

● The *Marco Polo* is popular with groups and offers an intimate, traditional cruise.



Finding the right cruise for your group

Forget the pre-conceptions and see why an ocean cruise holiday offers it all, no matter the make-up of your group. Rob Yandell explains.

Isometimes meet people who tell me they don't like cruising. I can only assume they don't know about the innovations and choice now available to them. It's all the more baffling because there isn't a more exciting holiday right now. Don't miss out by making the assumption that cruising hasn't moved on; it most certainly has.

FORMAL OR RELAXED?

If you think you have to don a dinner suit and dine at the same table at the same time slot every evening, think again. Over the past decade there has been an explosion of choice. No longer do you have to adhere to times and rules; you are on holiday after all.

It is simply down to what the people in your group would prefer. You can enjoy an elegant affair aboard Cunard's *Queen Mary 2*, or opt for a smaller, more intimate ship such as the *Marco Polo*, which would also appeal to traditionalists.

Want something modern; try the freestyle cruising offered by Norwegian Cruise Line which has been a pioneer in more informal, relaxed holidays at sea. Or, if you want to stay clear of families, Celebrity Cruises provides the same level of freedom for a more discerning guest.

GET THE FOOD EXPERIENCE RIGHT

Life onboard a cruise ship very much revolves around food so make sure you get it right. Perhaps the people you organise for would like the flexibility of dining with who they like, when they like. It's not an alien concept on land so why should it be at sea?

As ships get bigger, so does the array of dining choices. Even the mid-size ships now have more restaurants to boast about, meaning meal times can suit your mood. The larger, main restaurants will usually be included in the price of the holiday, but if you want to upgrade your culinary experience, more ships now offer premium dining experiences (some from the world's leading celebrity chefs), where a small supplement will usually be well worth it. The only problem is they can be highly popular and you will need to ensure your group are aware that booking ahead is a good idea.

But perhaps there are some people within the group who would prefer to be assigned a table with the same diners each evening. There are usually two set times for sittings when this is the case and those who want to catch the show that evening will generally prefer the earlier sitting.

BE ENTERTAINED YOUR WAY

These days you will find top West End shows such as *Rock of Ages* and *Chicago* in huge theatres that would be more in-keeping with Shaftesbury Avenue than at sea.

Comedy clubs, piano bars, brilliant nightclubs with glow bowling, karaoke booths, casinos, live bands, you name it - there is something for everyone. Or how about watching a movie on the big screen under the stars?

Activities can go hand-in-hand with special interest cruises. *Strictly Come Dancing* cruises where you learn to dance and meet stars of the BBC show are now popular. But you can also opt to learn a language, improve your photography skills, organise card tournaments and more.

Lectures that can enlighten you before reaching a certain destination may appeal to your group, who might like to meet some of the leading writers and speakers who can provide both humour and inspiration.

Onboard surf simulators, rock climbing walls, basketball courts, golf nets, croquet on a pristine lawn, fantastic gyms and spas add to what you can do.

DO YOU WANT IT BIG OR INTIMATE?

Of course, the size of ship matters and it sometimes feels as if there is an unending trend towards huge, resort-style ships that can cater for thousands of passengers. I appreciate some might find this thought unappealing but remember that ships carrying thousands of passengers are built to cope with it. You can still find a quiet area to enjoy with a good book in hand.

The only problem I find with the bigger ships; you sometimes forget you're at sea, which I think is perhaps missing one of the points of a cruise holiday.

Royal Caribbean International's 'Freedom Class' ships can carry over 4,000 guests in total and offer a main dining room for over 2,000 people. We are talking seriously big here. But a ship this size does mean you get brilliant facilities, such as a miniature golf course and an ice skating rink. It will take you a day or two to get your bearings, but staff will always be on hand to point you in the right direction.

Norwegian Epic, *Carnival Breeze* and *MSC Fantasia* are more ships that can accommodate guests in their thousands and worth a look if this is the class of ship you're interested in.

At the other end of the scale, Saga operates the *Saga Pearl II* (446 passengers max), and *Saga Sapphire* (706 passengers max - see our article starting on page 26) which are much smaller in scale and for the over 55 market. No children, and no garish colour schemes to be seen here.



● Depending on the person, an upgrade to a balcony could be worth the extra.

Voyages of Discovery, part of the All Leisure Group that includes popular group brands such as Travelsphere, is also pushing the appeal of its smaller ships that can reach smaller ports.

AGE GROUPS - WHAT TO THINK ABOUT

Cruise holidays are very popular with the over 55s market but the net is widening. With more ships there is now a cruise holiday for all age groups.

Companies like Saga, Cunard, P&O Cruises and Fred. Olsen are still hugely popular with mature travellers (Fred.

Olsen has been voted Best Cruise Line by Group Leisure readers for the past three years).

The likes of Norwegian Cruise Line, Carnival, and Royal Caribbean now have massive appeal for younger people and especially families with children.

Putting thought into the type of holiday your group is looking for is important. If you don't want to battle with children by the pool as they fly through the latest water slide above you, stay clear of cruise ships that attract families. Speak to a specialist cruise agent or operator who will be able to advise you. Do not simply buy on price and the ship's itinerary - you could regret it.

What I have noticed are the first class facilities for children of all ages. Families are well catered for on ships from companies such as Norwegian Cruise Line, Disney Cruise Lines, Carnival and MSC Cruises.

On the flip-side of the argument, if you organise for party animals, a quiet piano bar and an after-dinner lecture is probably not going to tick the right boxes, whether you've always wanted to cruise the Caribbean or not.

WHAT TYPE OF CABIN SHOULD YOU BOOK?

Cabins, or state rooms as they are often called these days, come in a variety of sizes and standards. Starting prices could well refer to an inside cabin, meaning you have to pay extra for a port hole, then a big window, or a nice balcony. There is no doubt that having a balcony adds to the sense of space and is a nice facility to have, but you have to weigh up whether or not it is worth the extra expense considering the amount of time you might spend in your room. If a person in your group enjoys their own company and would spend time watching the views from their own room then a balcony could well be worth the upgrade.

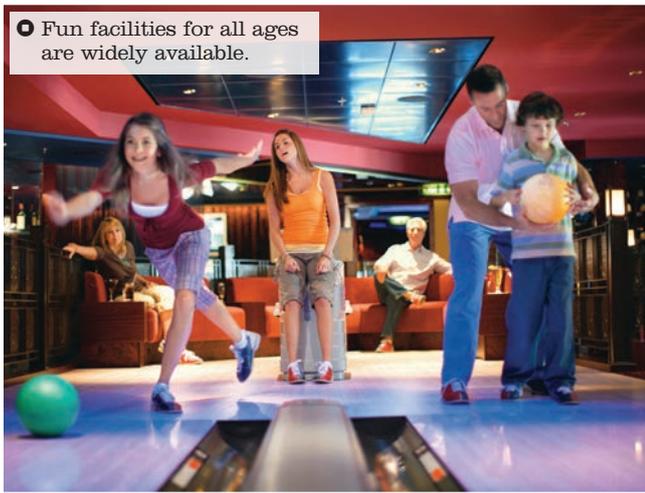
BEING A GROUP ONBOARD

Do you want to organise cocktail parties, perhaps games or exclusive excursions? Most things are possible. But perhaps once onboard, your group will want to mainly disburse and do their own thing. You have options here and as a group you can benefit from extras thrown in as more cruise lines tune in to the groups market.



● Theatres that wouldn't be out of place in the West End.

● Fun facilities for all ages are widely available.



← As you would expect, free places are offered depending on the size of your party. Some cruise lines will include free coach transfers, welcome parties and exclusive use of lecture theatres too.

SEA DAYS VS. ISLAND HOPPING

If you want to immerse yourselves into a destination, a cruise might not be for you. Shore excursions offer only a taster with just a few hours usually available once you have docked. It's even more limiting if you have to take a tender to land.

You will also have to consider how close ports are to a city. Your cruise schedule might include a trip to Rome, but the port of Civitavecchia is about an hour and a half's drive away. It's times like these when getting an organised excursion is the best option; when travel logistics can be complicated. That said, sometimes letting your group do their own thing can mean more flexibility and less cost. It's worth doing your homework so you can make recommendations pre-cruise. Popular excursions should be booked before your holiday or you may be disappointed if your first choice is fully booked.

For me, one of the pleasures of ocean cruising is a sea day. Of course, you can stay onboard even when you're in port, but there is something highly enjoyable about being forced to relax and enjoy the facilities. A balanced mix of the odd sea day amidst ports of call can be a good combination. Too many days at sea might send some stir crazy.

If sea days are appealing, consider a transatlantic cruise or a re-position cruise (e.g. when a ship finishes its summer season

in the Mediterranean before travelling to the Caribbean). It's at times like these you can find some brilliant deals.

HOW CAN YOU GET A TASTE FOR CRUISING?

There are two ways you can get more of a feel for this type of holiday before committing yourselves with both feet.

Companies and tour operators now often give group travel organisers ship tours, which include presentations and lunch. It allows you to meet the team, see the state rooms and facilities whilst a ship is docked at a domestic port.

Or consider booking a value short break cruise. Why not replace one of your short breaks on land by taking a cruise? Three nights is a nice introduction to what you can expect and you can usually depart from a convenient UK port.

WHY TAKE A CRUISE?

Not only are cruise ships now some of the most innovative resorts anywhere, you will find some of the best service onboard cruise ships, and staff work very hard. Tips are sometimes included in your price, sometimes they are added to the daily charge - make sure you check.

You can avoid the airport and depart from a UK port, of course. Plus, the value you get from knowing your meals and entertainment are covered in the price of your holiday. Some cruise lines will charge you in Sterling so there is no need to worry about losing out if the pound is weak against the euro or dollar.

A really nice idea is to 'cruise and stay', which is when you combine a land-based stay before or after your cruise.

Despite the headlines and the issues that have affected the cruise industry over the past couple of years, when it comes to health and safety, cruising adheres to the highest standards. Don't be put off by concerns you may have in this regard.

There are good standard three-star cruises to be had or ultra-luxury ships that can even be chartered for groups. I haven't touched on river cruising in this article; we'll leave that for another time. But whether you travel by sea or river, leave the assumptions and pre-conceived ideas at home and embrace a holiday they'll all thank you for organising. ■

● In recent years, it seems as if ships just keep getting bigger.

