

Leisure & Travel



Thoreau's Walden Pond is just a short trip from Boston. See story on page 38.

Repositioning cruises offer real bargains

By Ann Cochran

Each fall and spring, a quiet migration takes place as cruise lines move their ships from one geographical area to another. But these ships do not sail empty. They are full of passengers taking advantage of the best value in cruising.

For the past few years, I've met people who have taken repositioning cruises and wondered what one would be like. They involve many days at sea — whether they are going from Europe to the Caribbean or Seattle to Sydney — so would there be more to do to keep passengers busy and happy? Or less, because the price was lower than a regular cruise? Would the menus be limited because of all the days far from land?

My husband and I decided to try one out after he retired. We chose a late October into mid-November cruise last year from Rome to Ft. Lauderdale on a new Holland America ship, the *Koningsdam*, which was launched that spring. It is the largest ship in Holland America's fleet.

From Italy's Civitavecchia Port, we'd

spend one day at sea, then hit six ports along the coast of Spain and Portugal before setting out across the Atlantic, which takes seven days.

Boarding most cruises usually involves a flight to Florida or elsewhere for Washington area residents. For one-way repositioning cruises, there is the additional cost of an overseas leg — either to get to where the cruise leaves from, or to return home afterwards. Holland America was very helpful, as I imagine most cruise lines are, in finding us inexpensive flights. We paid less than \$600 per person to fly from D.C. to Rome, and from Ft. Lauderdale to D.C.

Excellent values

Including flights, the price was right. Our 15-day Passage to America cruise started at \$1,179 per person for an interior cabin and \$1,599 for an exterior balcony cabin like the one we had. Our cruise was similar to one Holland America is offering this fall on the same ship: the 14-day Jewels of the Baltic cruise starts at \$2,509 for an interior cabin and \$3,199 for a balcony cabin.

Royal Caribbean is currently advertising a 14-night transatlantic repositioning cruise on *Freedom of the Seas* for \$833 per person in an interior cabin and \$1,434 in a balcony cabin.

The ultra-luxury line Silversea has great deals as well, relatively speaking. Prices for their 16-day spring repositioning cruise from Ft. Lauderdale to Dublin starts at \$5,310 as opposed to \$10,620 for an Australia/New Zealand voyage of the same length during the same month.

The design of the avant garde wine cellar on Holland America's *Koningsdam* echoes the curved lines and art theme throughout the vessel, which holds more than 2,500 passengers. It is one of a number of ships that make trans-Atlantic repositioning crossings each fall and spring at steeply discounted rates for passengers.

PHOTO BY MAPICS



Antonio Gaudi's unique and ornate cathedral La Sagrada Familia soars over Barcelona, one of the ports of call on the *Koningsdam*'s repositioning cruise. Construction began in 1892 and is still underway.

A brand new ship

The day we settled into the *Koningsdam*, all the surprises were good ones, as one would reasonably expect on a new ship.

With music as their inspiration, designer Adam Tihany and architect Bjørn Storbraaten created an open, airy atmosphere with plenty of curved lines. Everywhere you looked, you engaged with interesting pieces of art, most of it contemporary.

Floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors enhanced the spaciousness of our verandah cabin. Even for people like us who do not pack light, there were more than enough closets and storage spaces.

The comfortable queen-sized bed was made up with crisp white linens, and there were perfectly placed bedside reading lights. The bathroom had a large shower.

The TV was of-the-moment: flat screen, high-definition. Lots of channels and on-demand movies, as well as the entirety of "Downton Abbey," provided relaxing interludes between meals and events.

The music-themed ship lived up to its intention. The main World Stage, which had a three-quarter-way-around seating layout, was surrounded by walls upon which gorgeous video and photography were sometimes projected. At a cast chat, many performers praised the lighting, sound and design technology, calling it su-

perior to that of most Broadway theaters.

If there's a head on every pillow, the *Koningsdam* can accommodate 2,650 passengers. Cruise lines encourage loyalty with discounts and perks. At a reception, we learned that out of the approximately 2,400 passengers, only 200 (including ourselves) were first timers.

Plentiful activities onboard

I needn't have feared boredom. Besides the nightly main stage shows, there were many other options, including a classic piano bar. At B.B. King's Blues Club, the band played current hits.

A classical quintet, easily transitioning from Mozart to Sting, performed at the Lincoln Center Stage. This strategic partnership with Lincoln Center was a huge hit. With their piano, cello and three violins, these elegant musicians seemed to be the most beloved performers on a ship that was rich in talent.

In addition to music and dance entertainment, a magician and two comedians were on the schedule. With freshly popped popcorn, we loved watching movies in lounge chairs around the pool. Popular films were interspersed with BBC Earth documentaries.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF HOLLAND AMERICA

Cruises

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Before sunrise one morning, there was a stargazing opportunity with two presenters who were attending navigation school.

During the day, lectures, a cooking competition and demonstrations, spa appointments, games and dance lessons given by the gorgeous shipboard dancers kept us busy.

At the gym, you could stare out at the sea as you walked or jogged. The sight and smell of the sea, and its breezes, drew many passengers out to the promenade deck. I joined daily.

I avoided the casino, but it was well-populated every evening.

I planned spa appointments and all our meals in the specialty restaurants for days we were at sea. On all the other days, the

two main dining options — a formal restaurant and a sophisticated version of an eatery — were both good to great. At mealtimes, we got to know other passengers and found people to hang out with on the ship, and to tour with on land.

We found the specialty restaurants, except the Italian one, worth the extra charges, which ranged from \$15 to a la carte. Of the French bistro, Culinary Arts Center (tasting menu, demonstration kitchen), steakhouse and Asian, the Asian (Tamarind) stood out. But each had its winning dishes.

Spanish ports of call

Every cruise line sells land tours, and Holland America is no exception, with classic highlights tours and many off-the-beat-en-track options.

They also do a great job of letting passengers know how to explore on one's

own. Lectures with beautiful slide shows gave a rundown of the best of each city, restaurant recommendations, and practical information about unusual scheduling and closings.

Palma de Mallorca in Spain was our first stop. Like many other ports, this island has a lot of fine museums, churches and ruins. Its beach is a quick walk from the ship.

It also has a large department store, El Corte Ingles, where I was delighted to find great variety and good prices for truly local items (after confirming by checking tags) to bring to loved ones back home.

Barcelona was the most alluring stop, and it required the most planning since there's so much to do. My husband and I chose to spend most of our time at La Sagrada Familia, the masterpiece cathedral (started in 1882 and still unfinished) designed by Antoni Gaudi.

I expected it to be more surreal and less spiritual, but the experience was quite the opposite. I was very moved by the structure and the guide's story of Gaudi's devotion to the project.

Afterward, we wandered Las Ramblas, the tree-lined pedestrian mall in heart of the city, and enjoyed a great meal. (Yes, this was the site of a horrific terrorist incident this August, less than a year after our visit.)

Alicante is a popular beach town graced with palm trees and a beautiful waterfront promenade, Explanada de Espana, made of 6.5 million marble tiles. This small city has one of Spain's most important modern art collections in its Asegurada Museum.

Malaga, Picasso's hometown on the Costa del Sol, honors him with an art museum and a house museum. There are many others here, including the Museo de Malaga, with fine arts and archaeology. From 2015, and scheduled to be there for five years, a pop-up outpost of the Paris

Centre Pompidou arts complex was installed in a many-colored glass cube structure at the port. Special exhibits share the space with works from the Paris museum's permanent collection.

Home to a U.S. naval base, Cadiz is known for great golf and five miles of beach, long-rated as having the cleanest beach water in Europe. Since we'd be there on a Sunday, with few places open, we decided to take an official Holland America tour, at \$80 per person for five hours. About 28 other passengers decided the same thing, and the consensus afterward was that it was worth it. Our intelligent and well informed guide toured us around the old city and a charming hilltop village called Jerez de la Frontera.

At the shipboard lecture about the last stop, Madeira, I was drawn in by the slides of a stunning hotel on a hill. When we arrived, we hired a taxi driver to take us around.

That is common practice for cruise passengers. Sometimes we'd share a taxi with another couple. It costs far less than an organized tour, the drivers know the main attractions, and you get to talk to a local while doing exactly what you want to do.

Before heading to the Belmond Reid's Palace for lunch, we asked our driver, Bruno, to take us to a grocery store. He looked puzzled, but we convinced him that's what we wanted, and the three of us walked the aisles, buying chocolates for the cabin stewards and some traditional honey cake to take home. You can learn a lot about another culture in a grocery store. And at a Belmond hotel, you can treat yourself to a fine Portuguese lunch.

To research repositioning cruises, visit cruise lines' individual websites, websites such as www.repositioningcruise.com, devoted entirely to this mode of travel, or sites such as www.Cruisecritic.com.



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