

Choosing Your Port Adventures: A Disney Cruise Line Review

by Michele Dakho, PassPorter Guest Contributor

"I want adventure in the great wide somewhere -- I want it more than I can tell..."

Belle sang it best and this may be your song when your Disney Cruise is finally booked. You may be prepared to get onboard but what to do when you pull into port is an entirely different story.

"Should I get off the ship?" is one of the most common questions in regard to cruising. Many people are intimidated by the port adventure situation and the ports themselves and let's face it, for most of us our "world experience" revolves around the magical World Showcase in Epcot. You feel safe on the ship but venturing out onto dry land in an unfamiliar place can be scary, so do you stay on the ship or do you go into port, and if you go into port should you book an excursion?

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□ Disney Cruise Line offers a wide variety of port adventures for each port of call, so how do you know which one is right for you? You may find there are several port adventures that are very similar on any given itinerary. For example, in Nassau alone Disney Cruise Line offers at least four different dolphin excursions, so how do you know which one to choose? In Walt Disney World we have Stacy on our TV to tell us about the "Must Dos" but she's nowhere to be found when it comes to cruising, so how do you decide?

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□ Variety is the spice of life and you'll find plenty of options for most port adventures, in fact your biggest problem may be narrowing them all down, particularly the ones that sound alike. So where do you start in your quest for the perfect adventure?

The port adventure section on the Disney Cruise Line website is a great place to start. You can filter the selections by port which will give you a much more manageable place to start. There is no need to read through port adventures for places you won't be experiencing, so find the port you're looking for in the drop down menu and start there.

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□ Now you have your options and the real decision-making process begins. So how do you know what to look for and how do you find that perfect port adventure for you? Here are a few tips to understanding and choosing port adventures.

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□ **Filter by Age:** If you are looking for a family friendly adventure,

filter by age to eliminate the extra bulk of excursions that you won't be able to enjoy as a family. Many port adventures have a minimum age limit, so if your son or daughter isn't old enough to swim with the dolphins, its best to take that option off the table right away (and pray they never saw it in the first place!)

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☛ Read the descriptions carefully: The devil is in the details, the similar excursions read almost identically to each other so read carefully to distinguish where the differences are in each adventure. Dolphin excursions are very popular for families with children but how do you know which one to pick? Some are excursions where you are in the water with a dolphin, others have limited interaction or photo opportunities, so read the description carefully. If you want to "swim" with a dolphin you'll want to look for key words like "dorsal pull," which means you'll be holding on the dolphin's fin and be propelled through the water. Posing with a dolphin for a photo and being propelled across the water by one are two entirely different things, so look for those details so you aren't disappointed.

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☛ Check the price: It's often debated whether it's best to book port adventures directly through the cruise line or if you can get it cheaper on your own. My advice on this is to be careful what you wish for, the "cheaper" price may not be the great value you think it is! While an excursion may look more affordable through a third-party vendor or doing it on your own, don't forget you may have to budget for transportation to and from the location, which is often where a bulk of the cost can lie. Also look at what the excursion includes; one with a more hefty price tag may include a light lunch, beverages, different transportation options, etc. so look for the items that are altering that price tag.

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☛ Check the time: Your time in port is not indefinite and the "all aboard" time is NOT optional. While the backs of Disney ships are super cute, I doubt you'd enjoy viewing one from the dock as your ship sails away without you. Set your watch to "ships time" so you'll be back onboard in plenty of time (Disney Cruise Line usually observes the local time, rather than a different "ship's time," but be sure to check). Some excursions seem to offer a full day of activity until you read the description and realize you have a 3-hour ride to do the 15-minute excursion you paid for (that may be a tad dramatic, but you get the point). Float plane rides are a popular excursion for Alaska itineraries and while the price range may seem drastic between some of the excursions offered, check for the detail that tells you how much time you will be in the air (there is a big difference between a 30-minute flight and a 60-minute flight, though the cost difference may be less than you'd think). The flight times usually vary, which affects the

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price and your overall enjoyment of the excursion. Disney Cruise Line will always plan port adventures in accordance with the length of time in port, meaning they won't plan a 5-hour excursion when they are only in port for 4 hours and 30 minutes. The excursion providers work closely with the cruise line to ensure timely departure and return to the ship, so if you book a port adventure with the cruise line, they will get you back to the ship on time. That being said, when you venture on your own you are responsible for the time, so don't be "that family" running through the streets praying the ship hasn't left yet. While Disney values your family, the fees charged to the cruise line for time-in-port overages are extremely high, and you can't expect an entire ship full of families and crew to wait because you decided to take an extra snorkel on the beach.

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• Read reviews: In the grand scheme of things, popular excursion destinations are actually pretty limited in number; that means you shouldn't have a problem finding reviews by fellow cruisers. Chances are someone has made the same mistake you're about to by booking a certain port adventure. Don't waste your hard-earned money on an excursion that's sub-par. Read what others have said about the excursion before you click, "book now." PassPorter's Guide to the Disney Cruise Line has a nice overview of port adventures, and the discussion forums are a great place to find trip reports from fellow cruisers. Reliable sites such as Trip Advisor are also a great place to find first-hand reviews and ratings so you can decide which adventure is right for you.

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Whatever you decide to do, remember to be safe and use common sense while in port. Keep your family together, don't flash money around, and keep your personal belongings with you at all times. Don't forget your Key to the World Cards and government-issued photo ID, you'll need both to go into port and return to the ship.

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It's not unusual for people to opt out of port adventures and stay onboard the ship. You can often find deals at the spa on port days and there are much fewer people onboard, so if you've been looking for some quiet time at the pool or a shorter line at the AquaDuck, port days might be a good option for you. Don't be afraid to consider a port adventure, the resources are out there and with a little bit of homework you may just find your perfect adventure in the "great wide somewhere."

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