

All Aboard!

Follow these tips to get the most out of your next cruise

BY LISA A. BEACH

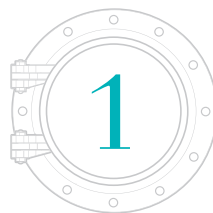


The Widmers in St. Lucia

SIX YEARS AGO, John and Heather Widmer quit their corporate jobs and ditched nearly everything they owned to travel around the world. Since then, they've circled the globe twice, visited more than 80 countries and sailed on 16 cruises, regularly sharing their adventures on *RoamingAroundtheWorld.com*.

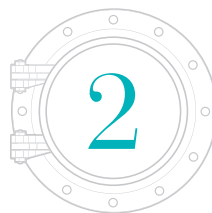
Eleven years ago, Laura Glenn and her husband, David, launched the travel agency Island Dreams World Travel based in Winter Springs, Fla., where 80 percent of their business comes from cruises. Laura has been on nearly 50 of them.

No surprise, these cruise experts have some insider tips and hacks to make the most of every voyage:



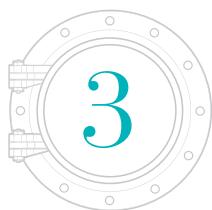
HOW DO YOU CHOOSE THE RIGHT CRUISE LINE?

Laura Glenn likes to match the "personality" of the cruise line to the travelers. What type of vacation are they looking for? Families would probably enjoy Carnival, Royal Caribbean or Norwegian with wave pools, rock climbing walls and rope courses. Older couples or more affluent travelers might prefer Holland America or Viking for a more relaxed, upscale experience.



WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO GO ON A CRUISE?

It depends on what you're looking for or need to accommodate, like traveling when the weather is warm or when the kids are on break from school. But summer often translates into higher prices and crowded ships. "Any time kids are in school, you'll find it less crowded and often get better deals," notes Glenn. Off-peak seasons vary depending on the destination.

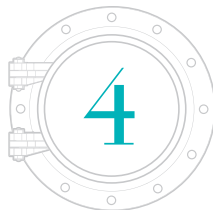


HOW CAN TRAVELERS MAKE CRUISES MORE AFFORDABLE?

Book early (one year in advance) because cruise lines offer generous early-bird pricing, but continue monitoring the fare. Many cruise fares can be canceled or refunded. "If the price drops lower, cancel (and) rebook at the lower fare," advises John Widmer. "Cruise lines will never notify you, so be proactive and monitor fares." Another advantage of booking early? "You can spread out payments," Glenn explains.

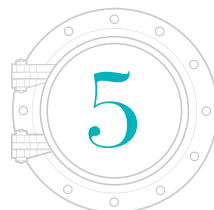
BUT ON THE FLIP SIDE ...

Don't discount last-minute deals, often surfacing about 45 days before the ship sails. This might work if the cruise is during off-peak season (September through November in the Caribbean, for example) or you can travel without much notice. "Cruise lines want to fill those cabins, hoping people will spend (money) at casinos, bars and shore excursions," Widmer explains. "If you're not loyal to one line or destination, you might find amazing deals."



IS TRAVELER'S INSURANCE WORTH IT?

Resoundingly yes, Glenn and Widmer agree. "Most people spend \$2,000 to \$10,000 on a vacation, so treat it like an investment and protect it," Glenn says. Widmer regularly reads horror stories on Facebook cruise groups: "People talk about missing a flight to get to a cruise, bad weather, an accident, a medical emergency," he says, noting that U.S. health insurance often won't cover you in foreign countries.



HOW DO GUESTS MAKE THE MOST OF ONBOARD DINING AND ENTERTAINMENT?

Book extras (like drink packages, Wi-Fi and shows) ahead of time, advises Glenn. You'll save money and avoid the risk of sold-out performances or port excursions. "A lot of activities are free," she notes, "but some still require reservations." She suggests downloading the ship's mobile app to preplan cruise activities and to communicate onboard with your party to avoid mobile roaming charges.



HUNGER HACKS

John Widmer, of *RoamingAroundtheWorld.com*, offers these insider tips for onboard dining. As always, check with each cruise line for their policies.

► Skip the lunch-time hoard at the buffet on your first day at sea. Instead, head to the other complimentary, less-crowded dining options.

► While you'll have to pay for your caffeine fix at the specialty coffee shops onboard, most of their desserts are free.

► On some cruise lines, room service is complimentary.

► Certain cruise lines allow travelers to bring their own soda. Some even allow alcohol, such as two bottles of wine per cabin.

► Don't miss the ship's Captain's Toast or Captain's Reception, where complimentary cocktails, champagne or wine are offered.