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HOW TO PICK THE RIGHT EXCURSIONS

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HOW TO

Pick the right excursions

There's nothing like stepping off your ship and immersing yourself in an exciting new destination – but a little planning can turn a good day into a great one, says *Daniel Edward*



Cruising has to be one of the most time-effective ways of seeing several destinations in a short amount of time. But to make the most of your voyage, it pays to do your homework first. Many cruises are port-heavy, and if you're not careful you can end up getting off the ship every day, tiring yourself out and not enjoying the experience as much as you might do. Booking a lot of guided excursions can be costly, too. So before you embark on your next cruise, read our handy ten-point plan to picking the perfect tours that will suit your travelling style – and your budget...

There's a whole world to discover – but pace yourself to avoid destination overload

1 Do your homework

Excursions always sound exciting, but don't overlook the small print in your eagerness to sign up. Some tours are specifically created with young families in mind, for example, while others set themselves apart with a knuckle-whitening itinerary of pure adventure. Carefully read the full description of the excursion to find out what it entails and whether it's right for you. If you're looking online, previous guests' reviews can be more useful than the marketing spiel.

2 Book directly with cruise excursion sites

Most of the major cruise lines sell excursions as optional extras and, depending on who you ask, the mark-up sits somewhere between 20 and 40 per cent. Booking directly with a tour operator is often much cheaper. Dedicated cruise excursion search engines such as cruisingexcursions.com, shoretrips.com and gangwaze.com give you a fantastic overview of your options, including reviews. Even better, once you've found a tour online, call the operator for their best direct deal.

3 Book before you sail

Booking early will give you peace of mind that you've booked the excursion you really want. Marta Laurent, founder of foreverbarcelona.com, says, 'the best tour guides are the first to get their calendar full, and a good guide can make or break your holiday, so it always pays to book ahead.' Booking with plenty of time also means you can check over all the easy-to-miss details without any last-minute stress. For example, will your ship's time be the same as local time? Paul Mayer, who runs Vallarta Food Tours in the Mexican Riviera, says one in three cruisers arrives an hour late for their tour because they haven't factored in a time-zone difference.



Given a little notice, many tours can easily accommodate those with mobility issues

4 Pace yourself

Most itineraries are port-heavy, packed with awe-inspiring destinations but with rarely enough time to see them all properly. One mistake many cruisers make when booking excursions is to cram too many big trips into one cruise. This means they end up not really enjoying their final excursions because they're too tired. Savvy cruisers know that on a typical seven-night trip you should factor in two days for staying on board, at the most just leaving the ship for a quick cup of coffee and a mooch round the port.

5 Try free local walking tours

Free walking tours are a great way of seeing a new destination. The guides are often local students with great stories to tell – those you don't always hear on the more traditionally structured tours. Because the trips



Booked a foodie tour? Check your time zones or you might miss lunch



Cruise lines like Royal Caribbean can arrange a private tour for you

are relatively short, often around an hour-and-a-half, you'll still have plenty of time to browse round the shops for souvenirs, or to revisit some of the landmarks you've seen on the tour and go inside to explore on your own.

If you're unsure where to join a free walking tour, pop into any hotel lobby and ask the receptionist. And if your guide does a great job, a small tip goes a long way to showing your appreciation.

6 Treat yourself to a private tour

An exclusive private tour may sound like an excessive splurge, but it gives you the opportunity to really get under the skin of a place, all at your own pace. A private tour will usually be better than the group one offered by your cruise line, and you

won't find yourself awkwardly shuffling your feet as Norman the Inquisitive asks yet another rambling question about cobblestone production in the late thirteenth century.

If you don't know much about an area, Maryann Ray of Alaska Adventure Concierge suggests you contact a local travel planner before you begin your holiday. 'A good local guide will give you tips on excursion options and find out a bit about you and your interests before they offer you a bespoke itinerary,' she says.

On a private tour you won't find yourself shuffling your feet as Norman the Inquisitive asks yet another question about ancient cobblestones

7 Check for accessibility

There's no point in booking an excursion if it doesn't suit your age or abilities, so it's always better to ask in advance (the onboard shore excursions team are used to answering questions about wheelchair access).

John Sage launched Accessible Travel Solutions, offering wheelchair-friendly tours in popular locations around the world, based on his own experiences of travelling with limited mobility. 'When I travel,' says John, 'I want an authentic itinerary that allows me to experience everything first hand, with interior visits and local cuisine. My wheelchair makes this harder but not impossible.'

It's a good idea to give plenty of notice of your specific requirements so the tour operator can make appropriate arrangements for you, whatever you need. Some excursions may also require you to be in particularly good physical health, or may have height and weight restrictions for participants, so to be sure of booking a tour that you'll be able to enjoy fully, it's wise to check everything before signing up.



The onboard excursions team have plenty of shore info at their fingertips

Choose a fun shore excursion that all the family will love



Sometimes it's good to explore a port on your own

8 Calculate your travel time
 After a couple of days at sea, everyone is keen to get off the ship and explore. However, many major ports are 'gateways' to the famous local landmarks, and it's easy to spend hours in stuffy coaches before you reach your chosen destination. For example, a Paris day trip from Le Havre involves four hours on a coach, while Civitavecchia – gateway to Rome – requires a two-and-a-bit-hour bus ride. With the exception of Sydney, many Australian ports are also quite a long way from the local cities. Excursions to famous inland destinations can be inspiring, but if coach travel isn't for you, local trips may be more up your street.

Your onboard crew are a great authority on how to avoid tourist traps – and which cafes have the best wi-fi

9 Ask the crew
 If you wait until you're at sea to plan your port days, then you have one of the most knowledgeable resources at your fingertips – your ship's crew. All cruise lines offer shore excursion specialists to help you maximise your time ashore. But don't overlook other crew members, who often accompany tours as a representative of the ship, and have been to the ports more times than they've cooked their own dinner. Your onboard crew are also a great authority on how to avoid tourist traps, and for knowing which cafes have the best wi-fi for visitors.

10 Please yourself
 Finally, there's another option that's well worth considering: don't go on a tour at all. Instead, spend the day totally your way – sipping a cappuccino in a seafront cafe, nipping in and out of the shops, or taking a dip in the sparkling sea. Sometimes a day casually exploring an exciting new place, *gelato* in hand, can be just as fulfilling as trooping round another church, however venerable, or bruising your nether regions on an adrenaline-fuelled watersports adventure tour. ●