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HOW TO

Meet the captain

Cruising is always a sociable affair, and ships are the perfect place to make new friends. But how can you engineer an encounter with the ultimate onboard VIP?

Daniel Edwards finds out...



Every cruise ship has plenty of crew to make sure you enjoy your holiday. You're bound to meet many of them on your trip, but let's be honest – there's one above all others that you'd really like to hang out with. Wearing more gold stripes than any other officer on board, he or she has a hugely demanding job, so it's no wonder that speaking to them isn't easy. But it's not impossible. Whether you simply want to say hello, ask a question, or deliver the old 'who's driving the ship if you're talking to us?' line, we've got nine top tips to help you get an audience with the captain on your next cruise...

1 Meet & greet

The Captain's Welcome Reception is a time-honoured cruising tradition that every line offers in one form or another. As Cunard's Captain Aseem Hashmi points out, 'The official cocktail party is a great way of having a chat with the captain, and at the same time getting a photo of all the guests.'

On bigger ships, this event is usually tied in with formal night, so everyone will look their best in the pictures. Some seasoned cruisers have this technique down to a fine art. A passenger

on Independence of the Seas once showed me an album featuring him with every captain he'd ever cruised with, starting in the 1970s on Royal Caribbean's first ship.

2 Book a tour

Bridge tours are becoming increasingly popular, and offer a fascinating behind-the-scenes experience. Princess Cruises' 'Ultimate Ship Tour' gives guests access to all kinds of normally off-limits areas, including the engine control room and even the ship's funnel, ending on the bridge. Official tours aren't cheap, but they're a great way to occupy a sea day and grab some time with the ship's officers.

On the river, where things are less formal, it's even easier. Emerald Waterways' Captain Remi Bouin says that on his ship, the wheelhouse is part of the sun deck, and he often enjoys chatting with passengers and showing them round if they're interested.

3 Tie the knot

OK, not everyone will go this far to guarantee face time with the man in gold braid, but holding your wedding on board is sure to make for a memorable cruise. British couple Joanne and Nigel Byrne were married by Captain Luko Vojvoda aboard P&O's Arcadia

last year. 'Captain Luko was very generous with his time, sharing a toast and some wedding cake as he told us about his time at sea,' says Joanne. 'To be married by the captain in full ceremonial dress was a real honour.'

Married already? No problem – you can still ask if the captain might officiate at a renewal of your vows.

4 Loyalty pays

If you're invited to a loyalty club event, the captain will probably make an appearance, and possibly even a short speech. But it's no good standing at the back. Arrive as early as you decently can – then you'll be able to hobnob with senior crew as you wait for the event to start. If you've sailed with a particular captain before, there's your opening gambit (officers love reminiscing, just as guests do).



Arcadia's Captain Luko Vojvoda made a big day truly special for UK couple Nigel and Joanne Byrne



Fancy sharing a cuppa with the captain on the bridge?

6 Be sociable

The crew are always looking for ways to make a cruise memorable, so chat with all ranks, let them know if you're celebrating a special day, and say you'd love to meet the captain. You'll be amazed what they can do on your behalf – especially if you pal up with the cruise director's team: it's their job to make sure you keep smiling.

7 An invitation to dinner

The social summit aboard any cruise ship, the Captain's Table is a place of mystique. You may think you have to be in the top rank of the line's loyalty club, or staying in the most lavish suite. But just letting it be known to Guest Services, or to the captain with a written note, that you would like to dine with him or her, can be effective. Give the captain a reason to want to dine with you, and that coveted invitation could be on its way.

8 Just ask...

Some cruise lines, such as Disney, run events for guests to ask questions and get the captain's autograph. Royal Caribbean and P&O offer Q&A sessions, while on Emerald Waterways, guests are introduced to the captain at the first port talk. Watch the daily planner for similar events – and if it's not clear whether the captain will be appearing, call in at Guest Services, and just ask.

9 Less is more

Luxury cruises usually come with a more personalised service, so for more time with the captain, book a high-end voyage with fewer guests. Windstar's six vessels, each with fewer than 350 guests, have a unique 'open bridge' policy, so anyone can visit when the ship is at sea, and there's even special coffee, called, naturally, Bridge Blend. ☪

5 Rise and shine

On a cruise ship there are two good reasons to get up early: you'll secure a sun lounger by the pool, and there's the chance of a pre-breakfast rendezvous with the captain. Sea day mornings are best, as there are no docking manoeuvres to keep the skipper on the bridge. Modern captains like to stay fit, so you may spot yours taking an early run.



Captain Hashmi of Queen Mary 2 looks forward to meeting his passengers

THE CAPTAIN'S STORY

Captain Aseem Hashmi, of Cunard's QM2, recalls his most memorable guests

Last summer we were delighted to welcome a party of American D-Day veterans on board. Known as the 'Greatest Generation', their average age was 98. It was truly enlightening to converse with them and listen to their stories. Most of them had sailed on the original Queen Mary, after she was converted into a troop carrier. They partied late into the night, 'making up for lost time,' as they told me. I was impressed that none of them had forgotten their army training, even after 75 years, and when I was introduced to them, they all stood to attention and saluted me. I found that deeply humbling.