

As with all aspects of the travel industry trying to cope with today's economy, cruise companies are lowering prices to attract customers. Now may be your best time to sign on to a luxurious cruise at bargain prices.

I became a senior cruiser despite my original negative thoughts about it. I retired at age 65.5 on a snowy December day, and 24 hours later my spouse and I were on our way from cold, damp Pennsylvania 2,000 miles to the hot, dry desert of Arizona. Instead just settling down right away, we decided to do some traveling.

A travel agency suggested we celebrate my retirement by taking a cruise from Los Angeles along the Pacific coast of Mexico. My reaction: A cruise! Who the heck wants to go on a cruise? When I cruised the Pacific with the Navy in World War II and Korea, a lot of angry guys tried to kill me! I absolutely insisted I'd never, never go on a cruise.

A week later we were at the pier to board our cruise ship. Gripping and moaning, I went up the gangway and to our cabin. I had to admit it was a bit more grand than some of my Navy sleeping compartments, and even agreed that the cruise ship had better chow halls. I enjoyed the onboard activities and visits to Baja ports, and since then, we've sailed on about two dozen or so other cruises throughout the world.

On every cruise, we found most other passengers were seniors, too. Obviously, retirees have the most time and money to pay the \$2,000 to \$5,000 it costs for the average one-week sea journey. However, there are also inexpensive three- and four-day cruises out of Los Angeles, Miami and other cities that go for from \$400 up. I took one just a few weeks ago, and it was very enjoyable.

We've participated in many of the activities on cruises, which started at 6 am (voluntarily) with exercise classes, swim, spa, walk/jog around the upper deck track. For breakfast and lunch, we prefer the buffet to sit-down served meals. It is much more relaxing and doesn't require dressing up or waiting for each course to be served.

Throughout the day, there are more organized sports, shuffleboard, card games, quiz shows, bingo and, of course, just plain lazing in the sun and watching the ocean go by. I must also say that cruise ship operators are very aware of advanced-age seniors and physically-challenged passengers, and all activities are designed to permit their participation.

For dinner, throughout most of our cruises, we sat at assigned tables with the same dining companions. Often this was enjoyable, sometimes it was being stuck with a group of yoyos. Now, cruise ships offer more open seating arrangements, special upscale (extra cost) dining rooms, flexible hours and other amenities for those who don't want to be tied down by time and/or table companions.

Most cruises always feature a sweets-themed midnight buffet, which often followed dancing in the luxury ballroom and under the stars. Ya just couldn't beat that on LST 263, USS Sibley or the USS Oriskany.

Once cruise ships clear US waters, the glitzy casinos open, and passengers can experience Las Vegas at sea with slot machines and table games. There's also an attractive row of upscale shops on the larger cruise ships that feature duty-free goods. If you wait till the last day of your cruise, you can get some bargain prices at the shops. While there's plenty to do aboard ship, shore excursions are always attractive, averaging between \$50 and \$150 per person for trips of from four to eight hours.

My post-retirement cruises have been mostly to Europe, Canada, Hawaii, Alaska, the Caribbean, Panama and South America, I've not yet sailed beyond Hawaii. There are wartime memories I not-so-fondly recall about China, Korea or Japan. Additionally, ads for Americans to tour Vietnam leave me cold. Well, maybe if a good deal comes up, and if they don't hold any grudges against this old Navy guy, I may just try some Far East cruises or tours some day.