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Escape Routes

Getting on Caribbean-bound boats getting easier all the time

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"The weather outside is frightful," Sammy Cahn and Julie Styne said in 1945. They had no idea.

When you don't want to be in 24 inches of snow or a "feels-like" of 15 degrees, check the cruises leaving from the Port of Baltimore. Celebrity Cruise Line's Mercury and Carnival Cruise Line's Pride are steaming off to Florida, the Caribbean and Nassau, where you can enjoy sunshine-filled balmy days with temperatures in the upper 70s.

People pamper you from dawn to dusk and then to dawn again. Would you like a drink? Do you need another towel? Would you like your massage soft or firm? What would you like to eat and when and where? Religious services are offered. Friends of Bill have regular meetings and many cruise ships offer Friends of Dorothy gatherings. Once in port, you can choose from snorkeling, sightseeing, shopping and doing nothing.

Peg Silloway, owner of the Silloway Press in Columbia, and her husband, attorney Phil Marcus, are particular fans of Celebrity ships, "because of their excellent service, world-class food and ships that are comfortable and well-maintained. Though we love cruising, we have not sailed in four years, partly because of the dreadful experience that flying has become," Silloway says.

"We quickly discovered that the number one advantage of cruising is the complete separation from daily routines and work," she says. "If you absolutely insist on having Internet service you can, but why? Your cell phone generally will only work in port, but again, why even turn it on? The relaxation that comes with cruising cannot be matched by staying on land, no matter where you go.

"The convenience and comfort of unpacking once," is great, Silloway says. "I love my hotel moving at night while I sleep, taking me to another interesting place where I can walk off the ship, see new sights and have new experiences, and then come back to a comfortable, familiar, safe place. On days at sea I read, sleep, eat, watch the wake, walk the deck, eat, read, explore the ship, nap, eat and read.

"My husband and I go through all the shore excursions and choose a few that suit our non-athletic style. When we get to a port we know whether we can sleep in or have a schedule to meet. For ports that we've seen before we will find a new excursion or even stay on board. On our February cruise we'll visit islands new to us and will definitely go ashore either for an excursion or on-our-own exploring."

As cold as the weather has been, that's how hot the Port of Baltimore is when it comes to cruising. Carnival introduced year-round cruising from here in September. Celebrity is using the port for winter sailings aboard the Mercury. Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines will start year-round departures in June 2010 aboard the Enchantment of the Seas, which is larger than their Grandeur of the Seas, which had been sailing seasonally out of Baltimore. A few years ago, there were 27 sailings from Baltimore, then 81 in 2009 and 92 scheduled for 2010 (carrying about 165,000 passengers) and 120 in 2011.

J.B. Hanson, spokesperson for the Maryland Port Administration, says the additional sailing schedule "will allow the 40 million people who live within a six-hour drive of Baltimore to look beyond the traditional cruising seasons."

Part of the attraction for the cruise lines is the 65,000-square-foot renovated paper warehouse that now serves as the passenger cruise terminal at South Locust Point, just off Interstate 95. It has 40 check-in stations and 1,500 locked and patrolled parking spaces. You drive in, you park, you hand over your luggage, clear the check-in process and enjoy.

"Winter cruises have a different vibe than at other times," says Carolyn Spencer Brown, editor-in-chief of www.CruiseCritic.com. "Much of the activity and hubbub takes place inside, at least for the first day." Fortunately, she says, "All of the ships sailing out of Baltimore have magradomes (glass-roofed pools), so you can get into the Caribbean spirit immediately, although it might be a little harder to get a table at the coffee bar the first day."

How much?

Brown says one advantage to the winter cruises is that rates tend to be lower when school is in session.

Regardless of your sail date or cabin category choice, you save money sailing out of Baltimore because you don't pay for airfare or checked luggage and you can have someone drive you to the terminal if you don't want to pay the \$15-a-day parking fee. For those who live a little farther away and want to spend the night before or after the cruise, the Country Inn & Suites by Carlson BWI and the Hampton Inn Baltimore/Washington International Airport offer a park-and-cruise package. Spend one night at the hotel and you can leave your car there while you're on the cruise and they'll shuttle you to and from the port.

For a week on the Pride, an inside cabin can be \$659, \$1,009 for a suite. By June (when school is out), the price for the suite is \$1309. Bargains can be found if you're a member of the line's frequent-cruise club, a senior citizen (55 plus), or if you have an affinity credit card that accrues reward points toward a cruise. Carnival offers a Fun Saver rate that lets you pick the stateroom type you want and has Carnival pick the location. It's guaranteed to be at least what you want, and you may wind up with one or more upgrades.

The Mercury runs from \$849 for an inside or ocean-view cabin to \$1,699 for a verandah and \$1,999 for a suite for a nine-night cruise. Later this year, they'll offer a 10-night cruise with cabins running from \$899 to \$2,149. One special includes a stateroom upgrade on select sailings.

Rates are per-person, double occupancy. Unless otherwise stated, rates do not include government fees and taxes, and the cruise line may add a fuel supplement for all guests per day, depending on the price of oil.

Cruise Critic's Brown says if you drink (at a bar or have wine with dinner) you can figure on paying 50 percent of your cruise fare in incidentals. If you don't have a bar bill, you can figure 25 percent. That includes shore excursions, or purchasing art, jewelry, cruise photos, duty-free alcohol or spa services. Figure on \$10 a day per person for tips that are distributed to the ship's staff.

About the ships

The Pride carries 2,124 passengers and has two seven-night itineraries. One stops at Port Canaveral (Orlando), Nassau and Freeport. The other calls at Grand Turk, Turks and Caicos, -- the cruise line's private Bahamian island of Half Moon Cay -- and Freeport. On the Pride, you can sit in or by a pool and slide on the Twister Waterslide; perform with Karaoke or enjoy a comedy show; watch sports in the sports bar or try your hand at the casino; dine at a buffet, in the dining room, feel pampered with cabin service, or enjoy a super special meal at David's Steakhouse.

Aboard the Mercury, you can take ballroom lessons, keep in touch with friends and family at the Internet stations or stop by the spa for a massage, facial, tooth-whitening and acupuncture. Beverage packages include anything from unlimited bottled water (starting from \$13.50 per night) to a taste-of-the-vineyard deal (starting from \$114 per package). Learn something at an

enrichment lecture and enjoy performances in the showroom. When you crave physical activity, you can do Pilates, paddle tennis, volleyball (in or out of the pool), or just walk around the ship.

Your ports of call on the nine-night cruise include Charleston, S.C.; Key West, Fla.; Nassau, Bahamas and Coco Cay (Celebrity's private island). The ten-night cruise also stops at Miami.

It is fairly easy to book your passage, shore excursions, and spa treatments online. Travel agents, however, know or plan special group events. Ragina C. Averella, the public and government affairs manager for AAA Mid-Atlantic in Towson, says they have an Inaugural Ravens cruise in July to Bermuda aboard the Enchantment.

Stefanie Pesce-Fitzpatrick, who manages the Cruise Holidays of Annapolis office, notes that agents can book special outings (e.g., a pasta-cooking class at a master chef's kitchen) and answer questions that can't be answered on a computer, no matter how interactive the site is.

"As the agents have traveled on most of these tours, they can tell you whether you have to take a launch to the port and then a shore excursion to see or do anything or if you can walk off and amuse yourself."