



THOU SHALT HAVE AN EVEN BETTER CRUISE IF YOU FOLLOW THESE RULES RELIGIOUSLY

By Debbi K. Kickham
Images courtesy of Holland America Line

Private in-suite dinners. Couples massages. Pillow menus and plush bedding. Ballroom dancing classes. These are just some of the posh perks that cruises offer you. Most cruise lines have always offered unforgettable experiences – for example, you can dine to your heart's content in fabulous restaurants and, unlike real life, *never* receive the bill. But nowadays, the envelope has been pushed, especially on upscale, luxury cruise lines such as Seabourn, Silversea, Regent Seven Seas and Crystal. Fantasy, thrills-of-a-lifetime, upper-crust adventures and red-carpet treatment await today's sophisticated cruisers, proving that you don't have to be rich to enjoy Trump-like travel.

Here are my Ten Commandments to make the most of your cruise and add hours of pleasure to your aquatic itinerary. Since I have taken scores of cruises around the world, I offer you here what I believe is the insider's guide to make every cruise even more enjoyable.

1). Thou shalt dine *a deux*.

The great thing about cruising is that it is the norm to travel with a friend, relative or especially, your significant other. That said, a cruise is all about spending private time together and getting to know each other better. Request a table-for-two in the main dining room, dine inside your cabin, or even on your verandah (if you have one), where the sea and sky surround you. For more intimacy, request a table-for-two in one of the specialty restaurants that many cruise lines offer nowadays, usually at no charge or at an inexpensive per-person fee. (This is a great way to get marquee food at matinee prices.) Don't forget to kiss and canoodle between courses, and remember, on a cruise ship, desserts are *supposed* to be sinful. (Another great thing about cruise ships – you can order a couple of desserts at each meal and taste-test them all!)

I always, always, always, custom-order all kinds of cuisine on ships in order to indulge in special treats. It involves simply letting the cruise line know of your pre-boarding requests, meeting with the Executive Chef when you're onboard, or asking the Maitre D' the night before you want your request. Cruise ships want to please you – and that means they will create special foods for you – usually at no extra cost. Go ahead, and request low-calorie chicken cacciatore, ratatouille, lobster Thermidor, caviar, or a favourite recipe from home. Something to celebrate – a birthday, anniversary, or business success – ask to chef to concoct your favourite cake as a surprise. It's yet another magical memory which will make your cruise all the more merrier.

2). Thou shalt spa.

Spa time on board – especially on “at-sea” days – is always welcomed and enjoyed. Who doesn't love a rubdown? If you're sailing with your sweetheart, by all means book a couple's massage where you can enjoy the experience side-by-side. Bring your favourite massage oil from home, if you want to assure yourself of your preferred fragrance. If you're visiting the pool's outdoor hot tub call room service and have them deliver hot fudge sundaes to you at the tub. It's deliciously different!

3). Thou shalt be lazy.

Cruises are designed so you don't have to lift a finger. If there's butler service in your stateroom, you can ask yours to unpack your luggage or stock your refrigerator. It's one of those rare times when you should be sybaritic. So go ahead sleep late, relax by the pool and order room service – and pizza – at 3am. Every day is the proverbial “seventh day” when you should rest. If you're an avid film buff bring along your favourite DVDs to laze about and watch movies if that's your desire.



4). Thou shalt also be active.

Most cruise lines offer oceans of exercise options: an outdoor jogging path, indoor gym, Pilates instruction, ballroom-dancing, slow and disco dancing in romantically-lit lounges, strolls on moonlit decks . . . everything short of walking the plank. If you are travelling with your significant other – and you are married – one really fun thing to do is to have a vow renewal ceremony. My husband and I have done this several times, on ships all over the world. It's a great way to remind yourself of your partner's positive qualities, and why you got married in the first place. Most ships offer vow renewal ceremonies complete with champagne, cake, flowers, and of course – a photographer to record the lovely event, carried out by the captain, of course.

5). Thou shalt enjoy your suite.

If you book a mass-market cruise on a ship that holds thousands of people, your suite will be small and pleasant, but not luxurious. If you book a premium suite on an upscale cruise line, you'll typically find upgraded amenities such as in-room DVD players; free movies; and silk hangers and drawer liners etc. You'll usually also find a couch, dining area, small refrigerator, desk, binoculars (for star-gazing and moon-watching), fresh floral bouquets, fruit baskets, turndown chocolates and fluffy robes and slippers. No matter your room, bring framed photos from home. Before you go, you should also purchase a travel diary and make an entry every day of your cruise.

Your stateroom is also tailor-made for entertaining – as in throwing a party. After you meet fabulous people onboard, invite them to your cabin for pre-dinner cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, and just have room service cater it all. Or *don't* have a party! Believe it or not, we know a foie gras loving pair of food fanatics, and on their recent cruise with us, they had a nightly, standing order of foie gras delivered before dinner to their cabin.



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6). Love thy sleep.

Today, most cruise ships have awakened to the fact that they needed to offer more sumptuous bedding. A good night's sleep – especially with your loved one next to you – and spontaneous intimacy are lusted-after luxuries that you should definitely enjoy on any cruise ship. So is a pre-dinner nap. You'll be spoiled by sleeping beauties: feather beds, high-thread-count cotton sheets, fluffy European goose-down duvets.

7). Thou shalt steal stolen moments.

On cruise ships, sweethearts can steal themselves away for unexpected pleasures and new discoveries, fore and aft and on shore. Follow the example of some of the savviest passengers we know. They forego booking the ship's excursions, and simply disembark and hire a private cab driver right outside the ship to take them, stress-free, away from the masses to all of the top sightseeing spots. Just make sure to stash extra dollars for this privilege.

If you really want to do something special offshore, speak to the ship's onboard Guest Services department to see if they can act as concierge to create a special event just for you. You might want to dine at a special restaurant, or see a particular play, opera or historical site. For the right price, Guest Services can make just about anything happen. Sometimes it doesn't take any money at all, only creativity.

8) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's Samsonite.

In other words, pack these must-have items for your rendezvous: your favourite DVDs; digital camera; eyeshades so you can nap during daylight hours; gorgeously scented room potpourri s and a bottle of fragrant oil and long scent sticks. We also travel with Post-It notes to create our own "Do Not Disturb" just to make sure we don't get accidentally wakened. Don't forget your nicest outfits and best jewellery; dressing up for dinner – and being photographed – is a must-do experience.

9). Thou shalt create surprises.

Surprises are always a good idea and you might tip your stewardess to pick up some roses and do a "rose petal trail" in your stateroom one night, as a romantic twist. Some ships even have "packages" that you can purchase, which might include strawberries, chocolate and champagne.

Shipboard surprises can turn memories into magic, faster than you can say "starboard".

10). Send your luggage packing.

Why bother with the hassle and inconvenience of lugging your luggage around? Instead, use a service such as Luggage Forward, which works with all the cruise lines and services clients around the world. "People want to make sure their bags are there at the ship, waiting for them," says co-founder Zeke Adkins. Two bags of up to 50lbs each (around 22.5kgs), shipped from the USA to New Zealand, for example costs US\$310 each. Each bag receives up to US\$500 in insurance and all customs clearances. www.Luggageforward.com.

At the end of your sailing, if you've had plenty of merriment, your cruise companion just might tell you those three little words. No, not, "I love you." But, "Let's book another!" 🍷

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