CHOOSING THE RIGHT CRUISE –

Seventeen years ago we took our two teenaged sons on their first Caribbean cruise. I cannot help but chuckle as I think back on that experience. In all honesty, they went kicking and screaming. From the moment we first told them about our decision to book a cruise in lieu of our typical vacation plans, they began to complain. "BORING"! For months, I suffered the same resounding accusations: "There won't be anything fun for us to do!"

Vindication came when on or about the third day, over dinner, they asked if we could take a cruise the next year. Since then, it's one of their (and our) favorite forms of vacation. My one son even planned a cruise wedding!

Even though more and more people are trying a cruise vacation, many remain wary. One reason is simply because there's a lot to know and it can be intimidating when trying to make the right selection for your family. There are endless itineraries, oodles of ships and countless variables of everything including staterooms! It's no wonder people shy away from taking the plunge.

But ... factoring in the great value of a cruise vacation (as compared to land tour prices), the wonderful opportunity to visit multiple destinations, the emphasis on great cuisine, the endless forms of shipboard entertainment, the inclusion of exceptionally well-run and safe childcare (you heard right – that's all included in the price) the chance to relax and be pampered and the convenience of packing and unpacking only once – perhaps it's time to reconsider a cruise.

To help with the selection process, as a seasoned cruiser and as a credentialed cruise consultant – I thought I'd give a few pointers on how to make a great choice and encourage you to use my services.

Once you've pinned down your travel dates, you want to first, give careful thought to the cruise itinerary and ask some serious questions. What do you want most? Pampering? Rest and relaxation? Or perhaps you would like to experience some exotic sun-drenched destinations with gorgeous beaches and turquoise water. (That may sound especially delightful come January and February in sunless Pennsylvania.) On a cruise, most days, you will wake up at a different destination. Would you prefer it be at a place with fun-filled shopping? Or do your interests lie more in art and history? The point is cruising offers something for everyone – you just need to know what you want – and where to look for it.

By far, the most popular reason people cruise is so they get to experience a number of different destinations (and the second most popular reason is for the great food). If multiple destinations are your goal – cruising is definitely for you. But, when thinking about destinations, it's crucial to look at more than simply the list of ports. It's equally important to know how long the ship will be docked in each port! All too often a port is listed on the itinerary – but when eyeing the list it's easy to miss the fact that the ship may only be docked at the port you're dreaming of exploring for only four or five hours. Sure, you will be there, but that won't allow time for the experiences you hope to have. And then there are "tendered" ports – another thing that gets missed more often than not by the novice cruiser. Tenders are small boats used by ships to shuttle passengers, a few at a time, to shore. Usually, tenders are needed because a ship is too large to sail into a port and must therefore remain at sea – far from land. Inconvenient and time consuming – an itinerary which relies on tenders can be a frustrating experience which greatly reduces your time ashore and is something to be avoided if possible or at least limited.

For my next few posts, I'll continue to review how to make wise cruising choices as well as give some tips on how to choose a good stateroom based on location on the ship. You'll learn there's much more to the selection process than simply shopping for price. The complexity is the reason many savvy vacationers seek the services of a travel consultant. And just in case no one has ever taken the time to explain how travel consultants work – the cruise lines pay us – essentially our services cost you nothing.