



Q: Haven't cruised for a long time, but this year we'll be with a group from our church on a week's voyage to Acapulco. Not sure whether we should pack a lot of clothing to dress up for dinner, or go casual. The schedule we received said it would be a freestyle cruise. What does that mean? *PFR, San Diego CA*

A: We've all seen movies about how passengers on vintage luxury cruises dined. In "Titanic", "Affair to Remember" and other examples, men appeared for dinner in tuxes and women wore long evening gowns.

Many cruises today still require passengers to dress for the evening meal, though not quite as strictly formal. Expected is coat and tie for men and cocktail dress for women. Another aspect of the requirements was that passengers used to be assigned to a ship's dining room table, and had to be at the same one for every meal at the same time. That also meant being with the same people, whether boring, obnoxious or nice.

Today, more and more cruise lines offer the option of freestyle cruising. Basically, you can eat at any time at any table with people you choose. Or, if desired, a table just for two. Freestyle eliminates some of the restrictive elements of cruising, like formal dress and set dining times.

How do you know when a cruise is freestyle? When you're planning a sea journey, check with cruise lines, your online and/or hometown travel agency about dining and other requirements.

Also, once onboard, go to the courtesy desk and get lists of freestyle dining options, locations, times they're available and any dress requirements. Although some smaller cruise ships allow shorts, swimsuits and bare feet at any meal, most major cruise line dining rooms require shoes, men to wear coats and women dresses or slacks. Of course, at onboard snack bars, buffets and poolside, those rules are relaxed.

While freestyle cruises don't require passengers to eat with the same people at every dinner, there's the option of doing it by agreeing to a specific time to meet in the dining room. If you

require eating as a group, ask the maitre d' in advance to accommodate you. Although reservations may not be required, set a specific time and table each night for your group.

Many cruise ships also offer special onboard dining rooms that are more like upscale restaurants. The atmosphere is intimate, and service more individual. Reservations are required, and the all-inclusive pricing that covers other meals aboard may not apply. An extra fee of from \$25 per person per meal is usually charged.

The larger, newer ships have applied freestyle cruising to many other onboard features. There are varieties of entertainment, where passengers can choose among stage shows, bingo, casino and group games.

Each passenger cabin gets an early morning printed or on TV newsletter listing planned activities for the day. Your cabin's TV also gives ongoing live and recorded info on all freestyle-related features.