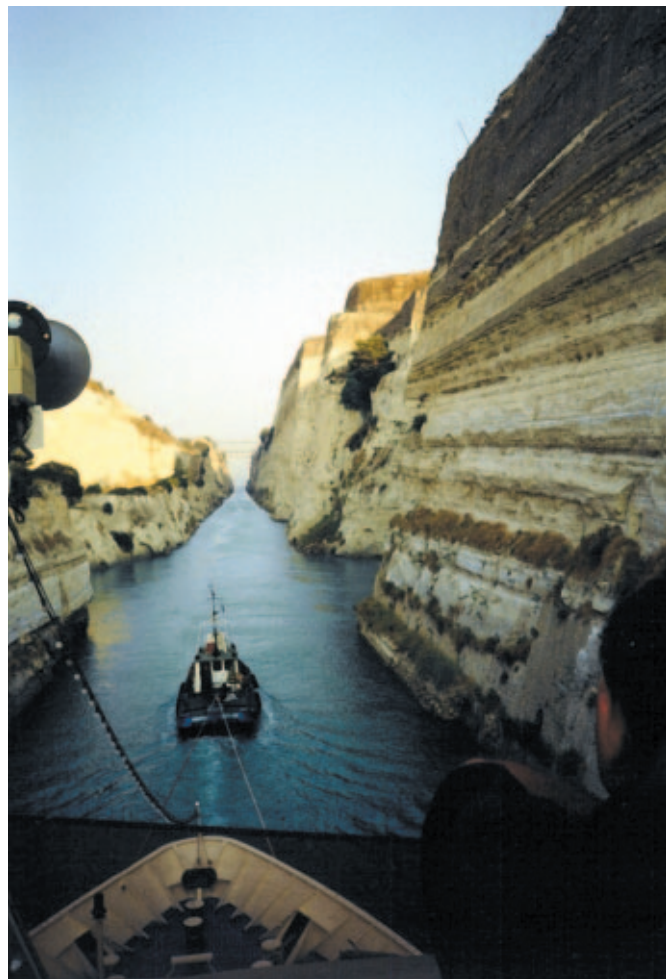


MAKING WAVES



The Discerning Cruiser

How can we measure the power of water? Water has been treated with a mixture of reverence and fear from time immemorial. We are 90% water ourselves, and it is an integral part of many religious rituals, and of course, the weather. We cannot survive without it. Was Noah's Ark really the first cruise ship?

With expanding capacity and a huge variety of products, look at factors such as port of embarkation (a separate travel expense), destinations, and then other factors such as the cruise line, the ship itself, and the activities. Amenities and accommodations, size and style, and comfort and cuisine determine whether the ship is the destination or a mode of transportation, or a balance of both.

Everyone has heard of ships with golf, rock climbing, spas, bridge tournaments, famous restaurants, Broadway shows, and ice skating; for some, the onboard activities are the main draw. Some guests travel the world and have no desire to sightsee or shop, while others have physical limitations. You do not have to watch Love Boat reruns to realize how romance can be kindled or reignited with the soothing rocking of the ship and the exotic ports of call.

BY RANDI WINTER

A Travel Specialist in Inspired Pursuits

CREATING UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

Most people can recite lists of cruise lines featured daily in the media. A smaller, but growing number of people consider themselves to be passengers on a life journey. These discerning cruisers increasingly find themselves far from civilization, unless their passion is to be transported to an urban destination teeming with infinite opportunities for unforgettable human interaction. They are also seeking like-minded people to enhance their social circles, and if they can help a favourite cause or charity, even better.

For almost 2 weeks this summer, a group sailed through the Baltic aboard the six-star Crystal Symphony with our own scholars-in-residence. We shared meals and our intellectual appetites. In every port we had exclusive entrée to places off-limits to everyone else. We met influential and interesting people. Our highlight was St. Petersburg, with pre-opening admission to every major museum and chartering a river boat, followed by a private reception at Yusupov's Palace, with local dignitaries and surprise ballet and opera performances. The mementos that I cherish are new friends and a greater understanding of this fascinating area of our world. Our onboard experiences perfectly harmonized with our ambitious undertaking, and our wish was the excellent crew's command. Crystal deserves every one of their many awards and accolades.

LOOKING BEYOND THE MAJOR CRUISE LINES

Did you know you can take a "heart-healthy" rehab cruise, or if you are in a professional field, that you can fulfill your continuing education credits and partially write off your vacation? Demand for new itineraries and enrichment programs are high amongst the new breed of travellers who do not fit the usual "cruise" profile.

THE ULTIMATE HOME AT SEA

Choose a world cruise or back-to-back segments on many types of ships that ply the waters of the world. If you live to travel, The World of ResidenSea springs to mind. You can own, or you can experience the lifestyle without the million-dollar investment or the maintenance. If you prefer the low-key unstructured ambience of a floating home without the heavy emphasis on large scale entertainment, the sophistication of this ship will absolutely thrill you. Their multiple days in port give you the opportunity to experience all the best that a destination has to offer.

If you want more action and entertainment, or more sea days, or more ports in a concentrated period of time, ask about Silversea Cruises, Radisson Seven Seas or Seabourn for ultra-deluxe cruising worldwide. Some of the cruise lines also offer private plane options. Now more than ever you are in control of creating YOUR experience; however be aware that with customizing your own program on your own terms come less discounts. If you are currently sailing in a balcony or higher cabin on a larger cruise line, then it is time to consider a step up to one of these luxury lines; often there will be a greatly reduced business upgrade option.

If the romance of sails turns you on, check Windjammer, Windstar, Star Clipper, Royal Clipper, and the European Lilli Marleen.

HERE COMES THE QUEEN

No article would be complete without mentioning the Queen

Mary. Doing Caribbean sailings until April 2004, she then starts her transatlantic voyages until she becomes a floating hotel for the Athens Olympics in August. There are special packages for those with deep pockets which include several nights aboard and event tickets. Bring your car if you like, but leave the Nanny at home, they are available onboard!

EXPLORING THE RIVERS AND CANALS OF THE WORLD

Do you think cruising is too formal or structured, or love to see the countryside and the way people live? Consider a river boat or barge experience in the United States, Europe or China. Wherever you choose, you will come away with a heightened appreciation for the history, food, and lifestyles dictated by Mother Nature.

Charter one for 2 to 102 passengers, or rent a u-drive and be captain and crew. Smaller barges have bicycles onboard. Special-interest programs, such as artists-in-residence, can be very inspiring. Since most towns are less than a kilometre or two from the rivers you experience the local flavour.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Some lines have been reincarnated from their predecessors, such as SeaDream Yacht Club and Oceania Cruises.

SeaDream Yacht Club used to be the Sea Goddess. In 2001, Atle Brynstad, the original owner, and Larry Pimentel, former President of Cunard, bought the SeaDream yachts without the name or past passenger lists. The yacht-like feel is even more evident now; goodbye formal wear – hello yachting life. The champagne and caviar SPLASH continues, but there is nothing stuffy! Try every water toy, mountain bike with the crew, Segway, and enjoy high-tech in cabin diversions.

This has to be one of the best kept secrets in the industry. They are PERFECT for charters, active sophisticated families and romantics. They have added casual dining in the new Topside Restaurant and the Top of the Yacht Bar, and added an Asian Spa, gymnasium, library, golf simulator and outdoor theatre. The average age is 45. With flexible itineraries, and the ability to overnight in ports that feature nightlife, they sail from St. Thomas, Nice or Monte Carlo.

Oceania Cruises has capitalized on the high customer satisfaction rating of the bankrupt Renaissance Cruise Lines to offer a deluxe new product replete with Jacques Pépin overseeing the recipes, and 400 staff catering to less than 700 passengers. Although the minimum cabins are on the smaller side, public spaces are beautiful and the higher grade cabins are more in line with size expectations. Current incentives, which include buy-one-and-get-one-free airfare PLUS 2 for 1 cabin pricing, add up to a steal, especially for adults who prefer a non-child-oriented cruise line. This line is best suited for the forty-something and older crowd, with most guests boomers or older.

SOFT ADVENTURE PUTS YOU BACK IN TOUCH WITH NATURE

If you like your vistas up close and personal, there are many different small ships. Expedition or adventure class ships as well as live aboard dive boats and research vessels offer naturalists and instructors academic credits and included land excursions which reinforce what you learn onboard. Although each journey is different, there are some elements that are common to all of them, which include

Ad Here

seeking quality and environmentally friendly journeys, while being comfortable (don't expect large ship accommodation... you can perform all bathroom functions from the "throne").

BC IS GALAPAGOS NORTH

I spent some time aboard the Nautilus Explorer, a 116 foot expedition yacht. It is perfect for diving (which is the passion of the captain), but it also does spectacular Alaska and Pacific Northwest Voyages, and Mexico. Jean-Michel Cousteau calls our BC Coastal Rainforest "the best place to dive in the world." With 27,200 kilometres of coastline, BC is one of the world's best places to go scuba diving, kayaking, whale and bird watching and of course, hiking. Explore some of world's last, best and purest wilderness in May and September. If diving is not first on your mind, consider the Queen Charlotte Island adventures. The diving is very good (Cape St. James and Langara Island), but do also see ancient Haida villages, spectacular scenery, remote beaches, humpback whales, and enjoy great fishing, kayaking and shore expeditions. Known as the 'Galapagos of the North', there are over 218 species of birds, plants and marine life that appear nowhere else on the planet. These smaller active ships are ideal ways to get together with friends who share a common passion, or to make new friends for life.

SO HOW DO YOU CELEBRATE A WEDDINGMOON?

Thinking of tying the knot, but don't have a huge budget for a wedding and honeymoon? Think nautical and have a wedding-moon aboard a cruise ship or in an exotic port of call. The Grand Princess has its own wedding chapel, and the captain is authorized to marry you at sea. RCCL's Voyager of the Seas has a wedding chapel, but no authority to marry, so couples get married in port or before the cruise begins. That way the guests can come aboard, enjoy the service, and disembark before sailing or stay on for the honeymoon!

Carnival Cruise Lines alone expects to plan over 2000 weddings – good business as these weddings feature a built-in honeymoon. More importantly, your guests will practically be paying for their own reception. They get to vacation and you get a honeymoon with a wedding and reception as a bonus! Wedding packages are available from American Hawaii, Carnival, Celebrity, Costa, Holland America, Norwegian, Princess, and Royal Caribbean International. However, with the exception of the Grand Princess, you need to arrange clergy to perform the service. Prices range from a few hundred dollars to thousands depending on what you want, but extra dinners and partying are usually part of the cruise experience, so additional costs are minimal.

SELF INDULGENCE – SPAS AT SEA

Vacation time is perfect for new experiences, and making time for "you". A cruise is a great way to try new foods and treat ourselves to new activities. Spas at sea are also something outside your normal daily routine. Spa services cost extra, and they are used to "spa newbies," so staff entice you with tours explaining spa services, what you can expect and daily specials.

Spa facilities and treatments often sound exotic and sometimes therapeutic. Most of us are familiar with massages, facials, and saunas, but the spa vocabulary also includes such foreign-sounding treatments as ionathermie, thalassotherapy, rasul or aquameditation. How about a rejuvenating "Environmental

Capsule"? Remember that a wrap in a spa has nothing to do with lunch! Even though the terminology may sound foreign, the goal is to help you relax and de-stress. Since we all love to be pampered and get some personal attention, everyone should find something which appeals, regardless of age or gender. Indulge to relax after hectic cruise preparations or to recover from a day's sightseeing. A good spa treatment will revitalize your body, your skin and your soul.

ACCESSIBLE VACATIONS

If you have any medical issues that include motor skills, dialysis, or other disabilities, there are cruises and agencies that specialize in taking care of special needs. Most cruise lines offer "handicap" facilities, but working with people who deal with accessible vacations can ensure all the smallest details are taken care of. I know of many sailings for 2004 which are specifically designed for wheelchair users and slow walkers. They are not escorted departures, but include adjustments to the cabin, accessible shore excursions where applicable, rental medical equipment, and assistance with service dogs. There are at least 8 on RCCL in the Caribbean, Eastern US and on May 30, from Vancouver to Anchorage.

DEALS DEALS DEALS

Every day, agents are bombarded with special promotions on cruises. Obviously, this is used to stimulate sailing dates not booking per projections, and to fill short-term unsold inventory. Make a list of your affiliations; the Carnival Group, which includes Holland America, Princess, Costa, Windstar and more, allows you to have past-passenger privileges based on sailing with a sister company. Frequency of sailing also translates into perks such as additional discounts, free days, free cruises, free laundry, and the obvious recognition receptions. Also, most cruise lines offer booking incentives; your agent gets notified of your booking, and almost all special discounts can be modified. We get specials with no or low single supplements, or free or greatly reduced third or fourth in cabins. Back-to-back sailings usually offer additional savings. Credit cards can reward you with everything from upgrades, shipboard credits, and wine to special receptions and pricing. Age matters to your advantage on some lines. Travel Consortiums offer exceptional value-added amenities.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT IT!

Make sure you are protecting your investment with insurance to cover any contingencies. The last thing you want is to lose your vacation and your money! Ask about covering pre-existing conditions. Cruise lines may offer ASSURANCE which means they are self-insuring. You can cancel for almost any reason – or no reason at all – with full or partial non-transferable future cruise credit within a year. Some credit cards offer coverage which includes medical. Understand the difference between trip interruption (after departure) and cancellation (prior).

BON VOYAGE!

Contact Randi at 604 261-7871.

Share your cruise questions or your best or worst cruise story and one lucky reader will be the winner of a cruise experience package. Email submissions and questions to passionatetravel@novus-tele.net