

Auschwitz—reminder of brutal inhumanity



The barracks and grounds at Auschwitz, the largest of the Nazi concentration camps, are maintained as a memorial to the 4 million who were killed inside the camp's barbed wire perimeter. It is a reminder that man's barbaric past is not so long behind him. The sign in the foreground: "VORSICHT Hochspannung Lebengefahr." Caution: High tension, danger to life. (Photos by Micky Jones)

travel log
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Ask it beforehand or bump and grind later

Cruises are very popular among retirees — especially among single women.

But older adults are often concerned about the lifestyle they will find aboard a cruise ship and whether they can handle the physical requirements of the trip.

Smart travelers ask such questions in advance, as many of our readers have done. I talked about this recently to Al Wolfe of the Cruise Lines International Association, which represents 27 cruise lines sailing out of North American ports.

Here are the questions he advises you to ask:

1. How many tender ports are on the cruise schedule. A tender port is not a place for love and kisses at dockside, but a port in which the cruise ship must transfer passengers to a smaller boat instead of tying up at a dock. The smaller boat is called a tender.

The transfer from ship to tender can be precarious. I made such a transfer when the Oceanic Independence stopped a mile from shore when we disembarked for Kona, on the island of Hawaii. The cruise ship was lurching. The tender was lurching. Each of us leaped, with the help of a crew member, from one bouncing vessel to the other.

That kind of travel requires agility and sure footing. If you don't have it, be sure you sign up for a cruise ship which makes all its stops at dockside. Many do.

2. Do you want to avoid discos? On some ships you can ignore them if you don't like them, but on some cruise ships the disco is the center of social life. Ask before you sail, unless you like to bump and grind.

3. What is the cruise ship policy towards children? Do they encourage or discourage them? Older adults will divide either way on this one. Many enjoy being with children. Many don't. Choose what suits you.

4. What is the nature of the ports where your ship will call? You may want to avoid the sidetrip where passengers ride a mule, or go deep sea diving, and stick with ports designed for shopping and sightseeing.

5. Do you need any special facilities for the handicapped? Many cruise ships have their own wheelchairs, for example, designed for their own doorways and staterooms. If you can fit in one of those wheelchairs, you are probably all right. If you must bring your own wheelchair, you may be in trouble.

6. Do you like to travel exclusively with other people your age? Holland American cruises and those which go to Alaska are more heavily populated by middle-aged and older travelers. If you prefer a mix of younger and older, check that out too. Your travel agent knows a lot about cruises.

TWO READERS asked more specific questions: Q. How do I find a freighter that has most of the amenities of a cruise ship? A. Delta Steamship Lines, one of CLIA's member cruise lines, has four ships carrying 100 passengers each and offers reasonable comfort on a freighter cruise.

Q. How do I get a job on a cruise ship? A: Most cruise ships are of foreign registry and hire employees from their own countries. The only American registry at the moment is the Oceanic Independence named above, or the Delta Queen, which sails the Mississippi River.

By IRIS SANDERSON JONES

I am as loathe to write about Auschwitz as I was to visit it. A Nazi concentration camp in which 4 million people were murdered hardly fits the pattern of pleasure usually associated with either travel or a travel story.

But people travel for more than pleasure. Auschwitz is on the itinerary of thousands of Americans who visit Poland. Others visit Dachau, near Munich, in Germany. Both are museum memorials to the people who died in concentration camps. The camps are kept intact so that the Holocaust is not forgotten.

Most adults remember their first sight of the photographs taken when Allied soldiers freed the concentration camps in 1945. Men, women and children, most of them Jews, had been hauled in boxcars to this remote area of Poland, where 20 percent were chosen for hard labor and the rest sent to their deaths in the gas chambers.

Four million died here, among them 2½ million Jews and more than a million Poles. Only a few hundred inmates survived. Recent television programs have shown us the horror of the hunger and desolation in which they lived.

AUSCHWITZ IS a different pilgrimage for each person who goes there. I was a young girl when those film clips first appeared, and I read about the concentration camps for years in a vain attempt to understand. I was terrified at the idea of visiting Auschwitz.

If you are considering such a visit, you might like to know that, although the real-life stories remain terrifying, it was not as bad a visit as I had expected it to be.

I would like to share with you some impressions from my notebook about that visit:

OSWIECIM is the Polish name for the town the Germans called Auschwitz. From the tour bus window, I see men and women walking back and forth between the small-town shops, and glimpsed down a side street of a steeped brick church that rises above the town.

There are ice cream trucks and tour buses in the parking lot at the camp, just outside of town. Brick barracks, barbed wire and guard towers stretch ominously away behind.

A film made up of old German and Allied-army film clips is shown in the large brick administration building. Older travelers have seen many of these pictures before, but younger travelers see them for the first time:

Men and women, grandmothers and toddlers, driven by Nazi soldiers to railway stations throughout Europe. Thousands shot and buried in mass graves. Lineups for the showers, the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Piles of naked bodies waiting for the crematorium. Skeletal survivors in striped prison garb clawing the fence as Allied soldiers arrive.

THERE IS A STRANGE sense of unreality among the sea of tourist raincoats as we walk through the barbed wire into the camp, under an ironic sign that reads "Arbeit Macht Frei." Work Makes Free.

These two-story red brick buildings, which were built as military barracks, are not what I expected to see. The long, low wooden and concrete buildings, which look like horse barns, are in an adjacent camp called Birkenau, built later in the war to make extermination more efficient.

Each of these red brick buildings is now a museum, showing photographs and the conditions of living and dying in Auschwitz. In one, simply marked "Extermination," there is a simple shrine where fresh flowers are placed daily.

Each of us had our own thoughts, but we nod our heads when a woman says: 'I had to go. I only had to walk through that camp, but all those prisoners had to live and die there.'

The shrine is a simple, lighted archway near a huge photograph of a woman and child being driven down a winter street by soldiers. A large black marble pedestal holds the official bouquet of flowers. At the base of the pedestal, in small, drying clusters that have clearly been clutched by loving hands, visitors leave their own memorial flowers every day.

WE WALK THROUGH the buildings in a blur of images. The women's quarters. The men's quarters. Photos of tiny children. Here, 1,000 Polish boys from Zamoszczyn were exterminated in one day. Drawings of the gas chambers. The ovens. The shock of seeing huge glass cases full of the spectacles, the shoes and the hair taken from the dead. A display of German suits lined with that hair.

No travel story can detail life in Auschwitz. Even a visit doesn't tell it all. Some is too terrible to tell. The final story is Block Smierci — the Block of Death — built next to the Wall of Death. Today, 36 years after liberation, the length of the wall blooms with fresh flowers set amid the flickering candles lit every single day by visiting travelers.

IT IS A STRANGE feeling to be a tourist in such a place. The tour group troves silently under red and blue umbrellas in the rain, towards the tour buses. Each of us had our own thoughts, but we nod our heads when a woman says: "I had to go. I only had to walk through that camp, but all those prisoners had to live and die there."



Black marble for a statue of Hitler became a monument marking the Jewish ghetto of Warsaw.

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