

## Ten Mistakes When Taking A Cruise

It's a shame to lay out \$250 - \$2,500 on a dreamy cruise vacation only to encounter unnecessary mishaps and inconveniences. So, in an effort to minimize the likelihood of a bump in the road to your perfect vacation, here are some common potholes that you can avoid.

**Mistake #1: Not Making Your Luggage Distinctive.** At the end of your cruise, your luggage will be placed in a huge room with THOUSANDS of pieces of luggage, probably in some designated area based on the color of a luggage tag provided by the ship. No matter how familiar you think you are with your own luggage, it's amazing how well your bags will blend in with the mass of cargo surrounding them. Having a quick, easy way to identify your luggage will be a major relief, especially if it gets misplaced. BUT, that isn't the main reason to make your luggage stand out. You will be entering this cavernous room with a couple thousand other people, some of whom stayed up all night partying. They are going to be tired and impatient and not overly careful about inspecting their luggage. If your bag looks like their bag, it could be a goner. And, if a stranger does take your luggage it could be hours, even days, before you get it back. Do something durable and noticeable to your luggage so that it is recognizable to you, AND let's bleary-eyed travelers know that your bag is not their bag. Put stickers on it, paint a day-glo streak around it, sew a teddy bear onto the outside... just make sure it stands out.

**Mistake #2: Not Researching Shore Excursions Beforehand.** Cruise line advertising folks have the ability to describe each and every shore excursion as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Of course, no cruise is complete without shore excursions and many of them are absolutely wonderful chances to do things you would never do otherwise. But, be smart here. It's okay to get hoodwinked into thinking that palm trees do sway all day long and that sand feels like silk under your feet. But, it's a whole 'nother thing to be looking forward to that perfect afternoon on a remote beach only to find out you have 500 friends, some with young kids, crowding around you and bumping into your beach chair while vendors hawk everything from coconut shells to t-shirts. Before you commit, read some reviews, talk to the cruise ship shore excursion folks, ask fellow passengers, do some thinking. Find out what you're getting before you go. Many (if not most) shore excursions are just great and you'll be happy you went. But cover your stump and you'll be glad you did.

**Mistake #3: Runaway Bar Tabs.** Unless you specifically choose a package that includes it, your bar tab is NOT included in the "all inclusive" part of your cruise. Adding to the bite is the ubiquitous 15% gratuity that gets added to every purchase you make on board a ship. So, pay attention to how much you drink. Those cute little umbrellas drinks that come in a stunning canary-yellow cup will cost you about twice what a basic cocktail costs. Cruise ship booze is already costly enough; you don't need to help them out by spending more for a cup that you'll stash in a closet when you get home. Cruise ships have a policy against bringing alcohol on board, but it is very loosely enforced if you don't flaunt it. So, don't strap a handle onto a case of Budweiser and check it as baggage. Discreetly packed airline bottles of booze or cans of beer will probably go unnoticed. Don't try to sponsor a frat party, but you can definitely help yourself out a bit. You are allowed to bring a small stash of non-alcoholic beverages (soda, water, etc) with no problem. You should definitely bring some water, especially if you're cruising in warm climates.

**Mistake #4: Ignoring the Fury of the Sun Gods.** Sun Burn treatments are the fourth most popular reason that people on cruises visit the ship's infirmary (behind bumps and bruises, indigestion, and seasickness). Once you're burned, there isn't much you can do except try to alleviate the pain. (My favorite treatment for that is something called "Traumeel". You can't find it in the drugstore, but most health food places will have it.) If you're cruising in the winter months (Nov - Feb), you don't have as big a problem. Even when you are in the sub-tropics, and even though your skin probably hasn't seen sun for several months, the sun is hitting you at an angle and that makes all the difference. You still need to be careful, but you have more leeway. In the spring and summer months, when the sun is overhead, you can get burned in as little as an hour. Some silly people forgo the sunscreen because they want to make sure they get a tan. Not a good idea. Even with a good sun blocker, your friends and co-workers will still know that you've been out in the sun. Hats are a serious plus if you are in sunburn territory. Most people don't put sunscreen on their heads, and so the part of your body that is getting the most direct rays for the longest period of time remains unprotected. Visors don't protect your skull; you need some type of covering.

**Mistake #5: No First Aid Kit.** As previously noted, there are several reasons that passengers end up wasting time (and sometimes money) visiting the infirmary. You may not be able to avoid all mishaps, but you can prepare for the lesser blunders. This is doubly important you're traveling with kids! Bumps and Bruises. Mixing booze, slippery surfaces, metal railings and the rolling motion of the ship can take its toll. For most of your injuries, the right size band-aid and a good analgesic crème will do the trick. A simple travel or camping first-aid kit will have what you need. Indigestion. One of the drawbacks of having such constant access to all that wonderful rich food that cruise ships are famous for is that people eat it. Unless you are a strict disciplinarian, you can expect to consume about two or three times your normal food quantity in an average day. Add to that a steady consumption of alcohol and voila! Indigestion. Take along some Alka Seltzer, some Pepto Bismol and some type of antacid tablet, like Tums or Rolaids. All are available in tablet form. Some ships stores will have some of this, but not always and if you need it in the middle of the night you're out of luck. Seasickness. The best treatment is prevention. After you get it, well... yuck! Check out the various forms of Dramamine that are now available, including pills and patches. The directions will tell you how much lead time before you hit the waves you need to get the maximum effect. You can also get acupressure wrist bands that work really well with some people. One of the best treatments seasickness once it hits you is Coke and soda crackers - lots of both. If you are feeling sick, your cabin is the worst place to be unless the weather topside is really bad. Being able to get fresh air and see the horizon helps to trigger the brain sensors that calm seasickness. Headaches. Of course, booze can make your head scream, but so can sun and lots of new food. If you're not used to heavy carbs in your diet and you eat lots of pastries, ice creams or gourmet desserts, your body can trigger the same symptoms it does when detoxing from too much alcohol. And, if you experience bumps, cuts or sunburn a pain reliever is a good thing. Have a supply of different types of pain reliever. (Do I need to remind you to read the label and follow the directions?)

**Mistake #6: What? No Camera? A Picture Really Is Worth A Thousand Words.** Some people will actually take the trip of their dreams and not take a camera. Or, they'll take a camera, but they won't keep it with

them. Don't do that. If you have a digital camera, use it, use it, use it. If you don't have a digital camera, spring for about three or four disposable ones. And be sure to take your camera to the Life Boat Drill. You'll know why when you get there. Speaking of pictures, there will be dozens of Photo-Ops on your cruise - when you're boarding, when you're dining, when you're getting off the ship, at the pool - at times it will seem like some one is taking your picture every time you turn around. You are, of course, free to decline. But I recommend that you give it a shot. You just might end up with the best shot of the cruise. Some of the settings are outright elegant, rivaling what you would find at a studio. It's a great way to get a nice formal picture for your living room or to send to your family, and there's no sitting fee!

**Mistake #7: Buying From Street Vendors.** Where ever you go on your cruise, once you step ashore you will be approached (accosted?) by local folks trying to sell you something. I'm not talking about the shops and makeshift kiosks you may find, I'm talking about the guys selling Cuban cigars out of their trunks, or pirated CDs out of a cardboard box. Your best bet, unless you've been there and really know the score, is to just say NO. Most of the products are very low quality, if not outright rip-offs. You have no way to check it out before you buy. People have bought CD cases with no CDs inside, watches that didn't work, Cuban cigars purchased in the local drugstore, "handmade" jewelry that came out of bubble gum machines, the list is endless. And this applies SIXTEEN FOLD if some local guy tries to sell you some pot. In most ports of call frequented by American-based vessels, this street traffic is actually illegal. You probably won't get into trouble, but why risk it?

**Mistake #8: Thinking You'll Save Money "In Town".** One charming aspect of cruising is visiting the local markets and shops. This is truly a fun experience and you can find all manner of unique and special items, but you probably won't find any real bargains. There are bargains to be found, but you really need to know what you're looking for and what it's worth in the US. Don't be cynical about it. It's all part of the experience. Somehow, buying a wooden giraffe in Grand Turk is better than buying the same wooden giraffe at Pier 1 Imports, even if you pay a little more. Go figure. You actually can save money when you buy liquor or tobacco products, but it might not be as good a deal as it first seems. Most ports have what are called "duty free" shops which means that there was no "duty" (i.e. import tariffs) paid on the products and so they are cheaper to sell in that country. The same applies to diamonds and other fine jewelry. The challenge is knowing what an item is actually worth. Just because these guys saved on the import fees doesn't mean they're passing the saving on to you. Also keep in mind that you are supposed to declare to US customs any purchases you make in a foreign country. Duty Free in Nassau doesn't mean it's duty free when you come back to the US. There are certain exemptions for personal items, but if you shell out some big bucks, you might lose the saving when you pay the US import fees. So, don't be a miser. Spend freely. Do some Christmas shopping. Spread your money around the local economy and have fun doing it. Just remember, these guys are in the business of selling stuff to foreign tourists. They know where the money is coming from and they know how to keep as much of it as they can.

**Mistake #9: Sticking Around The Port.** Most ports of call, especially when the call is for a day or less, are set up to provide the ship's passengers with a particular experience. They accomplish this by making their ports as visitor-friendly as possible. Around the port, all manner of business are set up to appeal to a particular comfort-zone and level of expectation from the tourists. But, often, just a few miles from the port, you can have a completely different experience. If you travel to Grand Turk, for example, you can spend a delightful afternoon at the resort-like environment of Margaritaville. The beach is well-maintained, though a bit crowded. There is a huge beautiful pool with lots of palm trees and man-made waterfalls. A beer will cost you about \$6 and a burger will be about \$8. But a short taxi ride to the old downtown area will take you to a much more authentic location. At least for the time being. You can stroll crowded, dusty streets; see skinny dogs shuffling through garbage cans and have a local beer and piece of fried chicken for about \$3.75 at one of the local pubs. Sure, the pub would never pass an American food inspection and you may have to do without air conditioning. But the experience can be wonderful. You won't get that experience staying close to the port. Of course, you want to be safe and you want to be able to get back to your ship before it sails, so keep all that in mind. But, there is a whole universe of color, sound, smells and people that don't ever get to the port and it's worth the trouble to find it.

**Mistake #10: Not Preparing For the Journey Home.** If you rush back into the reality you left behind, it's kind of like a diver coming to the surface too quick after a deep dive. Your mind and body will resist. If possible, do something fun on the way home. Stay an extra night in a hotel or visit a landmark or even a theme park. At least stop at a nice restaurant for a leisurely lunch or dinner. A quiet picnic (even with fast food) at a rest area can be a perfectly delightful way to transition home. A couple of things to make your return less stressful. \* If you're driving, fill up with gas before you go to the port.

\* When you have breakfast on your last morning, take some pastries with you, or even make yourself an egg sandwich for the ride home.

\* Leave some bottles of water in your car. Many bus companies will allow you to leave some personal items on the bus when you get to the port, so include some water and a pillow.

\* Find out what the weather is back home. I once stood shivering in 40 degree weather outside the airport in a pair of shorts and an aloha shirt. Hey, it was 85 degrees when I left Puerto Rico that morning!

\* Take the next day off. If it's not a weekend, schedule the time off before you leave or call in sick. You'll be SOOOOOOOO glad you did.

**A Final Suggestion.** Keep up with all of the information documents you got on the cruise - daily ships newsletter, shore excursion price list, etc. File all this in a folder and use it for reference material the next time a cruise is planned. And before you forget, write down all the things you wish you'd thought of or that you wish you had known. Stash this list with the other cruise information you brought back. Happy Cruising!

## About the Author

At MediPlan Diet Services we provide services to make our patients visits as convenient.

