



On Cruises, Some Passengers Have Fun Learning Skills Like Fencing, Making Beer – and How to Make Those Towel Animals

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People love cruise vacations for enjoying the sea, exploring new sights, having fun, getting active and spending time with family and friends, or maybe for simply taking a break from work and life. But along the way, don't be surprised if you learn more than you expected.

On many ships you'll find enrichment programs that include dancing lessons and cooking demonstrations. You can learn to play bridge or sign up for a mixology class to discover secrets to creating exotic cocktails. Some onboard educational opportunities go way beyond the expected, even into cerebral territory.

For instance, on cruises to the Dominican Republic or Cuba on Carnival Corporation's new cruise line, Fathom, passengers attend workshops created with The Stanford Storytelling Project. Classes include "The Story of You."

"We're equipping people with the storytelling tools to tell their own story about who they are and this great moment of change in their lives," said Ted Howes, Fathom's director of product and experience. "We all have stories to tell – and storytelling is a powerful tool both personally and professionally." Included is a storytelling festival on board where guests share their experiences and a video booth where stories can be uploaded to social media.

On Holland America Line ships, Microsoft-trained Digital Workshop hosts lead popular classes on how to use Photo Gallery and Movie Maker, including outlining ways to showcase the cruise experience for the folks back home. You can also pick up other tech skills in the digital workshop powered by Microsoft classes.

Holland America Line's On Location brings a local focus. In New Zealand, for instance, a six-person Maori troupe resides shipboard teaching the *haka* and *poi* dances as well as other cultural rituals. In Hawaii, you can learn fresh flower lei making or how to play a tune on a ukulele.

"The On Location program is about being emotionally and intellectually connected to the places you are visiting," said Roger Hawk, Holland America Line's senior manager of cruise programming.

Guests can also be immersed in the natural world thanks to Holland America Line's partnership with BBC Earth. Programming includes screenings of documentaries and events such as an earth-themed game show and trivia contests.

On the ships of Princess Cruises, guests explore both the sea and solar system. The line has partnered with Discovery Communications for programs such as "Stargazing with Discovery at Sea," where participants head to the top deck for an innovative tour of the major constellations, complete with storytelling. The session was developed with astrophysicist Dr. Hakeem Oluseyi, who

hosts Science Channel's "Outrageous Acts of Science" TV show.

Or passengers can ask questions on everything you always wanted to know about marine operations with Navigation@Sea, a program hosted by a ship officer and including a discussion of the history of navigation from ancient times to now.

For something completely different, set yourself on the road to stardom or just break out of your shell in acting workshops onboard Cunard's Queen Mary 2, the only oceanliner doing regular transatlantic service. Graduates of London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art lead the workshops; the experts also perform onboard.

Channel your inner knight (or pirate) with complimentary fencing classes on the Queen Mary 2 and Queen Victoria oceanliners. The program was created with Leon Paul Fencing Equipment, a British company founded in 1921 by Olympic fencers (and still providing equipment for Olympic competitors). The daily, complimentary classes are taught by a fully certified instructor and open to any guest 18 and up.

For a little less energetic experience, learn about beer-making on a brewery tour onboard Carnival Cruise Line's Carnival Vista, the first North American-based ship to feature a brewery. Carnival Vista's brew master leads the tours, which include samples of the three freshly made brews on board.

A whimsical activity on Carnival Cruise Line ships is learning the "skill" of creating the line's legendary towel animals, a signature element of the Carnival brand's experience. Cabin stewards make more than a million of the frogs, bunnies, elephants and other towel animals each year and hold popular sessions teaching guests some of the more than 40 designs.

Some lessons come through osmosis. For instance, on Italian line Costa Cruises ships you'll likely pick up a few words of Italian whether or not you take the line's complimentary conversational Italian classes.

On the ultra-luxury small ships of Seabourn, learning opportunity takes place both at organized Q&A sessions and informally, as you mingle with experts in their fields – the sort of folks who do TED Talks. You might get quality time with Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, famed mountain climber Paul Deegan or comedian Rita Rudner. Experts from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization are also part of the Seabourn Conversations scene, sharing their knowledge on natural and cultural World Heritage sites around the world.

"Given the intimate size of our ships, you really get to know everyone and that includes our speakers," said Chris Jurasas, Seabourn's entertainment manager. "You could be attending a lecture in the morning and then have dinner with that person and continue on the topic that was discussed that day."

Seabourn also has an Artist in Residence leading hands-on watercolor classes for artistically inclined guests on longer itineraries. The creations are displayed in a shipboard gallery near the end of the cruise.

On longer P&O Cruises sailings (excluding the Britannia), both beginning and experienced painters

can take inspiration from the sea and ports of call in watercolor art classes. You can purchase art materials onboard or bring your own.

Cruising from Miami, Fathom likewise has watercolor painting, but with a little something extra. In a popular "Wine and Paint" class, you create a Dominican-inspired portrait of a woman while sipping varietals.

Fathom also has unusual onboard experiential learning programs designed to compliment onshore volunteer and cultural exchange activities, and to teach a better understanding of yourself as you relate to others.

"Our programming helps orient travelers to the culture and open them up in terms of empathy for where they are traveling so they can act alongside people on shore rather than coming as tourists," said Howes.

One popular session is called "Getting to Know," where guests are shown a photo of a Dominican family and asked what they see. "It's a way of assessing whether we are looking at it through our eyes or their eyes," Howes explained.

Meditation classes are also part of the Fathom scene, as is a Lifehack Bootcamp to help interested cruisers become more effective with their time and find ways to become "changemakers" once they get back home.

"We're all looking for meaning in our lives and ways to make a difference," Howes said.

You may bring back more in terms of learning experiences from your cruise than you ever imagined.