



Taking Your Trip to the Next Level

by: Howard Moses, The Cruise Authority

So we've got your cruise vacation booked and you're looking forward to 10 days in the Med, 2 weeks in South America, or a week in Alaska.

Now you need to figure out what you're going to do with your time in port. Typically you will only be in port for one day, and you want to experience the place the way you have dreamed of, without wasting time. For some, merely getting off the ship and wandering around is sufficient, or perhaps hiring a taxi to drive around for a few hours, and for others arranging land tours (also called shore excursions) via the cruise lines' Shore Excursion Desk is the clear direction.

These are all options with positives and negatives, and the Cruise Consultants at The Cruise Authority have tried all of these avenues. A major consideration is the language spoken by the local inhabitants - in places like China or Russia, it is best not to stray too far from the ship without guidance, as the locals normally speak no English whatsoever.

A new type of shoreside experience has been growing over the last few years. Through our relationships with a cadre of destination specialists in virtually every country cruise ships visit, we are now able to plan custom shore experiences for our clients.

These experiences range from touring in a private vehicle with an english-speaking guide, with the added benefit of slipping into museums without waiting, dining at a bistro known only to the local residents, attending a show or doing something the cruise line just doesn't arrange.

The main benefit of booking independent private tours is the ability to customize how you spend your time. You can tell the operator what you want to see or where you want to go - or have them make suggestions based on your particular areas of interest. With the added benefit of being able to change your plans "on the fly."

Many times, private tours can be arranged for less than the cruise line excursions, but normally the cost is slightly higher, as you are paying for exclusivity and flexibility. There's certainly something to be said for having the ability to leave one location when you choose, or stay longer because you're enjoying it.

If the private tour you booked is in a port with museums, palaces, etc. the small private guides can often pre-book or pre-arrange your admission, saving time standing in lines.

Special needs

We find that those travelers who have special needs can benefit tremendously from private tours. These needs can be a function of a physical limitation or a multi-generational family traveling together.

The Drawbacks of Ship's Excursions

One of the big drawbacks to excursions sold by the ship is that everyone in the tour group moves only as fast as the slowest person. Though tour leaders attempt to stick to a schedule, there are always some on the tour who lose track of the time, and don't return to the transportation when they should, leaving others waiting. This can dramatically affect a tour that is scheduled to visit several sights in a four- or six-hour time frame.

On occasion, you might choose a tour because it visits a site of particular interest to you. However, that tour might also include visits to another site (or two or three) that don't interest you, however you must book the entire tour. This is quite common on more exotic itineraries such as Europe, the Mediterranean, the Baltic, the Far East, etc.

Private tours aren't for everyone, but we encourage you to discuss options with your Cruise Consultant, so that you may take full advantage of your time in port and experience everything it has to offer.