

While most major cruise lines do their best to make all trip enjoyable experiences, not all cruises are equal. First, of course, go to the internet to check passenger critiques from previous cruises on the same ship, and if they report poor maintenance, bad sanitary conditions, lousy food and other negatives. If so, look elsewhere for your cruise. In fact, once signed up, even before you board, understand all your options.



When booking, either online or with a neighborhood travel agency, make sure you've looked through all the options. For instance, if a five-night cruise offers cabins for \$299, it may seem like a great bargain. However, that cheap cabin will probably be in one of the lowest decks, have about as much room as a closet and no view of the outside world.

That's not necessarily the wrong choice. With all the onboard activities going on, you'll probably spend less than six to eight hours daily in the little cabin. When you want to see the sea, all you have to do is to go out on deck at any time of the day or night. Also, all the great food, spas, pools, excursions, entertainment and other facilities are as available to the cheap passengers, as to the ones on the same five-night cruise in \$3,000 topside balcony suites.

Another factor to consider are the themes and destinations of your chosen cruise. If you're a pair of old duffers, are you sure you want to sign up with the Disney Line, and spend a week among decks full of running, jumping and yelling kids? And the port of call is Walt Disney World? If your cruise is set up as a Spring Break special, you may find you won't appreciate gangs of slightly older kids running, jumping, yelling, drinking and who knows what else? And the port of call is Tijuana?

Or if you're Mister and Missus Straight, would you enjoy sharing a cruise among a thousand gay and lesbian revelers? In your research, you'll see many cruises that cater to special groups or have specific themes. For instance, would Mr. and Mrs. Straight enjoy a cruise featuring the music of Frank Zappa or Frank Sinatra?

If you're fed up with sloshing through the winter snow, where even Al Gore can't get warm this season, it may be time for you to book that cruise to Baja, Hawaii, Bermuda, Catalina or other warm, comfy spots. But, before you sign up, crank up your computer to make sure you're getting the best bargain on the best cruise ship ever to sail the Seven Seas.