



Crazy cruise costs

Solo cruisers get dinged twice at port

By Anita Dunham-Potter
Travel columnist

Tripso.com

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Veteran cruiser Elliott Manning booked his Hawaiian dream cruise aboard Norwegian Cruise Lines' (NCL) Pride of Aloha. Manning travels solo all around the globe and is quite familiar with the single supplement charged by most cruise lines. This supplement is an adjustment to the published cruise fare that compensates the cruise line for the loss of double occupancy in the cabin. It can be quite high, as much as double the regular per-person rate. Manning doesn't like it, but he considers it a necessary evil: Just pay it and be done with it, he figures.

So you can imagine Manning's surprise when he glanced at his cruise bill and noticed not only the usual fee for the single supplement, but also two additional fare components, each totaling \$140. What the heck? Manning called his travel agent, who looked at a detailed invoice of Manning's fare and figured Manning had been charged double port fees. The agent contacted NCL and learned that it was no mistake: Under a new policy, NCL is now charging solo cruisers port charges not once but twice.

Manning was incensed.

"This is scamming the single traveler for more money," he said, when he contacted Tripso for help.

I contacted NCL and was told that the cruise line implemented the additional charge for solo travelers last summer.

Is this standard practice among cruise lines? No, but NCL isn't alone, either. According to Denver-area travel agent and avid solo cruiser Amber Blecker, Princess Cruises and Holland America Line also charge single cruisers additional port fees. Blecker's agency, CruiseResource.com, works with many solo travelers and regularly tracks the fees that cruise lines charge them. She notes that while NCL doubles the port charges for singles, Princess and Holland America base the port charge on the formula they use for the single supplement.

"If the single supplement is 150 percent, the port fees would be 150 percent, too," she explains.

What are port charges, anyway?

Elliott Manning wonders what all these port charges are and whether charging double fees is legal. The answer is yes. Why? Because these "port charges" aren't really port charges — or at least not as the term is commonly understood.

What most people think of as "port charges" — i.e., the taxes that foreign jurisdictions impose on arriving passengers — are itemized separately on the cruise bill. This practice came about a decade ago after a legal decision in Florida prohibited cruise lines from charging customers any fees beyond the advertised ticket price, *except for* the taxes and fees charged by a government agency. Manning's bill included a charge for such taxes — a charge that was properly listed once, not twice, in the "Taxes" section of the bill.

So what's that \$140 double-whammy on Manning's bill? They are "non-commissionable fares," a set of miscellaneous fees that are bundled into that advertised ticket price. The fees might include such port services as shore power, piloting and ground labor. These fees have nothing to do with government levies, and cruise lines are free to raise and lower them to reflect their costs. They can also charge solo travelers twice if they choose.

Travel agents hate these miscellaneous fees because they don't earn commissions on them. Agents also point out that while base cruise fares have remained steady in recent years, non-commissionable fares just keep going up — evidence, they say, that the cruise lines are creating a profit center at the agents' expense.

"There's no question that the non-commissionable fares are contributing a significant portion to the cruise lines' bottom line," says Blecker.

Cruise lines say they are raising fees simply because their costs are rising. But what *exactly* are those

costs? None of the cruise lines I spoke to would break down its non-commissionable fares completely. When I pressed them, they told me, "No comment."

"Because these fees are so nondescript, you don't know what they are for," says Stewart Chiron, a cruise industry expert who is nationally recognized as [The Cruise Guy](#). "Port charges are allegedly paid to ports and are based on per passenger, so why are solo cruisers being charged double? It doesn't make sense."

So, what's a solo cruiser to do?

Shop around. Compare single supplements and ask whether the bill includes double port charges. Check out [Blecker's agency Web site](#), which offers a free newsletter that tracks fees charged to solo cruisers. Also check out [SoloCruiser.com](#) and [SinglesCruise.com](#), which offer deals and services to help solo cruisers cut costs.

As for Elliott Manning, he says he'll keep cruising solo, but he plans to closely investigate cruise charges so he's never charged double port fees again.

Sound off! Do you have a comment, an idea, a complaint or a problem for Anita to solve? [Send her an e-mail](#) and you might find yourself in her next column.

Anita Dunham-Potter is a Pittsburgh-based travel journalist specializing in cruise travel. Anita's columns have appeared in major newspapers and many Internet outlets, and she is a contributor to Fodor's "Complete Guide to Caribbean Cruises 2006."

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