



Cruising Tips: Choosing Active Shore Excursions With Diverse Itineraries

Jun 28, 2018 Sandy Bornstein 0

Cruises are, overall, all-inclusive fun. But part of the pleasure of cruising is arriving at ports and getting off the ship to explore. Writer Sandy Bornstein has taken many cruises, and gone on many shore excursions. She's figured out some very helpful tips so you can make the most of them.



Celebrity Cruiselines in a harbor, at a port-of-call.

By sailing on cruise ships, I've been able to explore destinations around the world with reduced effort. The cruise company's staff manages most of the heavy lifting. Sailing from port-to-port eliminates tedious day-to-day issues associated with traveling to multiple countries. The main focus becomes my shore adventures.

Research Ports of Call and Shore Excursion Options

Before researching my day trip options, I find the harbor's location in relationship to the closest city. Usually, this information is available prior to departure. If you've never cruised before, be aware that a variety of factors may cause the port's location to change. To fully enjoy a cruise, one needs to be flexible and not become unglued if the itinerary changes slightly.

If the ship will be docked in a commercial area or is far from the main attractions, the port might not be pedestrian friendly. In challenging scenarios, I will opt for the cruise ship's shore excursion, a local shore excursion, a private tour or possibly hiring a taxi or Uber onsite. In smaller ports, it's always advisable to have something arranged in advance. There's no guarantee that there will be taxis or Uber drivers available upon disembarkation.

Since many daytrips involve a disproportionate amount of sitting, it is wise to ask in advance how much time is allotted for both the activities and the commute. If the places that I want to see are a few hours away, I'm stuck being sedentary for long

stretches of time. In China, I was faced with a six-hour round trip bus ride from Tianjin to Beijing. On this itinerary, the ship was docked in Tianjin for three days and I wanted to maximize my time on land. I purchased a multi-day shore



An excursion to the Great Wall of China.

excursion package that included staying two nights in Beijing. This provided sufficient time to see the Temple of Heaven, Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Great Wall near the Jyong Pass, the Summer Palace, and take a rickshaw tour through an historic area.

While at sea I overheard some passengers griping about the amount of wasted time going back and forth to the cruise ship each day. I was thrilled that I didn't commute to Beijing each day. Keep in mind that depending on the destination and the passengers' interests, some special excursions may fill up prior to departure, especially in a city with heavy traffic.

Private Tour or Group Tour

Occasionally, I arrange for a private tour that does not require 100% payment in advance of arrival. In Israel, I hired a private guide that I had previously used on a land trip. In other places, I found reputable, small group tours online.



Peggy's Cove outside of Halifax.

When
I was
in



The Costera Trail in Parque Nacional Tierra del Fuego near Ushuaia, Argentina.

Halifax last fall, I wanted to see several places. If I had endless resources, I might

have hired another private guide. Instead, I took a group tour and coped with a busload of people and set time limitations at each stop. The allocation for time for this particular excursion was ample. I was able to see everything on my list except for one place. I explored Peggy's Cove, enjoyed a lobster lunch, toured the Halifax Citadel Fortress and its museum, and also viewed the Titanic memorabilia and learned about Halifax's coastal history at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. This particular large group experience was well planned.

However, I have also experienced multiple stop shore excursions that are rushed. Sometimes a planned stop is totally skipped. On an Argentinian tour, I was limited to just 30 minutes on three trails and an extended stay at a gift shop. I couldn't help but feel frustrated since the excursion was sold as an active trekking adventure. Who plans a 30-minute hike? Keep in mind that tour guides will alter schedules whenever necessary so that the passengers reach the port before the ship sails.

Convenient Ports Suitable for Walking

Some of my best memories come from easy to navigate ports. I create a list of my "must see" sites and then map out my routing. Once again, I need to be flexible because it is difficult to predict what may happen along the way. I'm constantly checking my watch or mobile phone for the time. It's a costly mistake to see the ship sail out of the harbor without being on board.

In Europe, I had an amazing time exploring the streets of Dubrovnik, Santorini, Mikonos, and Venice. In Asia, I planned a self-guided tour of Nagasaki that utilized public transportation. In all of these places, my husband and I were able to see most of the key attractions within the allotted time.



A shore excursion to Santorini.

Locating Small Group Shore Excursions

Whenever possible, I try to pick tours that are intentionally designed for a fewer number of people. While some people have no problem being herded onto a bus with 50 passengers, I prefer smaller vehicles.

Food tours oftentimes have a limited number of participants. On Prince Edward Island, I learned about Charlottetown's culture by tasting a variety of foods. For three and a half hours, I zigzagged through the streets while listening to the tour guide's stories.



A food tour was my pick in Charlottetown, to experience authentic food.

Before embarking on an [Asian immersion cruise](#), I found out that it would take several hours to drive from the Halong Bay (UNESCO World Heritage Site) port to Hanoi. Since the ship would be in port two days, I had the option of spending the night in Hanoi. I looked over the itinerary and chose Plan B. I reserved a two-day Halong Bay small boat excursion. Yes, this trip was a bit pricey. That might explain why only a handful of other passengers considered the adventure.

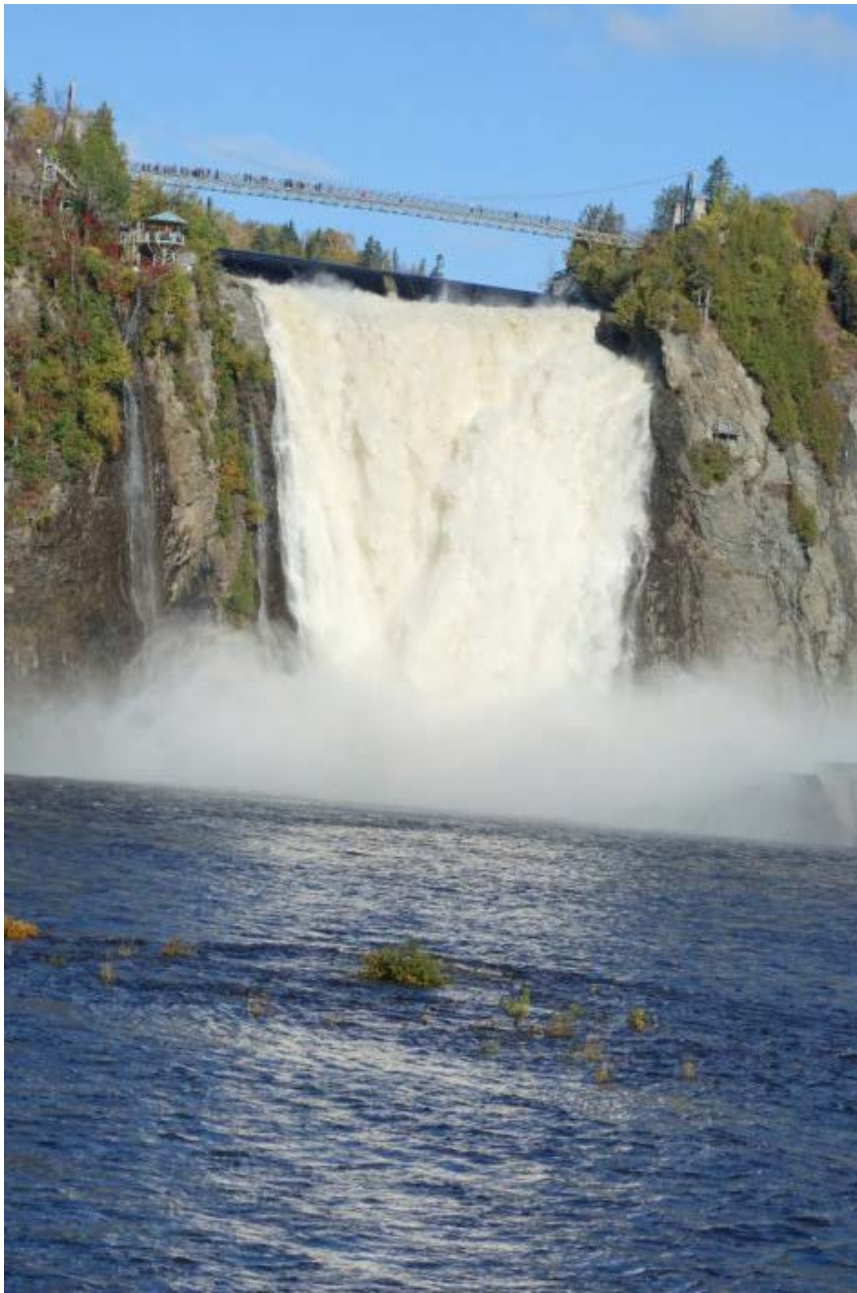
At a leisurely pace, I visited the key attractions—Luon Cave, Sung Sot Cave and Ti Tov Island—at off peak times. I was also treated to local cuisine, experienced a regional cooking lesson, a festive evening feast, and participated in an early morning tai chi class.



An excursion in Asia to Ha Long Bay – the view from the top of Ti Tov Island.

Farther down the Vietnamese coast, I spent a day in Ho Chi Minh City (Phu My). To increase the activity level of my Cu Chi Tunnels tour, I selected an outing that also included a motorboat ride on the Saigon River and an 18-mile bicycle ride in the countryside. Fewer passengers tend to select active excursions. While the bicycling and crawling through the narrow and low Cu Chi Tunnels were not conducive to picture taking, I have spectacular memories.

On another bicycle excursion, I pedaled my way to and from a bicycle shop near the Quebec City port to the base of Montmorency Falls. The round trip ride was a little more than 15-miles. This waterfall is the highest in Quebec and is even higher than Niagara Falls. This tour included sufficient time to explore the waterfall.



An excursion to Montmorency Falls outside of Quebec City.

Concluding Thoughts

From the moment I disembark until the time I return to the dock, I strive to capture memorable features about the destination that differentiate it from other places along the route. Simultaneously, I seek out trips that promote an active lifestyle. While it's not always possible to determine how much time will be spent in a vehicle, I've found that hiking, biking, and walking food tours are great options for energetic passengers.

— Article and photos by Sandy Bornstein.

Hungry for more? Here are two other articles by Sandy that elaborate on her visits to [Charlottetown](#) and to [Hong Kong](#).

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Sandy has visited more than 40 countries and lived as an international teacher in Bangalore, India. Sandy's award-winning book, *May This Be the Best Year of Your Life*, is a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. Sandy writes about food, family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences, historical sites, and Jewish culture and history. You can follow Sandy on Facebook and Instagram.