

Tips for first time Cruisers

Long-time cruisers often have an embarkation day routine. Some make a beeline for the atrium or poolside bar, while others head to the buffet. Some like to explore the ship, posting photos online to make Facebook and Twitter friends jealous. Others meticulously spray down their cabins with Lysol, start popping seasickness medicines and unpack all their belongings into their proper places.

If you're a first-timer or haven't settled into a familiar cruise routine, here's a list of embarkation day do's and do not's, culled from many years cruising, as well as input from Cruise Critic's Facebook fans.

DO start your vacation off with a tropical drink in a colourful glass with umbrellas and plastic monkeys a-plenty. Just don't assume that drink proffered by a waiter is free ... or that you can't get it cheaper by opting for a regular, non-souvenir glass.

DO tour the ship, get your bearings, and identify which bars and eateries you want to hit first. We recommend starting at the top and working your way down ... unless you want to get in a workout by climbing all the stairs.

DO NOT head straight to the buffet -- it's one of the most crowded places on board on embarkation day because everyone comes hungry for lunch. Instead, check out your dining options. Sometimes other venues are open for a first-day lunch, and they aren't such madhouses.

DO take photos -- lots of them. Get that first "Hooray, I'm on vacation" shot of your family by the ship's rail; snap a pic of your cabin in pristine condition before it's wrecked with daily schedules, towel animals and your assorted laundry; capture interesting spots on board before they're overrun with passengers; and do feel free to post them online to make your friends drool.



DO NOT take the elevator if you don't need to. The lifts are super-slow on embark day and crowded with passengers and crew ferrying luggage between decks. Take the stairs. Then have no guilt when you tuck into dessert at dinner.

DO arrange your spa and salon appointments, as the most popular treatment times book up quickly. Not sure what you want? Take a spa tour. You might get to sample a massage or win a free treatment in the first-day raffle.

DO NOT spend the day in your winter, workday or travel clothes. Pack a change of clothes in your carry-on so you don't have to wait for your luggage to arrive for you to slip into sandals, shorts or swimsuits.

DO take a dip in the pool or hot tub. They're often un-crowded on the first day because many people haven't followed the advice above and brought a change of clothes. But why wait to begin your vacation? The pool is open!

DO make specialty dining reservations if you haven't done so online before your trip. Choice dining times can sell out.

DO NOT forget to check in at the kids club and sign up your little ones for the on board camp activities. There's often an introductory session for kids and parents to meet the counsellors and get acquainted with the facilities. Better to sign up on day one, even if you're not sure your kids will want to go; there's no requirement to attend.

DO book shore tours, and ask the tour desk any questions you might have. Some tours have limited space and sell out, so book early (if you haven't pre-booked).

DO buy a soda card or alcohol package to get the most use out of them on your cruise. Just do the math beforehand to make sure the packages will actually save you money.

DO NOT settle for unacceptable dinner seating. The maître d is typically available to take questions and make changes, if possible, on embarkation day. If you wanted early dining but got a late seating, want to switch from set-seating to flexible dining or just want to find out if you're at a two-top or 10-top, make a visit to the dining room a top priority. It's also good to check in with the maître d' if you have dietary restrictions to make sure you'll be taken care of on board.

DO reserve space on any fee-extra sun decks (such as Princess' Sanctuary) or cabanas, especially if you want to book them for a sea day. Space is limited and can sell out.

DO make your last phone calls, texts and tweets while your phone can access land-based cell towers and you're not paying sky-high satellite Internet and roaming fees.

DO unpack your suitcases, and get that task (and your luggage) out of the way early. Decorate your cabin and door if you like to personalize your home for the vacation.

DO meet your cabin steward and make any requests you have. Some travellers like to tip their cabin stewards on day one to ensure good service throughout the cruise (but this isn't necessary).

DO NOT skip the muster drill. It will provide important information in case of an emergency. Plus it's mandatory, even if you have cruised before.

DO take a nap or lounge on your balcony (even if the view is just of an ugly port building). It's your vacation; you can be as active or as laid-back as you want.

DO head up on deck for sail away. It's festive, with live music and flowing drinks, and it's a fun way to kick off your cruise.

DO NOT automatically eat dinner in the main dining room. Embarkation day can be a great night to dine out in the specialty restaurants, as they're often less crowded and, on some lines, carry a reduced cover charge on day one.

DO watch the sun set over the ocean, go to the welcome show, hit the casino, sing karaoke and shake your booty at the disco -- your cruise starts tonight!

