To Cruise, or Not To Cruise

by Dave Rupel

Until summer 2007, I had never gone on a cruise – and never wanted to. I was convinced it would either be filled with cranky retirees, or a big gay floating bathhouse. Neither version interested me. I told my partner I wouldn't consider it unless another couple went with us.

Lo and behold, two friends of ours, a couple, spontaneously booked an Atlantis cruise on the Mediterranean Sea – traveling to Spain, Italy, and Greece. And within a week, so had we.

I won't lie. It was freaking fantastic! One of the best vacations I've ever had. So if you're thinking about a cruise, here are the top ten things I learned.

1. It's a great way to sample new destinations. Yes, each visit is short, and the daytrips are crammed full of highlights so you can get a taste of everything. But that's good. Personally, I don't get enough vacation time to spend weeks at a time in one place. And there's still so much of the world I want to see, this was a great way to experiment.

2. Be prepared to be surprised. I'd heard for years about the great gay destination of the island of Ibiza. Frankly, it was the worst place we experienced. The only people at the clubs were from the boat, and the bus ride to the beach was hot and smelly (and not in a good way.)

But Ibiza was the only disappointment. Barcelona was magical, seeing the ancient Coliseum in Rome was breathtaking, and Athens – which I'd assumed was big and dirty – was spectacular. Of course, the true gem was the Greek island of Santorini, possibly the most beautiful place I've ever seen.

3. Book extra days on either end of the cruise. Our cruise started in Barcelona and ended in Athens. Our friends and I booked an extra day in each city. It's a long flight to Europe, and if you can give your body an extra day to adjust to the time change, it's very helpful. It also gives you a day to ramp up into vacation mode, while you start to absorb and delight in European culture.

4. Learn a little bit of a foreign language before you go. We traveled to three countries with three different languages. Of course, you're never going to be able to master all three, but between the four of us traveling, we spoke moderate Spanish and a little Italian and Greek. While most destinations have people who speak English, the locals love it when we tried to communicate in their language.

5. Don't let the unexpected rattle you. Perhaps one of the reasons I didn't enjoy Ibiza was that I lost a crown on the dance floor. (A dental crown, not a tiara.) It came out in my gum, so upon our return to the ship, the very dedicated ship workers explained to me how to go to town the next morning and ask for the Spanish version of Polygrip. Trying to explain Polygrip still brings a smile to my face.

6. Enjoy your time on the boat. Atlantis presents almost constant entertainment on the ship – enjoy it. From top level entertainers like Belinda Carlisle and Charo (refer to Rule 2 – Charo was hilarious and an amazing guitar player), to gay comics such as Alec Mapa and Bruce Vilanch, to drag queens like Edie and Dixie, the Tupperware lady – the fun never stopped.

7. But wait – there's more! In addition to the official performances, there were a variety of other activities: bingo, a casino, an art auction, a rock wall, a gym, a spa, volleyball, miniature golf, ping pong, plus poolside games led by the funny and fantastic cruise director, Malcolm. The best: A "Project Runway" spoof where guests had to use whatever they could find deckside to create "fashion." Let's just say, bananas were featured prominently.

8. There's plenty of sex. My partner and I are monogamous, but if you're single, or in an open relationship, there are plenty of people who are happily looking. There's a great t-dance on the second day to let you state your preference. Everyone gets dog tags. You get a red sticker if you're monogamous, yellow sticker if you might be looking, and green, if all systems are go!

9. Six pack abs not a requirement. One fear I had was that the ship would be full of muscle bound Gods, and I'd never want to take my shirt off. Yes, there was plenty of eye candy, but the majority on the boat were guys in there 30s and 40s and just regular guys.

10. Eat at large tables for formal meals. In the main dining room, there are tables of every size. We lucked out the first night, when the four of us were seated at a table for twelve. The next eight people who walked in were randomly assigned to eat with us. We met more great people that way, of all ages, from all over the country, and never did we experience any attitude. (Well, maybe a little on the last night, but I attribute that to everyone being so pleasantly exhausted.)

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