



Is a World Cruise for Me?

By Rita M. Ippoliti

People who have been on world cruises often post their daily journals online. Those of us who read them often fantasize about taking such an elaborate trip. What's holding us back? Two good reasons: Being away from home and loved ones for such a long time, and the daunting cost of such a voyage.

But the possibility of a world cruise might not be as far-fetched as you think, even for someone with an average household income. If this piques your interest, here are some things to consider.

Having the Right Expectations

A grand world voyage generally runs three months or longer and visits 40 or more ports, many of them in far-flung areas of the world. Unlike a regular vacation cruise, a grand voyage often visits unusual regions with unfamiliar cultures, peoples and traditions. The educational value of a world voyage alone is worth the cost. Travelers often report being forever changed as a result of such a trip.

Most cruise lines kick up the amenities a notch on these expanded voyages. From dining to special activities and expert lecturers, a grand voyage provides opportunities for learning, socializing and discovery that you can't get on a regular cruise. There are more sea days on longer voyages, providing ample time for enrichment programs and classes -- and for forging lasting friendships with fellow passengers.

Experienced world cruisers often say their biggest mistake was initially trying to pack too much activity into each day. Because they didn't pace themselves, they began running out of steam just when they were getting to the ports they looked forward to the most.

To take best advantage of a world voyage, let the expanded length give you time to stop and smell the roses (or sea air). This mindset is very different from the average seven-day Caribbean cruise, where you have a finite amount of time and want to cram as much into it as possible. A longer cruise allows you the luxury of truly relaxing. You

don't have to force yourself to stay awake for that show you wanted to see. If you're tired, you can retire to your stateroom without guilt. Chances are that show will repeat later in the voyage anyway.

Is a "Grand Voyage" Really for Me?

A world cruise -- or really any cruise of more than a month -- is not for everybody. Some people just can't imagine being on a ship that long. Are you one of them? Here are a few suggestions to answer this question before you pay a fortune only to find yourself miserable onboard.

Start with a Segment

If you are limited in time or money, or if only a portion of the itinerary appeals to you, no problem. Any cruise of more than 45 days is generally sold in segments as well as in its entirety. This will usually involve a long flight, or perhaps even two, but at least you have the option of taking a couple of days to explore the embarkation or disembarkation city.

A segment of a world cruise could run 15 days or longer. For example, Holland America's 2008 World Cruise offers segment options like a 37-day Fort Lauderdale to Sydney itinerary; a 27-day Sydney to Hong Kong segment; a 30-day Hong Kong to Istanbul segment; and a 28-day Istanbul to Fort Lauderdale segment. Other options are offered as well.

Read World Cruisers' Blogs

Many world cruisers in recent years have posted online blog journals, by posting to message boards such as CruiseMates, or creating independent web logs for their families and friends to read. Checking cruise message boards will often yield links to such blogs. You can "virtually" cruise along with these world voyagers and benefit from their insights and experiences.

You can often leave messages at these blog addresses, asking specific questions. I find that reading other cruisers' blogs helps me get a feel for what a longer voyage is like and the problems that crop up, so that hopefully I can avoid those issues when I finally get to take such a trip.

Anticipate and Prepare for Possible Bumps in the Road

Maybe you would like to take a long voyage, but worry about possible pitfalls. Let's take a closer look at some of these:

I Don't Have Enough Money

For what you get, many world cruises are a bargain -- relatively speaking. Considering that most people plan such cruises for a few years, making financial planning a part of your goal means cost doesn't have to be a big stumbling block. Just plan for the cruise

a couple of years out and then start scrimping and saving. Give up some daily extravagances, like jewelry purchases, or that new car when the old one is running fine. You'd be surprised how easy it can be to accumulate the money necessary for a longer cruise.

Princess is advertising prices as low as \$19,000 for an inside cabin on its 2008 world cruise. Holland America offers similar pricing. While that may seem expensive, the fact is world cruises offer some of the lowest per diems (or daily rates) of any cruise.

If money is a consideration, book a cheaper accommodation -- or better still, book the lowest grade guarantee. Chances are a world voyage won't be fully booked, so your odds of getting a free upgrade are pretty good -- or at least better than on shorter cruises.

Even if you get "stuck" in that inside cabin, is that so bad? You shouldn't be spending much time in the cabin anyway, and having the inside cabin will only encourage you to get out and mingle with your fellow passengers. After all, the view on that outside deck is just as good as the one from a balcony.

Won't Onboard Expenses Drive Up the Cost?

It depends on your tastes. True, the basic cruise fare is only one element of the total expense, so you have to plan for such things as onboard charges, gratuities and shore tours. These are necessary elements of such a voyage, and you'd be better off scrimping to save up for them than missing out once onboard. You wouldn't want to go all the way to Australia and not see a bit of the country, now would you?

On the subject of shore excursions, it might not be necessary to do even a substantial part of your touring via ship's excursions. They are very convenient, and most can be a good bargain, but often with a little advance research you can do far better on your own, both in price and in tour quality.

Consider that on a ship tour, you share the tour with a busload of others. The more people, the more delays. The tour guides keep a tight schedule to hit all of the sights advertised. If a few people go missing at any stop, others have to go looking for them. Put a few delays like this together, and it's easy to envision being rushed through sights in the interest of getting everyone back to the ship on time.

Organizing your own tours can be cheaper and you can focus on the sights you want to see. Since you don't have to accede to the needs of 40 other people, or take into account their mobility issues, you can enjoy far more leisurely tours and see more for your money.

But you have to do the research. Use the internet to research museums and other sites. Find out about local transportation options and "not to be missed" highlights of each port. It's all part of the planning process.

Onboard expenses work the same way. You can economize without jeopardizing the quality of your cruise. Do you really need to use the ship's internet at those exorbitant prices when you can use internet cafes in almost every port for a fraction of the cost?

Same with food and drinks: Do you have to order all those expensive drinks in the ship's bars? Coffee, tea, iced tea and tap water are free. Food in many varieties is available 24 hours a day. Why spend extra for specialty items when the standard fare is excellent?

Do you have to make extensive use of the spa? There are lots of physical things you can do onboard ship that are included in your basic cruise fare. This is not to say you should deny yourself any luxury onboard, but even on a strict budget, you can still have an excellent cruise without feeling deprived.

What if I get Seasick?

World cruises and other exotic voyages sail on a variety of oceans, some with reputations for being quite rough. Even if you are prone to seasickness, this is no reason to turn down a world cruise. Just plan for it. Make an appointment with your doctor beforehand and discuss the best remedies. Your doctor can likely prescribe something with minimal side effects that will allow you to be comfortable in the roughest conditions. Actually, most people report that the seas bothered them very little, since modern vessels have stabilizers that filter out the worst movement. Even if you are a worst-case scenario, taking an over-the-counter medication such as Bonine, or using a drug-free remedy such as Sea Bands (which work on the acupuncture theory) could be all you need to feel like your old self in no time.

I Don't Own Enough Clothes for such a Voyage!

I've always said I could pack for a 100+ day cruise using no more than four suitcases -- and that would include packing things other than clothes. Most vessels have reasonably priced laundry packages. These allow you to send out unlimited laundry for the duration of the cruise, and run several hundred dollars -- not an unreasonable amount for such a long voyage. If you are a "do-it-yourselfer," you can save money by using the ship's self-service laundromats. You can get the necessary change for washers and dryers at the Purser's desk. These laundry rooms also have ironing facilities -- something not permitted in your cabin due to the potential fire hazard.

As for formal wear, no one will be watching to see if you wore that same gown on the last formal night. No one will say, "She wore that blouse twice before." You don't need a ton of formal clothes. A few black skirts or pants and several dressy blouses will more

than suffice for the 30 or so formal nights you might encounter. And no rule says you need to observe every formal night. On some, you may wish to dine casual in the Lido and perhaps spend an evening relaxing in your cabin with a few good videos.

Summing Up

This article only scratches the surface of grand voyages and world cruises. Maybe you think you could never take one due to the cost. Maybe you think you could never tolerate being on a ship for so long. Either way, you still should consider it, even if the possibility might not become reality for many years yet. An extended cruise provides a unique opportunity to see much of the world in one trip, and the experiences of such a voyage will provide memories that will forever change your life.