



A well-planned cruise can cost less than a comparable vacation on land.

BABY, LET'S CRUISE

TIME WAS WHEN CRUISING WAS THE EXCLUSIVE PASTIME OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS. NOW ANYONE CAN GET IN ON THE FUN.

By Michael Bennett

The first time I cruised the seas 15 years ago, I found everything I was looking for: beautiful islands, scrumptious food and lots of activities. But I couldn't help wondering, Where are all the black folks?

On a ship with nearly 3,000 passengers and hundreds of crew members, brothers and sisters were about as numerous as they are at the Winter Olympics.

For the first two days of my seven-day trip, I made note of every person of color I saw. The first day went by...nothing. Day two came and went—still nothing. On the morning of the third day, a black couple sat down at my table during breakfast. It was wonderful sharing our experiences, and we vowed to stay in touch during the cruise. Spotting each other over the next four days wasn't difficult; we were the only people of color on the ship.

Princess Cruises treated us like royalty, and I wondered why more black people weren't taking part in this grand escapade. Was it the expense? Was it not knowing where to go? Could it have been they weren't sure they'd be accepted? I must admit, when I first examined the travel brochure and noticed there was no one in the photos who looked like me, I wondered whether I'd be welcome. But I decided to go anyhow; after all, I was headed to islands where black people were plentiful.

Times have changed since that enchanting spring vacation. Today, several cruise lines are reaching out to African Americans, obviously hoping to capture some of the millions of dollars we spend on travel annually. This year, radio talk-show host Tom Joyner has booked all of the berths on Royal Caribbean's *Explorer of the Seas* (proceeds go to his foundation, which helps students attending historically black colleges).

Prices for a cruise run the gamut from cheap to super-expensive, so it pays to shop around. If you book a moderately priced cruise package, the cost per day can actually be cheaper than flying to a destination, renting a car, paying for a lengthy hotel stay and shelling out for food and entertainment.

Here's the magic question: How can you get the best bang for your buck?

KNOW WHEN YOU WANT TO TRAVEL

Travel-industry prices are adjusted

seasonally. You'll pay less for a cruise if you travel during the off-season. You can determine whether a place is in the off-season or peak season by following the sun. Warm-weather climates such as the Caribbean and Mexico are off-season during the summer. Conversely, places like Alaska and the Mediterranean hit their peak during the summer. Also, remember that places in the southern hemisphere such as Brazil, South Africa and Australia are seasonally opposite the U.S. While we're enjoying our 90-degree summer temperatures, its winter south of the equator.

PRICING

Cruise lines can be divided into four broad price categories, which are based on off-season rates.

The average cost of a moderately priced cruise is about \$80 per person per day. Cruise lines in this category include: **Imperial Majesty Cruises** ▼ **Sun Line Cruises** ▼ **Regal Cruises**

The mid-price cruise category will cost approximately \$90 to \$130 per person per day. Companies in this range include: **Celebrity Cruises** ▼ **Carnival Cruises** ▼ **Costa Cruise Lines NV** ▼ **Disney Cruise Line** ▼ **Holland America Line** ▼ **Norwegian Cruise Line** ▼ **Princess Cruises** ▼ **Royal Caribbean International**

Luxury cruises start at \$300 per person per day. Cruise lines in this group are: **Crystal Cruises** ▼ **Cunard Line** ▼ **Radisson**