



Taking the kids: A kid's-eye view of cruising

By Eileen Ogintz

What's not to like -- from a kid's perspective anyway.

Carnival Cruise Lines is adding WaterWorks aqua parks on its Carnival Inspiration and Imagination "fun ships."

The way they see it, a cruise ship is vacation heaven, better even than a theme park.

There's all the food -- and free room service. "You'll be stuffed when you leave," says 11-year-old Matthew Moris.

There are all the other kids onboard (more than a million children cruise every year, reports the Cruise Lines International Association, more than 1,000 on each Disney ship) and organized kids' and teen activities from morning until night. "You'll find a friend on the first day," promises Brooke Abzug, 10, who likes the shipboard scavenger hunts staged by the kids' clubs.

There's the freedom to roam as they please, sun by the pool, hit the arcade, watch a movie, grab a slice of pizza or an ice cream cone. Alyssa Baron, 15, says she would never be permitted to be on her own as much at home or at a resort. "When I come in to our cabin, my parents are already asleep!"

"You don't have to be with your parents, except maybe at dinner," said Allison Clayton, 12.

Add sunshine, frothy non-alcoholic drinks, big waterslides, rock climbing walls, new places to explore, private islands (for you and 2,000 or so of your closest friends) and an adventure or three (how about zip-lining across a rain forest or climbing to the top of a waterfall in Jamaica) and you're good to go.

Let's not forget the always-smiling stewards who not only clean up your mess and make your beds, but also leave behind animals fashioned out of towels. It's easy to see why kids have become such cruise fans.

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Clayton, Abzug and Moris -- all from South Florida -- were chosen to be on a panel I moderated recently in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, at cruise3sixty, the cruise industry's annual conference for travel agents and cruise lines, which was sponsored by the Cruise Lines International Association. The kids in the group, who ranged in age from 7 to 15, were all cruise veterans -- some had sailed 10 times (thanks to someone in the family in the travel industry) and clearly knew what they were talking about.

Their charge: Give the grown-ups a kid's-eye-view of cruising. They weren't the least bit phased by the more than 1,000 people in the audience. A cruise, they agreed, beats a theme park any day. At a theme park, "There's not as much to do, or as much good food," said Mathew.

The cruise lines, including the most upscale, for their part, are doing all they can to keep these young cruisers happy. They know -- just as any adult who has ever traveled with a child knows -- that if the kids are happy, the adults will have a good time too, especially when they don't have to pay every time a child wants a snack. That's why this year you'll see more kid- and teen-friendly shore excursions, shipboard water playgrounds and theatrical productions, enhanced programming and facilities.

- # Royal Caribbean has just announced Nickelodeon-themed cruises starting this summer on Freedom of the Seas, which kids love because of the FlowRider surf simulator and H2O Zone water playground.

- # Carnival, which expects to carry 600,000 kids this year, is adding WaterWorks aqua parks (complete with 300-foot-long corkscrew water slides, water spray park and double-lane racing slides) as part of its \$250 million "Evolution of Fun." Look for them first on the Carnival Inspiration and Imagination "fun ships," while a new "Circle C" program is unveiled on the line for 12 to 14 year olds. (Look for deals that start at \$199 for the third person in a stateroom.)

- # Norwegian Cruise Line has more connecting staterooms -- penthouses to small cabins -- than any other cruise line. Families also like the "Freestyle Dining" option offered in every NCL onboard restaurant. Now there's no need to get dressed up or eat with others, if you don't want to.

Disney, which provides day care (at an extra fee) for infants and toddlers too young for the organized kids clubs, debuts the stage adaptation of "Toy Story" aboard the Disney Magic this spring, complete with a new eight-song score and a nearly 9-foot-tall Rex the dinosaur, as the Magic sails from the West Coast to Mexican ports of call.

Regent Seven Seas offers an "Ambassadors of the Environment" youth program on certain Alaska and Tahiti voyages that was created by Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of Jacques Cousteau. The program, designed to provide families, through the use of hands-on activities, the awareness and skills needed to build environmental sustainability into their lives. (Ask about third person sail-free deals in Tahiti.)

A record number of ships will sail Europe and the Mediterranean this year and more families will decide that, despite the weak U.S. dollar, there is no easier, or more economical, way to show kids the great sites than from the deck of a cruise ship. Your food, lodging and transportation costs are all paid for in U.S. dollars. There's a pool, the food is familiar and there are plenty of organized kids' activities. Princess Cruises and Holland America Line will each have six ships overseas this summer.

The key to a successful cruise vacation? Choose the right ship for your family. (Hear that grandparents? Visit www.cruisesatcost.com.) Make sure there are programs for your kid's age group. (You don't want to get onboard with a 2-year-old and discover all of the kids programs are for kids 3 and over, nor do you want to see that your tween is too old for one group, too young for the teen club. A professional cruise consultant is a good resource.)

If you can, splurge on a second stateroom for older kids. (You'll all appreciate the extra bathroom and you can book them a less expensive inside cabin.) And especially in Alaska and Europe, book shore excursions ahead. The best ones (trekking on a glacier, touring the Sistine Chapel) often get full before the ship sails. A tip: Remember you don't have to book a pricy excursion at every port.

There's just one downside to showing kids the cruising world, said 7-year-old Brandon Abzug. "You have to go home when it's over."

"I wish I could live on a cruise ship," said Allison Clayton. E-mail to a friend E-mail to a friend

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com, where Eileen Ogintz welcomes your questions and comments.)