

# Holidays at Sea

*Celebrating Christmas,  
Hanukkah and the  
New Year on a cruise*



Disney Cruise Line's "Very Merrytime Cruises" feature Disney characters dressed in festive attire and a boatload of special events.

Christmas markets in cities along the way. My holiday cruise, a 12-day voyage through the West Indies, had Oceania Cruises' 684-passenger *Insignia* standing in for Santa's sleigh on Christmas and party central on New Year's Eve. An overall positive experience, it did leave me wondering what cruise lines in other demographics and destinations do for the holidays. I hope to take a holiday cruise again, but maybe next time I'll bring the kids and grandkids along.

Only a handful of children were aboard the *Insignia*'s cruise, not surprising since Oceania ships have no programs or facilities for kids. Still, Santa had gifts for the few little ones invited to sit on his lap and pose for photos. Several adults had a turn on Santa's lap, too, much to the amusement of all gathered around the ship's upper and lower great hall for the Christmas morning festivities. A string quartet played, and servers poured creamy cups of eggnog.

My fellow passengers were mostly a well-to-do crowd of experienced cruisers, some who had been aboard Oceania vessels multiple times. They came from Canada, South America, Europe and the Far East as well as the U.S.

Christmas Eve happened to coincide with the first lighting of the Hanukkah candle. With no rabbi onboard, the few Jewish passengers gathered for the ceremony took matters into their own hands, reading from a pamphlet provided by the cruise director, lighting a menorah and singing traditional songs. Someone asked where everyone was from, and voices rose from around the deck: New Jersey, Arizona, Florida, Mexico, Germany, France.

A nondenominational Christian service just before midnight on Christmas Eve filled two-thirds of the seats in the largest lounge. The ship's band and string quartet provided

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Cruise ships pull out all the stops in ushering in the New Year. Expect a countdown and flutes of Champagne as you party hearty with new friends.

By Katherine Rodeghier

**E**scape. My fellow passengers seemed to share this underlying theme when asked their reason for choosing to spend the holidays on a cruise. Holidays at home are too hectic, they said. Families too distant. Adult children will spend the holidays with their spouse's family. Those of divorced parents will be with their other parent. Elderly parents have passed, leaving little behind but memories—time to make new ones.

The reaction from my own family and friends proved to be a mix of envy and dismay. The men seemed surprised that my husband and I would leave home to cruise over the holidays. The women, who are usually the ones elbow deep in gift wrap, gave a big sigh and pronounced it a wonderful idea. No poring over holiday recipes, sweating over a stove, clearing the table and laboring over a sink full of dirty dishes. Let the crew do the clean-up and the chef plan festive meals.

Holiday cruisers can skip the hours spent putting up a tree and decorating the house. Just hang a wreath on the door for the neighbors to see, and split. Cruise ships are awash in holiday finery, with expertly decorated trees standing majestically in atriums and brightening halls and lobbies. Garlands twist around stairway railings. Carols echo around ships as madrigal singers in Victorian dress stroll by. A holiday cruise offers all the ambiance without the muss and fuss.

When it's time to ring in the New Year, no designated driver is necessary. The captain navigates safely across dark seas while revelers count down and the calendar flips.

Then there's the weather. Those who live in northern climates happily avoid below-zero wind chills with holiday cruises in the Caribbean, spending the morning sitting in the sun rather than straining their backs shoveling snow. And those bound for river cruises in Europe trade the packed shopping malls at home for magical



For Jewish passengers, many cruise lines arrange services during Hanukkah. Christian services may be organized on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Princess Cruises

Disney Cruise Line/Keat Phillips

Princess Cruises



Madrigal singers circulate on Oceania's *Insignia* during holiday cruises.



The Christmas market in Basel, Switzerland, enchants river cruise passengers.

## Holidays at Sea

*Continued*

music, and performers led the singing of traditional carols. In place of an ordained minister, the cruise director and a few passengers and crew read Bible passages and gave spiritual talks. An abbreviated service drew a smaller crowd on Christmas morning.

The "country club casual" dress code on Oceania went by the wayside on New Year's Eve when many of the women donned evening gowns and beaded cocktail dresses. I wish I had dug out something with sequins from my closet at home. After dinner and the nightly show, Horizons lounge and Martinis bar filled with passengers in party hats as flutes of free Champagne were passed. Everyone counted down to the New Year, and the pianist played "Auld Lang Syne."

The chef, who prepared whole Christmas goose with walnut stuffing in the main dining room on December 25, really outdid himself with a 3½-hour New Year's brunch. Multiple buffet tables stayed loaded with an array of hot and cold dishes, ice carvings, a tower of ornamental breads, meat-carving stations and a long table of chocolate desserts with three tall chocolate sculptures.

Throughout our cruise gingerbread houses, two feet high, stood at the entrance to the ship's four restaurants, and a whole gingerbread village with Seuss-like scenes occupied a corner of the main hall. Holiday films were screened in the main lounge.

On Carnival Cruise Line ships, movies such as *The Polar Express* play poolside on giant LED screens. December's early sunsets in the Northern Hemisphere mean older children remain awake after dark and can participate in this and other evening activities on deck.

With a broad demographic, Carnival caters to a wide range of ages and income levels, and the holidays are one of the most popular times of the year for family cruises. Santa always makes an appearance toting a bag of gifts for the kids. Youngsters in the Camp Ocean children's program put on a special holiday show. Both kids and adults join in caroling on deck, and Midnight Mass in the main lounge is well attended.

Disney Cruise Line provides plenty of children's activities year-round, with extra fun built into holiday itineraries. The first night kicks off with Mickey's Tree-Lighting Magic in the atrium as Disney characters lead carols and lights on the three-deck-tall tree click on. All four Disney ships deck out in holiday finery, a total of 130 trees, 126 wreaths and 3,768 feet of garlands. Passengers can order miniature trees for their staterooms.





Young Princess passengers enjoy a December romp in the Cayman Islands.



The *Insignia's* kitchen crew puts finishing touches on a gingerbread village.

Children decorate Christmas stockings and gingerbread houses and make holiday cards and animation cells during their Disney cruise. On Christmas morning they gather around the atrium tree and put on a musical performance. The whole family joins in deck parties with hula hooping, limbo under oversized candy canes and conga line dances. Crew members teach the moves of the Yuletide Slide.

On Disney's private Bahamian island, Castaway Cay, decked-out Christmas trees are brought onto the sand as a backdrop for Disney character meet-and-greets. Passengers on shore excursions in Cozumel get a taste of Mexican culture by making holiday piñatas.

Christmas dinner menus feature Virginia ham, a double chocolate Yule log with meringue mushrooms and Mickey's chocolate Christmas tree. Adults can enjoy poinsettini and Christmas cookie cocktails. An egg-nog mocha is just one of the specialty coffees on holiday cruises. Sparkling wine comes in commemorative flutes on New Year's Eve.

Jewish services are organized on Disney cruises on each day of Hanukkah, and Christian services are held on Christmas morning, with a Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

Cunard Line also organizes both Jewish and Christian services on its holiday cruises. Last Christmas morning on the *Queen Mary 2*, for example, it held a Catholic Mass, Protestant service and an interdenominational captain's service with donations made to Seafarers charity. A Hanukkah service took place that evening.

Cunard's British roots came through with a broadcast of the Queen's Christmas Speech in the Golden Lion pub. For silly fun, passengers headed to the pub for Christmas trivia and a Name that Christmas Melody contest. Sophisticates could partake in a fancy Champagne Christmas Tea, a Christmas concert by a clas-

sical guitarist and a formal Christmas Ball in the Queen's Room. Senior officers on the *QM2* organized the singing of carols, and Santa led a musical parade through the ship's public areas. The youngest passengers received gifts.

plenty of activities for adults on late-December cruises in Europe. Its core demographic remains the same year-round: experienced travelers, age 55 and up from North America, the UK and Australia who have an interest in history, art and culture.

Four Viking itineraries in Europe extend into Christmas this year: "Rhine Getaway," "Danube Waltz," "Portugal's River of Gold" and "Christmas in Germany." Ethnic holiday foods may be added to menus, such as *Lebkuchen* from Germany; *truffle au chocolate*, apple cranberry tart and chocolate Yule log from France; and *Donauwellen* cake and *Sachertorte* from Austria. Passengers might bake gingerbread cookies with a ship's executive chef and help decorate the ship's Christmas tree. Holiday decorations lean toward simple and traditional with classic touches throughout.

Individual itineraries incorporate additional events with a holiday theme. On Viking's "Christmas in Germany" cruise between Cologne and Nuremberg, for example, passengers have the chance to attend baking demonstrations, classical music performances and lectures on holiday traditions in Europe. The eight-day cruise includes stops in six ports with an optional pre-trip to Prague and post-trip to Paris.

A big attraction on all river cruises in Europe is the open-air Christmas markets in many ports where ships call in the days leading up to December 25. Often held in medieval town squares and down cobblestone lanes surrounding the spires of Gothic churches, vendor stalls stand laden

with hand-crafted toys, ornaments, nutcrackers and clothing made by local artisans.

And when it's time to take a break from hunting for gifts and treasure, shoppers can buy a handful of roasted chestnuts and relax with a cup of warm *Glühwein* before heading back to their holiday home on the river. **CT**



Elegant holiday decorations add sparkle to Cunard Line ships in December, providing plenty of photo opportunities.

Cunard has high-quality children's facilities onboard and crew members to supervise activities. Families on holiday cruises can make gingerbread together and decorate cookies.

The ships of Viking River Cruises aren't designed with children in mind but offer

Cunard Line