

Enjoy ultimate relaxation with a cruise vacation

By  Brian Berkman

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If it is relaxation you are after - and who isn't - then a cruise vacation is very hard to beat. Unpack just once and be transported from one glam stop to the next. Then there's the food, even on the most cost-efficient line, food is a highlight and I repeat the advice the restaurant manager shared the first night we dined. "Wear your best outfit soon as it won't fit by the time the cruise ends."

Make Alaska your first cruise

If you plan to only ever take one cruise, the smart choice is to visit Alaska. The Inside Passage routing from Vancouver, Canada to Seattle, USA is a spectacular seven-day itinerary, only available during the South African winter months. Watching great sheets of ice carve off a glacier and plunge into the sea is one of the most memorable experiences while in Glacier Bay, sailing with Holland America Lines.



It's a comfortable life on board Holland America

HAL is a sophisticated experience and while an Alaskan itinerary is generally supported by older people, HAL does have an excellent Kids programme. The wilderness of Alaska will thrill anyone of any age. You might go kayaking for whales or, as I did, take a helicopter flip to walk on the glaciers or enjoy a foodie experience, cooking and eating just-landed Alaskan salmon in the harbour of Ketchikan. Highlights on board include indulging in steaming Dutch pea soup and rich hot chocolate.

A second, must-do-before-you-die trip, is to round the Cape Horn, the southern-most tip of earth. We sailed with HAL from Buenos Aires, Argentina to Valparaiso, the port city in Chile which is about an hour away from the capital of Santiago. Rounding the Cape Horn is a trip for those with an adventurers' spirit and is famously choppy. That said, when we sailed, in December two years ago, seas were disappointingly calm. Standouts, aside from following the same routes as Magellan, Shackleton and Darwin, are to experience the drop in temperature from the balmy Argentinian capital to the near freezing Chilean fjords and then back to mid-summer temperatures of Santiago within 12 days.



The Cape Horn

Holland American Lines, and its crew of mainly Dutch officers, provide every comfort with some wonderfully “old-fashioned” touches like the nostalgia of teak deck chairs with blankets on promenade decks.

Fancy an ice-rink on your cruise ship?

By contrast, Royal Caribbean Lines, sets out and achieves what might be imagined impossible. They have reinvented the cruise experience with ships that are closer to theme parks and shopping malls than they are to sailing vessels. We were spellbound by the ice shows on board one of their ships, *The Explorer of the Seas*, on a North Africa and Canary Islands itinerary, which included stops at Madeira, The Canary Islands, Morocco and two Spanish ports including the famous La Coruna from which to explore the pilgrim's church of Santiago de Compostela.



Fancy an ice show while on the high seas? Royal Caribbean obliges

For sun and sea a Caribbean itinerary is tops. One of the best wildlife experiences to date was while sailing the Western Caribbean on a Royal Caribbean ship, *The Brilliance of the Seas*. Stingray City, on a sandbank off Grand Cayman Island, is where you can swim with and feed Manta Rays. You are in the open sea and the rays are free to come and go as they like. They are naturally inquisitive and will, if you let them, swim beneath your legs and up against you.



Swim with the Manta Rays at Stingray City

French luxury on Ponant

Ponant is an exquisite French luxury yacht cruise line. You may have just a total of 250 guests on board compared to the 2500 and more on larger ships. The experience is style personified and the cuisine is not unlike dining in a Michelin-starred restaurant. Although among the more costly, almost everything, including fine French wines, is included in the fare.



A Ponant highlight is superb cuisine like these eat all you can prawns on the buffet

We travelled from Cape Town to Durban on Ponant's *Le Lyrial*. The eight-day experience started with two nights on board in Cape Town itself and then a leisurely trip to Port Elizabeth, Richard's Bay and finally Durban.

There are always acclaimed guest speakers on board who offer lectures in French and in English. The experience is luxurious in every detail but not at all stuffy. Veuve Clicquot Champagne is standard as are the most acclaimed French cheese and chocolates. And, did I mention the Laduree macarons in your room or the Hermes bathroom amenities? You get the picture. Although it would be hard to imagine more luxury, the real appeal is that these ships and French crews are built to explore regions - like the polar ice caps and the smaller ports most other ships are simply too large or ill equipped to navigate.



Ponant's Le Lyrial photographed at Richard's Bay

In South Africa Cruises International books Royal Caribbean 011 327 0327, Monica Ferreira of Cruisemasters on 011 234 3134 represents Holland American Lines and Ponant by Natalia Ross or Development Promotions 011 463 1170.

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