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# EUROPEAN CRUISING 101

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Lecture by Cameron Hewitt

## Pros and Cons of Cruising

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**Pros:** Excellent value (includes room, board, transport)—impossible to see certain parts of Europe more cheaply and in reasonable comfort. Convenience of waking up in a new town each day. No hauling bags. Good for retirees (relatively low-impact) and for families/big groups (something for everyone).

**Cons:** Insulates you from Europe. Emphasis on hedonism rather than learning and cultural experience. Inescapable “herd” mentality on ship and in port (i.e., crowds). Limited time in port.

**Bottom Line:** Smart, well-prepared travelers can have a good trip to Europe on a cruise, provided they make the most of their time in port.

## Understanding the Cruise Industry

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**History:** Since the “newlyweds and nearly-deads” era of luxury cruising, cruise lines have gone mainstream: In the last 20 years, they’ve built giant megaships and lowered fares; clientele has broadened and become more middle-class.

**The Economics of Cruising:** \$30 bn/year, 12 million Americans each year (1 out of every 5 Americans have cruised). Cruise fares have remained steady; to make up the difference, they charge more “à la carte” expenses on board. The “Big Three”: **alcohol sales, gambling (casino), shore excursions.** Others: duty-free shopping, specialty restaurants, photography, spa treatments, etc.

## Choosing and Booking a Cruise

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### Comparing Cruise Lines:

- ♦ **Mass-Market:** “Tacky-resort-hotel-at-sea” ambience, huge ships (thousands of passengers), lots of upselling, relatively short days in port, a widely diverse clientele (young families), focus on vacation fun rather than sightseeing/learning. Norwegian Cruise Lines (NCL), Royal Caribbean (RCCL), Carnival, Costa and MCL (Italian).
- ♦ **Premium:** A step up both in price and in elegance. Still huge ships (but more intimate) but more restrained upselling, with a generally older, better-traveled, and more sightseeing-minded clientele. Holland America Lines (HAL), Celebrity, Princess, Cunard, Disney.
- ♦ **Luxury (a.k.a. “Upper Premium”):** Smaller ships, better food and service, classier/more dignified

experience, less upselling, longer days in port, more exclusive clientele (ranges from casual to stuffy).

Windstar, Azamara Club, Oceania, Star Clippers

- ♦ **Ultra-Luxury:** Top-of-the line, more is included, can be stuffy. Crystal, Regent Seven Seas (RSSC), Seabourn, SeaDream, Silversea.

**Other Factors:** Consider the complete price (including taxes/port fees, fuel surcharges, \$10/person/day auto-tip, airfare, added onboard expenses); **ship size** (bigger ship = more amenities but also more crowds); **onboard amenities** (quality/variety of restaurants, activities, entertainment, athletic facilities, children’s resources, etc.); and **destinations and time spent in each one.**

**Resources:** Ask friends, check cruise-line websites, read online reviews (Cruisecritic.com, Cruisediva.com, Cruisemates.com, Avidcruiser.com).

**Booking:** 90% of cruises booked through a third party; choose between a big, impersonal booking site, or your hometown travel agent (we recommend Sheri at Elizabeth Holmes Travel). You’ll almost never pay the list price—lots of sales and incentives. Best time to book for summer cruises is the previous fall.

## Life on Board

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**Getting to Know Your Ship:** Explore your stateroom (a.k.a. “cabin”). Compact but well-designed. “Inside,” “outside,” or “veranda.” Get your bearings with deck plan.

**Entertainment and Activities:** Resorts at sea: lobby/front desk, casino, library, activities (e.g., bowling), mini-shopping malls, art galleries with works for sale or auction, children’s areas, spas, and more. Entertainment: Variety shows in big theaters, smaller acts in lounges, movies. Stay fit by using the gym, running track, pool, climbing wall, etc. All explained in the daily program, some have extra charge.

**Eating:** Dining room and buffet have different dress codes (see later). Assigned “seatings” are being phased out on most lines—more flexible. New trend for wide variety of “specialty restaurants” (French, Italian, steak house, sushi), \$10-30 cover charge, fancier items also have a surcharge. Water, coffee/tea, juice, milk are free; alcohol, soft drinks, lattes are extra. Stick with “included” options to save money.

**Staying Healthy:** Wash your hands frequently—hand sanitizers don’t kill the “cruise-ship virus” (Norovirus). Average cruiser gains about a pound a day (but Rick lost weight).

**Dress Code:** Most of the ship, including the buffet, is always **casual** (shorts and T-shirts OK). The main dining room is “**smart casual**” most dinners (polo shirt/nice top and slacks; no jeans, shorts, collarless shirts). Each week 1-2 “**formal nights**” (men: jacket, sometimes tie or even tux; women: cocktail dress or dressy separates). If you don’t want to pack formalwear, you can **skip the dining room** on those nights—instead, do buffet or room service.

**Pack Light and Versatile:** Cruisers often want three outfits a day: comfortable port wear, dressier evening/dinner wear, and athletic/swimwear. Think versatile to pack light.

**Seasickness Remedies:** **Dramamine** (or its less-drowsy formula); tiny **Scopolamine** patches behind the ear (prescription-only); elasticized **Sea-Bands** with pressure points on wrist; **homegrown cures** (green apples or candied ginger).

## Money-Saving Tips

**Watch Extra Expenses:** Extras (like photography) can really add up. Ships are “cashless”—just sign for expenses with your room number. To avoid overspending, keep an eye on your bill (ask at front desk).

**Shopping:** Shops on land that are “recommended” or “guaranteed” by your cruise line are paying a big commission. Prices are high to include cruise-line kickback. If possible, find local shops, not affiliated with cruise lines.

**Communicating:** Internet/Wi-Fi is expensive (\$0.50-1/min) and extremely slow. Ship-to-shore calls also very expensive. When the ship is close to shore, mobile phones can access land networks for reasonable rates; prices go way up if you’re on the shipboard network. For details on phoning in Europe, see [ricksteves.com/phoning](http://ricksteves.com/phoning).

**Crew/Tipping:** Don’t try to economize by skimping on tips. Drastically low cruise wages help keep cruise fares cheap. “Insourced” mostly from developing world, work 10-14 hours a day (or more), 7 days a week, up to 10 months at a time—without a single day off. Most earn a base salary of about \$1 a day, so virtually all of their income is from tips (which usually add up to what would be a good salary back home). Cruise lines levy \$10/person/day “auto-tip,” can be adjusted, split among crew. Additional cash tips at end of cruise for those who gave great service.

## In Port

### Shore Excursions:

- ♦ **Pros:** Convenient, efficient, use vetted local guides, first off the boat (especially nice when tendering), guaranteed to make it back on time.
- ♦ **Cons:** Expensive (\$40-60/person for town walking tour, \$100-150/person for an all-day bus and walking tour), less flexible, always moving with a group, “hostage” shopping.

**On Your Own:** Always possible, but easier in some ports than others.

- ♦ Don’t count on crew advice—they want you to stay on board (to spend more money) or buy excursions. Local tourist offices are often set up at the port—use them for reliable information.
- ♦ Get cash from ATMs and keep it safe in a money belt.
- ♦ Hop-on, hop-off bus tours are pricey, but can be convenient for reaching the key sights.
- ♦ Public transit often works well, but can involve some waiting.
- ♦ Taxis are convenient, but often rip-off expensive—know the going rates. Consider splitting the cost of a shared minibus (though these are less widely available).
- ♦ Hire your own private guide or join a local walking tour to cut out the middleman.
- ♦ You must be back on board 30 minutes before departure. Be careful to **return to the ship on time**—if you’re late, they will leave without you (on your own to get to next port). But don’t be bullied. Just use a good guidebook to plan your day carefully, and watch the time.

### LEARN MORE

**Read:** *Rick Steves’ Mediterranean Cruise Ports*, *Rick Steves’ Northern European Cruise Ports*

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