

TRAVEL

# Do your homework to enjoy a cruise vacation

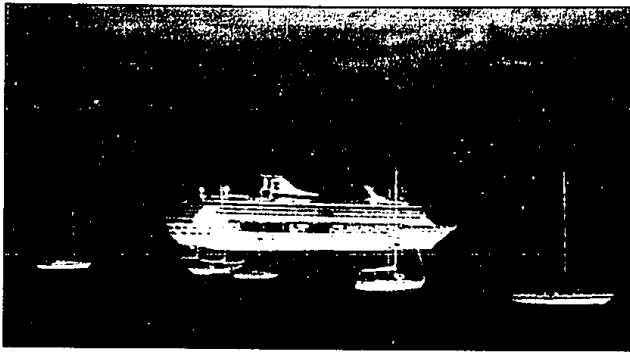
By SANDIE PARROTT  
SPECIAL WRITER

## Pros share tips at AAA seminar

Thinking of going on a cruise? Thinking: "What's the right cruise line for me?" Or maybe it's your first time on a cruise ship? Not to worry, says AAA Travel — armed with a few travel tips from the pros, it should be nothing but smooth sailing.

Learn how to find and reserve the best cruise package for your needs 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 20 at the AAA Michigan Farmington Hills branch, 38751 W. 12 Mile Road.

Representatives from Holland America and Carnival Cruise Lines will share their secrets with those considering a cruise: the cost, the convenience, the cuisine, cruising with kids, popular itineraries and more. Seating is limited, call (800) 224-1178 for reservations. There is no charge for the seminar.



Relaxing getaway: A cruise ship dwarfs sailboats in a sunny port.

Are you thinking of getting away from the cold for a while and sailing the seas, but choices of destinations and ships have got you confused? Then perhaps you need to sort through all of this information and to plan the cruise trip of your dreams.

The key word here is "plan." If you don't do your work up front, no matter how much you pay for the trip, you may still be disappointed.

**Budget**

Nobody wants to talk about it, but money comes first. The first decision has to be how much are you willing to spend in total for this trip. "In total" is italicized as a reminder that the total cost of the vacation must be considered. The brochure may state cruises from \$499 per person, but what does that mean?

That means the rate for the lowest deck level and smallest inside cabin.

Will you stay in the smallest room with no window? Does it include airfare or port taxes? There are cruises for almost every budget. Spending more does not guarantee a better trip.

A typical \$499 trip for two that includes airfare could cost you \$1,500 to \$2,000. The extra costs include tips to the staff, shore excursions, beverages, gifts and souvenirs and any transportation or meals while ashore.

**Destination**

What do you want to spend your time doing? Look at this carefully, because the four largest factors in the price of your trip are destination, num-

ber of days, type of ship and cabin size.

Do you like to bask in the sun, explore historic cities of Europe, visit several countries at one time, party all night, observe animals in their habitat, learn about exotic places and customs? There are cruises geared to each of these activities. It is hard, but it must be narrowed down.

This is the most important decision if you want to see something specific. For example, if you want to see certain areas of Alaska, it doesn't matter what ship you choose or what cabin you will stay in — the main point is seeing the ports of call and experiencing the tremendous shore excursions available to you.

**Number of days**

This is another main factor in the price of your vacation. How long are you able to withstand the rigors of travel? This is important, not only because of the cost, but because a strange environment with different foods and away from the kids can become stressful instead of relaxing.

A maximum of a seven-day cruise is recommended for first time cruisers. Especially if it is a specific area of the world. The experiences actually can start to run together. A couple we know visited many of the Green Islands on one trip. They said they were sick of seeing ruins. It can happen. Don't plan too much of one type of activity or locality.

**The ship**

The large ships (700 or more passengers) that stop at popular destinations, like the Caribbean, are less expensive and have more amenities. If you want a more personal experience, with fewer passengers and special guides there are smaller ships, barges and yachts available. The smaller and more personalized tours are usually more expensive and have less of the frills of larger ships.

Very large ships cannot dock in some small ports. If using a port to get into port is objectionable to you, make sure you ask if the ship actually docks. Also, some areas may be too narrow for larger boats to navigate. If you have your heart set on

cruising down the Amazon, the large mega-ships just won't fit. Some large ships, however, can navigate the tight passages and fjords of Alaska.

**Cabins**

The last big choice is the cabin. This is a significant part of the price of your cruise. Do you need a window? Some of the rooms are very small and seem even smaller without a window. It depends on your needs.

Do you need a balcony? Some cruises are too cold for the balcony to be practical. Many cruise brochures and on-line websites provide actual square footage for the rooms. Look at this carefully, you will not spend very much time in your cabin.

One recommendation is to choose a cabin away from stairs,

elevators, equipment, crew quarters and kitchens if you want a quiet trip.

**Deck level**

This is another smaller factor that can affect price. Generally, the higher level cabins are more expensive. Many people feel they need to be close to the recreation areas. This can actually be a negative. Higher level cabins can feel the sea movement more and there can be noise from the public areas.

**Brochures and Web sites**

Read between the lines. These are written by marketing experts to sound enticing and perfect. Nothing is perfect. Do your homework look at many brochures and Web sites. Talk to travel agents and read some of

the recommended books.

**Shore excursions**

The last piece to consider is shore excursions. Plan on taking as many as you can afford. Some of the excursions are expensive, but they are well worth the once-in-a-lifetime memories. These can range from city and museum tours to dogsledding in the Yukon, walking on a glacier, seeing a bald eagle or a blue whale up close, coasting 33 miles down Haleskaka Mountain on Maui, or swimming with sting rays in Grand Caymen. These experiences are worth every dollar.

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■ A 15-day Autumn Leaves, New England Fall Foliage Tour leaves Detroit on Sept. 8. Tour includes round-trip air service to Philadelphia and motorcoach touring and sightseeing to Milford, Conn., New York City,

Newport, R.I. and Boston. Tourists will also visit Quebec, Montreal, Buffalo, N.Y., Niagara Falls, and tour four historical Pennsylvania cities before flying home. The cost is \$1,319 per person based on double occupancy.

Trip flyers are available at the Farmington Family YMCA, 28100 Farmington Road, Farmington Hills. Call (248) 563-1934 or (877) 846-7329 for information.

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