



So often you need a vacation to recover from your vacation. On many occasions my husband and I have overdone it – speed-walking and subway-hopping to frantically complete our checklist of European sites. But sometimes what we need is a slower-paced vacation where all we have to do is show up.

You can be as relaxed or ambitious as you choose during a cruise vacation. Stay on the ship and soak in some rays or watch a theater performance. Gamble away your quarters or get pampered at the spa. Get involved in the ship's social activities, from cocktail-making and trivia contests to concerts and bingo.

You can also take advantage of the shore excursions offered by the cruise line or take off on your own to explore the cities of Europe. However, you will usually have only a few hours at each destination, so don't try to see everything. Think of your time at port as the chance to plan for future vacations. Shop, savor

the local cuisine or enjoy an activity like snorkeling or hiking. But, give yourself plenty of time to return to the boat ... it waits for no one!

Your choice for a cruise experience is virtually limitless given the variety of cruise lines, ships and itineraries available.

CRUISE EXPERIENCES

Large cruise lines, including Carnival, Royal Caribbean and Princess, are a great value. These lines cater to all age groups, offering programs for children and teens as well as nightlife for adults. The ships are floating cities with shopping, libraries, casinos, theaters, swimming pools, hot tubs and rooms for thousands of passengers. Some ships even feature water slides, rock-climbing walls and miniature golf courses.

For a more exclusive and expensive retreat, look into a luxury cruise line, such as Seabourn. Or, sail the ocean on a commercial yacht with Windstar. Much smaller ships mean fewer crowds and white-glove service. The meals, accommodations and entertainment are also of a higher caliber.

When booking, avoid surprises by knowing what your package includes. The rate typically covers your stateroom, meals in the main dining room and most on-ship entertainment. Meals in the dining room are excellent, so stay away from exclusive onboard restaurants if you're on a budget. Also note that sodas and alcoholic drinks, spa treatments, gambling and shore excursions are almost always extra.

It is usually customary to tip the wait staff, housekeeping and concierge at the end of your trip, which can add up on longer voyages. To cut costs, book the most basic room. You'll spend so little time there that you'll never notice if it's missing an ocean view. Just venture to the ship's decks for lapping waves as far as you can see.

PORTS OF CALL

Most European cruises last from four to 14 days with numerous ports of call along the way. The most difficult part of planning your trip will be picking just one itinerary!

Western Mediterranean – Eat tapas and visit Gaudi's masterpieces in Barcelona. Hike to the cupola of St. Peter's Cathedral, tour the ancient Roman Forum and cool down with gelato in Rome. Or, visit France's Côte d'Azur with stops in Cannes, Nice and Monaco. If you're an expert surfer, don't miss the waves at Praia do Guincho in Lisbon.

Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea – Cruise the canals of Venice. Travel back in time as you tour the Parthenon and Acropolis of Athens. In the Greek Isles, spend the day at one of Mykonos' beaches (there are more than 20 to choose from!) or enjoy the gastronomy of Santorini. Peruse Istanbul's Grand Bazaar and save time to visit the immense Hagia Sophia cathedral.

British Isles, Western Europe and Northern Europe – Learn how to perfectly pour Ireland's famous beer at the Guinness Brewery and Storehouse in Dublin. Tour Edinburgh Castle for an incredible view of the city that inspired J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" book series. And, add Iceland, Norway, Russia and The Netherlands to the list of countries you've visited.

A cruise may be just what you need to recover from the winter blues and life's stresses. Cruises are also a great solution to the barrage of family and friends wanting to visit you in Europe – no hosting, chauffeuring or needing to please everyone. So grab the sunscreen, set sail and let the sounds of ocean waves soothe you. Bon voyage! ■

