately, that initial boarding experience turned out to be merely a portent of things to come. The dining room doors for that first night’s 8 O’clock seating were more than a half hour late in opening. You had a large crowd of people - - unhappy already from the boarding experience earlier in the day - - packed into a very small lobby area waiting for the doors to open. Those doors opened on time only twice during the cruise.

Smoking Policy. Mixing with folks that smoke? I don’t want to be in the same area code! Shame on me for not checking out “smoke-free” cruises first.

Given the fact Disney and many U.S. hotel brands have mandated smoke-free hotels now, given the fact a restaurant mecca such as Beverly Hills is now outlawing smoking in all outdoor areas, and given the fact the great majority of our cruise passengers were American citizens, I was shocked to find so much widespread smoking throughout the ship.

Particularly offensive was the cigar and cigarette smoke (from neighboring cabins) wafting into our private balcony as we stepped out to enjoy the fresh ocean air and magnificent scenery.

Pandering. I did not appreciate being subjected to all the solicitation on ship. Staff and vendors pushed photos, jewelry and apparel in a “flea market” type environment. The spa and the multiple “education classes” were no refuge either. It seemed as though for the entire cruise, someone was trying to sell you something on board at every turn.

The \$1.75 charge for Diet Cokes bothered me, too. I never used the ship's business center because 1) I was on vacation and 2) the computer/Internet charges were too expensive. Why, I wondered, wouldn't the cruise line simply add \$100 to the total fare and allow passengers soft drinks and bottled water and free access to the Internet whenever desired?

Management Absence. I was surprised to find no one from management visible with a full capacity ship and passengers subjected to unexpected delays. When upscale and luxury hotels run 100 percent occupancy, everyone's on duty. Managers work the line, interact with guests, and take care of complaints before they become real problems. Managers, for instance, should have been present at the dock boarding, apologizing for the delays, keeping passengers fully briefed on boarding status, procuring extra chairs or passing out bottled water, hot coffee or cookies.

There was an absence of managers throughout the entire cruise. Line employees, courteous, well-trained and smartly outfitted, were faced with answering passenger questions and resolving potential problems. The majority of staff observed was not that fluent in English - - all the more reason for management's presence.

The only time the passengers actually got to see the captain was during the much heralded "Captain's Reception." Only those passengers fortunate enough to have secured a spot on one of the three atrium lobby level railings actually got to see the captain. The "complimentary" alcoholic beverages and hors d'oeuvres presentation passed by the handful of waiters was an embarrassment for anyone in our business.

Value Received and Recommendations

Price-to-Value. Expensive? Between airfares, land day tours and the cruise itself, we could have flown round trip to Hawaii first class and stayed in a magnificent suite at any number of luxury Maui resorts for a full week.

Cruise Recommendations?

- Add escalators and people movers
- Reassure passengers it's okay just to stroll through the towns along the stops; land tours are - - in fact - - "optional"
- Stop the "nickel and diming"; include water/soft drinks and Internet access into the total fare
- More seamless access to more fitness rooms located throughout the ship
- Cruise lines: "smoke free" ships will become mandatory - - will you be a leader or a follower?
- Pay more for one of the "luxury" or new "deluxe" cruises featuring smaller ships, fewer passengers, and sailing to exotic and adventurous destinations

Getting to see Alaska for the first time was worth waiting all these years. What a marvelous part of our country and what marvelous people live and work there.

Anyone who has served our country in the military will tell you this about basic training: "Glad I went through it, but never want to do it again". I may choose to take another (smaller) cruise in the future but thanks, for now I'll take my luxury resort any day.

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