

Sail & save

Save big on that next family trip to Europe by cruisin'

BY EILEEN OGINTZ

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The guide at St. Peter's in Rome thought we were crazy. He'd never given a shorter tour, he declared.

I just nodded. Anyone who has ever toured Great Sites with kids - in this case my 13-year-old nephew and 10-year-old daughter - knows that there's just so much sightseeing they can take at one time before they start whining for a swimming pool, ice cream, a burger or other kids, preferably who speak English.

That's why so many parents and grandparents are opting to introduce their kids to Europe via cruise ship - more this summer than ever before, believes nationally known cruise broker Stewart Chiron, president of www.thecruisequy.com.

With the dollar so weak against the euro (it's as if you're paying at least 30% more for everything), a cruise paid for in American dollars can give families a lot more bang for their vacation buck across the ocean this year. Some travel Web sites, in fact, tout European cruises for under \$100 per person per day, even less for kids sharing cabins with two adults. Book early before ships sell out, advises Travelocity's Amy Ziff. She adds that these cruises are great venues for family reunions because there are activities, on board and off, to suit every age group.

"You won't get to immerse yourselves in the culture of each port, but you do get a taste, and it's a great way to expose the children to many world destinations on one trip," says Maryland mom Bee Miller, whose family liked cruising Europe so much they did it two summers in a row.

So many repeat Disney cruisers wanted to tour Europe that Disney Cruise Line will anchor its Magic abroad this summer for the first time, complete with special kid-friendly shore excursions. Youngsters can paint their own ceramic souvenirs in Palermo or take in a traditional Sicilian marionette show.

"The pace of the bookings has exceeded our expectations," says Disney Cruise spokesman Jason Lasecki (check www.disnycruiseline.com for special deals on transatlantic voyages).

Even those who aren't big cruise fans, like Miami TV photographer Mike Zimmer, are signing on. He's planning to introduce his 14-year-old and 12-year-old sons to Europe via ship this summer. "We'll go see the cities and then come back to our home base," he says. It will be a lot less stressful, he figures - no packing and unpacking, no checking in and out of hotels (not to mention paying for them in euros), racing to catch trains or navigating foreign cities. "I don't want to come home needing a vacation from my vacation," Zimmer says.

Or having spent more than he planned. That shouldn't happen when paying up front for a cruise, typically starting at \$100 a day per person (plus tips and taxes), and less for third and fourth passengers in the same cabin, cruise experts say. It's a good deal when you consider it includes lodging, meals, transportation and onboard entertainment, including supervised activities for kids and teens.

That means that parents and kids (especially teens) can get a much-needed break from one another after long days of sightseeing.

"You're with an English-speaking staff in an environment that is focused on families' needs," explains New England mom Janine Salvey, who has cruised Europe twice with family. Salvey's daughters made lasting friendships with teens they met on the ship.

Zimmer is counting on his boys making new friends. That shouldn't be difficult, as some lines expect to host hundreds of kids and teens on board.

These megaships promise the kids won't get bored with multiple pools, water slides, basketball courts and mini-golf, teen clubs, Internet access, the latest video games, movies and the chance to eat whenever they're hungry.

Even luxury lines, like Crystal and Holland America, are catering to families and expect as many as 100 children on board, often with grandparents leading the way and footing the bill.

"The good part is there's always something for the kids to do," said suburban Chicago grandmother Louise Richter, who has cruised Europe with her grandchildren as bar and bat mitzvah presents. "And their rooms get

cleaned."

Other pluses on a cruise: the same bed each night and plenty of familiar food. That's no small detail for parents and grandparents traveling with finicky young eaters unaccustomed to changing their environment every few days.

Touring Europe with kids, of course, is frustrating when you've booked expensive shore excursions and they drag their feet (see story below on smart planning).

There's no telling what the kids will enjoy or remember years later - the crepes in the tiny walled city of St. Paul-de-Vence near Nice; snickering about the ancient brothel in Pompeii; the soaring unfinished Barcelona cathedral, La Sagrada Familia, designed by Antoni Gaudi; squabbling with their cousins; animals crafted out of towels the steward left on their bed, or the souvenir you wouldn't let them buy.

Also, be prepared that a European cruise will be different from one in the Caribbean. "It's very busy," acknowledges Bee Miller.

Excursions can last 10 or more hours and may require early mornings, long drives to city centers and historic sites, and tours that last too long - from a kid's perspective, anyway.

It wasn't fun shepherding the children through Pompeii and Rome when it was sweltering, mediating their bickering on the way to a perfume factory in France or searching for something my nephew would eat in Barcelona. But I'm glad I took them. We didn't see everything. We didn't even try. I threw out the guidebook and let the kids lead the way.

Perhaps that's why, five years after that cruise, my nephew, now a college freshman, is already talking about his junior year abroad.

GETTING THE BEST BARGAINS

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YOUR GUIDE TO SIGHTSEEING SANS MELTDOWNS

Face it. The kids would rather be anywhere other than touring churches and museums, especially when it's hot and crowded and it takes an hour or more to get there. Make sure to bring along something to amuse them en route and stuff to snack on. Also consider these tips:

EXPLORE YOUR OPTIONS ON SHORE

Every ship offers a multitude of shore excursions in each port. These tours are convenient (you won't have to worry about getting lost or missing the ship) but often expensive. Before booking, do some research online and ask yourself the following questions.

If you have a travel agent you trust, ask for help. Ciao Bambino (www.ciaobambino.com), a new company devoted to foreign family travel, can plan customized shore excursions in Italy and France for a planning fee, starting at \$250.

Sometimes it's more fun to be spontaneous, waiting until you get off the ship to decide what to do.

DEALS AND DETAILS

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