

Q: We'll be cruising soon for the first time in several years. When we sailed before, all dining was with assigned seats at the same table at the same assigned time for all sit-down meals throughout the cruise. For one or two nights, couples had to gussie up in formal dress and suit and tie. Some men wore tuxes. Now, we've been told our next trip will have "freestyle cruising". What does that mean?

A: Unless you really enjoy dressing up for your cruise dinners, leave those formal clothes at home. All dining aboard ship these days is much more casual, and formality is voluntary.

To answer your question, freestyle cruising is also another step into cruise informality. It means you can dine at any time you want at any table you choose, whether it seats two or ten. No more will you be assigned to the same (boring? gabby?) tablemates for every meal throughout the entire cruise.

Freestyle dining is included in the price of your cruise, as are eating your meals at buffets and casual cafes aboard the ship. However, be aware that most major ships also have several special upscale restaurants. If you choose to dine there, you'll have to pay a surcharge of from \$20 to \$50 extra per meal. And, of course, all beer and liquor charges you incur anywhere throughout your cruise are extra, too.

Before you go on your voyage, check with your travel agent or the cruise line to learn about dining rules and any required dress codes on the ship you've booked.