



Six Cruises To Do Before You Die

by Ralph Grizzle

So many spectacular places to visit, so little time. Here are six of our favorites.

We're not suggesting by the title of this article that it's time to begin disembarking from that great journey known as life. Far from it. Cast your eye farther down the page, and you'll see what I consider to be life's greatest cruise itineraries.

These six "must do" cruises represent possibly the most satisfying journeys that any avid cruiser could ever take. Those who manage only one of the six proclaim it to be the cruise of a lifetime. But those who check off all six put themselves in a different league altogether. They become world travelers who have sailed the sea to earth's most wondrous places.

1. Panama Canal - Completed in 1914, the Panama Canal took 34 years to build - at a cost of 30,000 lives. Along this "path between the seas," cruise ships move at a crawl, waiting in line to enter the enormous locks that flood with water. After water fills the concrete locks, ships move forward to the next set of locks. There may be a cargo ship in front of you, a sailboat behind. This engineering marvel is best savored in the comfort of a cruise ship. Itineraries typically run for full 14-day transits between San Juan and Acapulco, but several cruise lines offer 10-day partial transits to Gatun Lake sailing roundtrip from Florida.

Tip: Head for an air-conditioned lounge early and grab a seat for viewing the ship's transit. Central America's heat and humidity are too fierce to stand comfortably on deck.

2. Greek Islands - Experience spectacular beauty and world-famous antiquities during a one-week cruise between Greece and Turkey. From Kusadasi, Turkey, it's a short ride to the classical city of Ephesus, where the facade of the two-story library, two millennia old, still stands at the end of the marble thoroughfare marked with chariot tracks.

Mykonos, Greece, once a sleepy village, is now "tres chic" with Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Chanel among the shops, but there are still a few artisans worth visiting on the winding streets. A short hop from Mykonos, Delos, once the capital of the ancient world, is famed for its ruins.

Santorini is my pick for the most spectacular of the Greek Islands. Sail into the bay, a huge volcanic crater, then ascend 900 feet to the winding streets of Thira, a tiny terraced town overlooking the Capri-blue Mediterranean.

Tip: The best time to visit Greece and Turkey is May and June or the fall. If you do go in July and August, the dry heat may be intense. Wear sandals and drink bottled water constantly.

3. Baltic - From the opulent palaces of the Tsars in St. Petersburg to Stockholm's breathtaking harbor and Copenhagen's spectacular Tivoli Gardens, few cruising regions offer such diverse treasures as the Baltic. Best of all, most ships dock in the center of the cities and towns, allowing you to hop off and explore on your own.

Founded in 1703 by Peter the Great, St. Petersburg is among the most beautiful cities on earth. The baroque Winter Palace known as the Hermitage boasts more than 1,000 rooms and 8,000 paintings.

The "City That Floats On Water," Stockholm sits on 14 islands, with meandering shop-lined streets, palaces and parks. Don't miss the Vasa Museum, housing a royal flagship raised from the harbor more than 300 years after she sank in 1628.

Copenhagen is chock full of attractions, including Stroget, Europe's longest pedestrian shopping street and the dazzling display of the Danish crown jewels at Rosenborg Castle.

Helsinki's marketplace, next to the ship terminal, is a colorful introduction to this city. Attractions are a short ferry ride away, including the "Gibraltar of the North," Suomenlinna Fortress, which has guarded the entrance to the city for 200 years.

Tip: Unless you are fluent in Russian and have a tourist visa, shore excursions are necessary in St. Petersburg. But with pre-departure research, the remaining ports can be enjoyed on your own. Many Scandinavians speak English. Book early: Baltic itineraries sell out fast.

4. Western Mediterranean - From Spain to Italy, this region is a historic treasure trove and the height of sophistication. For the first-time visitor, pick an itinerary that focuses on Italy for its diverse attractions. Arrive in Venice or Rome (both deserve several pre-cruise hotel nights) then sail to Naples where you must choose between a day at

Pompeii or touring the scenic Amalfi drive. Livorno is the port of entry to Florence where some of mankind's most magnificent masterpieces were made. Sicilian ports include Taormina, a beautiful resort overlooking the sea and facing Mt. Etna. Spain, on the other hand, is one of Europe's fastest-growing cruise destinations, with Barcelona on most itineraries.

Tip: As shore excursions can be pricey in Europe, you may be better off arranging your own sightseeing. A guide with a private car is frequently less expensive than a tour when there's four or more traveling.

5. Asia - Few places are as exotic as Asia - with such bustling modern cities as Hong Kong and Singapore, colorful markets, ancient temples and stunning landscapes. The most popular cruises visit Vietnam, Thailand, Burma and Malaysia, all with diverse ports ranging from busy cities to bucolic rural settings. I prefer to walk around Asian cities to savor their uniqueness, although many passengers, especially those who do not speak the local languages, opt for tours.

Tip: Ask your physician for antibiotics, and take medication for stomach problems. Also recommended is cruise insurance just in case you need an emergency flight home or hospitalization.

Antarctica - A cruise to Antarctica ranks for many as the best cruise of their lives, a voyage to a place unlike any other on earth. Sailing through perilous Drake's Passage, arrive in a magical place of icebergs a mile across, whales, elephant seals, albatross and penguins upon penguins. Excursions on Zodiacs take you ashore to penguin rookeries of 300,000 birds.