

TRAVEL

Cruising has it all in a convenient package

By CASSY HANS
STAFF WRITER

Ever dream of days filled with tropical sun and drink and nightly five-course meals — that you don't have to cook?

How about snorkeling, shopping or walking the beach by day and variety shows every evening? Visiting different islands or ports every day, and learning about different cultures?

If these things appeal to you, then a cruise may be the vacation for you.

After taking two Caribbean cruises — one to the Western Islands in 1992 and the other to some Eastern isles just recently — I'm an avowed cruising enthusiast.

Like the one-price package, which on many cruise lines includes airfare, transfers, ship passage, and all meals and entertainment and use of ship's facilities such as the health club, pool, library and game room. Many lines also have a cashless system on board the ship, where vacationers put down a deposit or credit card, and charge any shipboard purchases — such as wine or alcohol or items from the gift shops — to the card, which is tallied and paid for at the end of the cruise.

Cruising the Caribbean often includes visiting the popular Cancun or Cozumel in Mexico, the mountainous Jamaica, the British Cayman Islands and isles like Barbados — independent since 1966 with a British

Tell us about your cruise

The cruise industry is busy touting February as National Cruise Vacation Month. When the snow falls and the winds howl, residents of Southeast Michigan begin thinking seriously about drifting through the islands on a cruise ship.

We'd like to know what your experiences were. Did the cruise live up to its billing? Was the food fantastic or just so-so? What about the ports of call, were they inviting or frightening? Was your captain like Capt. Stubbing on "The Love Boat" or Capt. Bligh on "The Bounty"?

Tell your neighbors in 75 words or less what it was like to take a cruise and we'll print a sampling of your comments.

Send your cruise stories to: Hugh Gallagher, Assistant Managing Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48160, or fax (313) 591-7279.

influence — or the French-speaking Martinique. The Mexican stop can mean

beaches and shopping, or something more cultural like a day trip to a Mayan ruin.

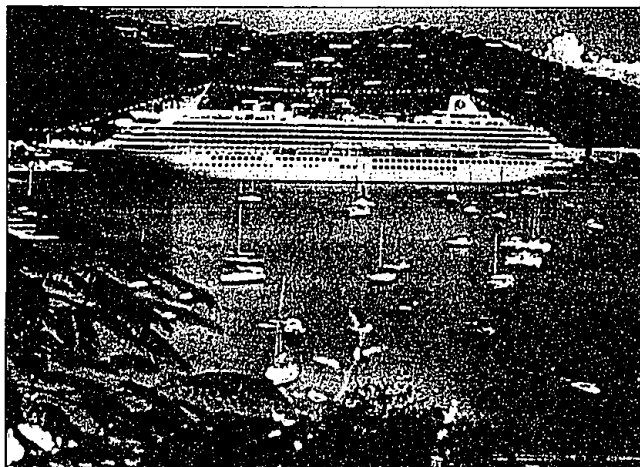
Beach-lovers can enjoy a stop at Antigua, where local tourism officials and cabbies tout the 365 beaches — one for every day of the year and many with plenty of white coral and shells for collecting.

Shoppers often look forward to a visit to St. Thomas, where jewelry, linen and perfume stores abound and where U.S. residents can take back up to \$1,200 in merchandise tax and duty free. Although there is a touch of the Caribbean here, the island is a U.S. territory, so is highly Americanized; expect people on the street hawking time shares.

Nearly all the islands boast good snorkeling, but Grand Cayman and Martinique received the most raves from my traveling companions. Most ships also provide a myriad of entertainment for those who wish to stay on the ship, or for the days that the ship is at sea. Pool volleyball, early morning aerobics and walking club, art auctions and other activities are scheduled throughout the day or you can simply sit on the deck with a good book.

But everyone really wants to know about the midnight buffet and other food delights.

It's true that you can eat regularly scheduled meals, or eat throughout the day and go to the daily midnight buffets as well. Most cruise lines offer sit-down meal service in a formal dining



Caribbean cruising: Crystal Cruise's luxurious Harmony calls at St. Thomas during its Caribbean season.

room for three meals each day, as well as a poolside buffet service for breakfast, lunch and snacks. The midnight buffet usually features a theme nightly, and includes ice carvings and

activities spearheaded by the cruise staff.

Cost for a 7-day cruise usually starts at about \$800 for a basic package and goes up from there, depending on the time of year

you're traveling and the package you choose. Cabin upgrades to a larger room and outside stateroom — which includes a window — come at an additional cost.

Travel agent says cruising means value

By BETTY SWARTZ
SPECIAL WRITER

February — snow, wind and ice — an appropriate month to declare as National Cruise Vacation Month and target the first-time cruisers and, of course, those that have cruised and are ready to do it again. The anticipation of the hassle-free, relaxing cruise vacation can warm the bones of any Northerner at this time of the year.

Cruising has become today's most popular worry-free vacation. Almost every corner of the world has been or will be visited by a cruise ship with itineraries varying in length from three days to as many as 180 days. More than a dozen new ships have entered service in the last few years, with several more scheduled to debut and even more on the drawing board. The people are out there to fill those cabins and suites. It is estimated that only six percent of Americans have cruised, and based on

industry data, nearly all of them will choose to cruise again. Are you one of them or are you one of the 94 percent that want to cruise but have not made the commitment?

What is cruising other than being on a ship for days and nights? A cruise is value and value is on everyone's mind. Like resorts, which land lovers have experienced, there are a vast number of different ships and itineraries and there is one to fit your lifestyle, budget and time allotment.

In addition to the convenience of a cruise vacation, a complete cruise vacation package can be designed (round trip air transportation, transfers to and from the pier, a pre or post cruise hotel package etc.).

To make this dream a reality, a reality with good, lasting memories, plan your cruise vacation with a cruise counselor, a person that has experienced the various cruise lines and is knowledgeable

about the cruise industry. Remember cheap is not value, value is being totally satisfied with the cruise experience.

You haven't lived until you've cruised. It's true. Betty Swartz is a master cruise counselor at Cruise Selections Inc. in Troy area can be reached at (810) 643-6868.



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