

San Francisco Chronicle

Avoiding the plagues of cruising Steering clear of maladies that put ship trips in troubled waters

Fixing a bad trip

BY SPUD HILTON

Never go on a cruise with statisticians. They know that, statistically speaking, there are as many things that can go wrong with a voyage as can go right. You might spill mango chutney on your tux shirt at the captain's party. You might get an uneven tan. You might wake up bobbing alone in the Caribbean Sea, trying to convince yourself those circling fins belong to dolphins.

But the truth is that most problems on cruise ships are relatively minor annoyances, especially if your general disposition is positive and, um, flexible. There is, however, the occasional horror story about Homeric tribulations -- truly epic bouts of sea sickness, cabins worthy of a Stephen King novel, demonic zombie tablemates selling Amway products. They are the plagues -- rare but real -- that can make you wish you'd spent the time and money at the Grand Canyon. Or even New Jersey.

So in the spirit of being more prepared than paranoid, here are our tips about how to cope with -- or better yet, avoid altogether -- seven trip tragedies that, on a personal level, can turn the Love Boat into the Lusitania faster than you can say, "Honey, have you seen the bags?"

SEASICKNESS

Unless you were the love child of a North Atlantic cod fisherman and a mermaid, you've probably been queasy on choppy seas -- if not on the ship, probably during the 40-minute ride in a stifling, musty tender boat.

Avoiding: Beating mal de mer begins long before you see the sea. Pick the right itinerary -- the Caribbean is usually calm, Drake's Passage is a chunder-fest -- and pick the right cabin.

"The closer you are to the lowest level in the midship, the calmer it will be," said Anne Campbell, co-founder of CruiseCritic.com and CruiseMates.com. "The irony of cruising is the higher you are, the more expensive it is, but also the more you'll feel the motion."

If you have a history of getting queasy during the credits to Gilligan's Island, see a doctor and ask about a scopolamine patch. Not that bad? Go for over-the-counter Bonine or Dramamine, and start taking the medicine well before you board. Both contain antihistamines (unless you buy the non-drowsy formula), so if those knock you out, consider ginger -- tea, capsules, candy or crystalized -- which works well for some people without the zombifying effects of the drugs. Even Altoids has come up with a ginger variety, although you might have to eat half a tin to get enough of the stuff.

Hate ginger? Hyland's (see below) makes a homeopathic remedy, a little white pill that dissolves under your tongue. Wrist bands work for many, but read the directions twice; pressure points can be elusive.

Coping: Go outside and look at the horizon. Get fresh air. Call room service and ask for apples and crackers to settle the stomach, according to Campbell, and don't lie down. Sadly, cocktails will only make it worse.

Visit: Reed's Ginger Brew, www.reedsgingerbrew.com/candy.html; Hyland's, www.hylands.com; Sea-Band, www.sea-band.com/seaband.htm.

THE CABIN FROM HELL

So your cabin is next to the Night-Shift Anvil-Dropping Office. The toilet works fine -- but in reverse. The sheets look like they were used to bandage a fatal head wound. The cast of "Riverdance" practices in the room above. To some people, the cabin isn't an important factor, but you gotta sleep somewhere.

Avoiding: "Guaranteed category" cabins are cheaper for a reason: They are the rooms that everyone who had a choice didn't want. If quiet is important, pick a specific room. Travel agents and Internet booking sites have floor plans for ships, so look first at what's on your floor (elevators, laundry room, bomb disposal), then look at the floors above and below for galleys, nightclubs, engine rooms and theaters. Also, never take a maiden voyage -- ever -- unless you crave



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the smell of wet paint, carpet fumes and 1,200 malfunctioning toilets.

Coping: Complain to the front desk early and often, but be as polite as you are firm. (Don't be that guy who thinks his ticket entitles him to treat everyone like the "hired help.") The staff should move you to a suitable room or promise to deal with the noise source. If they don't, repeat Step 1. Rooms like that shouldn't exist, and cruise lines know it; they rely on you being too timid to complain.

If it's noisy neighbors, let them know (again, be cool), and if it continues, let the staff know.

NOROVIRUS

Lately it's been known as the scourge of the high seas -- even though you're 10 times more likely to catch it on land. Getting it on land, however, doesn't typically mean trying to enjoy a \$200-a-day vacation within crawling range of a suction-flush toilet.

Avoiding: Norovirus covers a gang of nasty viruses with common symptoms: vomiting, diarrhea, exhaustion and, sometimes, fever. There is no vaccine.

The Centers for Disease Control says: Wash hands often, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer as necessary and, for the love of God, stop shaking hands. Really. Try bowing instead.

For peace of mind, you could research which ships have sanitation issues (www.cdc.gov/nceh/vsp), but so far that hasn't been a good predictor of future outbreaks. Also, be aware of where and what you eat while in port -- you could end up as Patient Zero for the next big outbreak.

Coping: Don't bother with antibiotics: They're useless. The bug only lasts a couple of days, so the best move is to drink lots of water and ride out the storm. Short of giving you an IV for severe dehydration or pronouncing you dead, the ship's doctor isn't going to be much help, either, so save your money. Opinions differ on whether relieving the symptoms with Imodium just prolongs the malady.

Also: If you're sick and the staff knows it, you will be quarantined. In some cases, passengers have been confined to cabins the entire week, despite feeling better (and, presumably, being noncontagious) after a couple of days -- and they did not qualify for refunds.

LOST LUGGAGE

You and your ship are chugging around the West Indies, but your Samsonites are chugging around carousel No. 4 at Charles de Gaulle International? Unless it's a Windjammer Barefoot ship or a nudist cruise, wearing the same outfit all week -- especially one with lime-green flip-flops -- isn't really an option. What now?

Avoiding: There are a boatload of reasons to fly to your departure city a day before the ship leaves, and lost luggage is near the top of the list. Allowing an extra day for your wayward bags to catch up -- and eliminating any chance of wearing hiking shorts on formal night -- is well worth the added expense. Also, make sure all luggage is labeled and tagged (inside and out) and includes a copy of your itinerary, especially if you don't have a nonstop flight.

Last line of defense: Pack extra underwear in your carry-on.

Coping: When you book flights through the cruise line, missing bags become their problem. And if it's the cruise line's problem, make sure the staff is doing everything possible to fix it; keep track of the names of the people helping you. (You might want to tip them later.)

Push for a modest onboard credit to buy a few clothes and sundries in the ship's shops. You might not get it, but it can't hurt to ask. If there's a tux/gown rental shop onboard, it probably leases by the week. Might as well get your money's worth out of it.

BAD WEATHER

Mother Nature can be a harsh travel agent. She can turn a cruise in the sunniest time of year into seven days of torrential downpour. Or fog. Or oppressive humidity. Or flying monkeys.

Avoiding: No guarantees, but research improves the odds. Start at www.weatherbase.com and look up temperatures and rainy-day stats for each port, especially the departure city. Go to Weather.com for trip-planning features and a thorough section on hurricane season. (If you can't pass up the bargains that time of year, build in a few extra days at the end of the trip in case the ship can't return for a while.)

Coping: The captain can play hide-and-seek with storms, but again, no guarantees. Bring games, an iPod, reading material and an open mind about the agony and ecstasy of bingo. For warmer climates, bring a lightweight, rainproof windbreaker, mostly to protect your gear while in ports.



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TERRIBLE TABLEMATES

The sweaty guy in the magenta leisure suit wants to spend each dinner telling you about his “close personal relationship” with (Jesus/Allah/Buddha/Krishna/Tony Robbins). ‘Nuff said.

Avoiding: If you really don’t want to chance it, book the trip early (six to nine months) and request a table for two. If you’re not deeply nostalgic about traditional dining, consider booking a ship with alternative restaurants.

Lastly, visit one of the online cruise community boards (CruiseCritic.com or CruiseMates.com) and find someone on the same cruise. Exchange e-mail as a test for compatibility before the trip.

Coping: If the first night was difficult to endure, find the maitre d’ after dinner and ask to be moved (it’s more common than you think). Don’t wait until the next night. If you feel you have to make an excuse, be vague: You ran into old friends and they invited you to their table.

Also: There’s a chance you’re the dreaded Tablemate from Hell. Go easy on the religion and politics for a few nights, until you know everyone’s comfort level. Also, check the conversation occasionally to make sure you’re not the only one talking.

OVERINDULGENCE

It’s rare to hear the word “moderation” on a cruise ship, but when it comes to food, alcohol and the sun, it’s probably best to remember the cliché about too much of a good thing.

Avoiding: Be smart. Live it up and have a swell time, but remember that: a) drunk people fall off ships, b) hangovers can put a real crimp in sightseeing and c) with today’s technology, you’re never more than a few clicks from having an exposed part of your anatomy show up on the Internet.

Save the serious tanning for the last few days of the trip. You won’t spend the voyage in agony, and your color will still show when you return to work. Better yet, use a self-tanning product before the trip to make baking by the pool unnecessary.

Lastly, it’s a cruise ship, not a Soviet-era bread line. Are those four extra sausages really necessary, or are you just trying to squeeze your money’s worth out of the trip? Are you going to feel like snorkeling if you’re stuffed like a Christmas goose?

Coping: Pack a first-aid kit with Pepto Bismol, Alka-Seltzer, an aloe vera gel with a local anesthetic, and a laminated card that says, “If found unconscious, leave me somewhere I can’t accidentally stagger over a railing and fall into the sea.” This, among other things, will save your family from a plague of its own: the embarrassment of appearing on the Nancy Grace show.