

# CRUISING A LA CARTE

By Nichole Bernier

Our kayaks slipped through the Canadian bay, paddles creating tiny tornadoes in the still water. The rocky shoreline rose straight from boulders to evergreens against water so dense and calm that the surface appeared black. Above, the gray sky was like a damp wool blanket.

The four kayaks moved like missiles on a radar screen, honing in on the small space beneath a narrow bridge. We angled through to the other side, and glided past a tiny fishing community with hundreds of lobster traps piled symmetrically on each dock. By the time we reached Mars Island, we'd been paddling for hours, and were famished. Our guide laid out a Tupperware buffet of marinated salmon, cheese and vegetables, and gooey brownies. We attacked it with unusual gusto, considering we'd had a three-course breakfast that morning and a four-course dinner the night before.

The truth is, this was no rustic kayaking expedition. We were camped in the Halifax harbor on the luxury vessel Crystal Symphony, known as one of the most upscale ships plying the seas. But we were using the Symphony as a means to an end. Our plan was to hopscotch the eastern seaboard, jumping on and off the ship to do fun things like kayaking, hiking and sailing in a different port city each day. How else could you cover so much ground for your favorite sports? Today kayaking in Halifax, tomorrow hiking in Bar Harbor. It would almost be like chartering the proverbial jet to Paris for lunch.

Crystal hasn't exactly been known as sporty, and neither have cruise lines in general. As the stereotype goes, the biggest sprint you're likely to find onboard is the dash to the midnight madness chocolate buffet. But that's changing, as cruise lines reach out to more health-conscious passengers with spas, balanced meals, enhanced fitness centers and sportier itineraries.

Examples of this focus on active lifestyle are spreading throughout the cruise business. Royal Caribbean, a leader in fit cruising — all its ships are outfitted with rock-climbing walls — has a robust roster of shore excursions that

includes heli-hiking in Alaska and swimming with sting rays in Antigua. Its five Voyager Class ships are the most fitness-oriented of its fleet, with inline skating tracks, putting greens, golf simulators, running tracks, and even ice skating rinks ([royalcaribbean.com](http://royalcaribbean.com)). Norwegian Cruise Line has a “Dive into Adventure” program for all its ships offering both land and water-based activities, from lava-seeking hikes up a Hawaiian volcano to horseback cattle drives in Florida. A port and cruise consultant can assist passengers looking for some independent arrangements, such as bike and kayak rentals ([ncl.com](http://ncl.com)).

Like Crystal Cruises, a few lines will pull out the red carpet and plan entire day trips for passengers ([crystalcruises.com](http://crystalcruises.com)). Celebrity Cruises offers personal assistance for made-to-order tours, rentals, and transportation, as does Cunard Line, which adds a fee for the service ([cunardline.com](http://cunardline.com)).

Silversea Cruises, known for luxurious ships scaled down to only 300-400 passengers, has been offering personalized shore excursions since it was founded 10 years ago, and trumpets the free service in all its cruise literature ([silversea.com](http://silversea.com)). The concierge can do anything from designing a jogging route on the Greek island of Santorini to planning a guided beachfront hiking itinerary in South America.

“You don’t have to know what you want,” explains Silversea spokesperson Brad Ball. “The concierge will know the region, or be from that region, and will be armed with suggestions for you unique to that port.”

WE DECIDED TO PUT THIS BUDDING TREND TO THE TEST at the luxury end of the cruising spectrum. Crystal – a cruise line whose demographic skews rather older than your average triathlete -- has beefed up the role of its shore-excursion specialist to become more of a customized activities director. Think Julie McCoy outfitted with a cellphone and high-speed internet instead of a clipboard and whistle. It works something like this: If the ship is stopping in Bar Harbor, Maine, the pre-arranged shore excursions might include a bus tour of the town and a biking expedition through Acadia National Park, and a lobster-bake lunch. But you’d rather go, say, hiking up one of the mountains in the park. You present

your request to the shore-excursion specialist, who then either offers suggestions or tailors a day with the activities of your choosing. Which is exactly what we did.

Gorham Mountain is one of the smallest of the 26 mountains on Mount Desert Island, and at only 525 feet, the perfect size for a lunchtime hike. Crystal had coordinated our trek in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce, who in turn rustled up van transportation and a hiking outfitter. The van was waiting for us when we stepped off the ship.

It was an easy ascent, skipping up the small rocks and boulders. After about an hour we reached the summit, and were rewarded with a vista of clear blue over the Porcupine Islands and the open Atlantic. The guides doled out lobster rolls – made fresh from the catches of local traps, of course -- and we sat in scenic peace feeling a little sorry for the folks sitting on the bus tour. And our hike cost about \$20 less (\$35 instead of \$56).

“Actually, passengers are taking more and more initiative to plan their own shore excursions,” notes Clare Bingham, executive director of the Bar Harbor Chamber of Commerce, who estimates that about 25 percent of the cruisers who come ashore in Bar Harbor do organize their own shore activities. “We’ve been finding the whole cruise market is changing and becoming more self-sufficient. The more upscale the boat, the more travel savvy the passengers tend to be, and the more motivated they are to take initiative.”

Back on board that evening, I chatted up fellow passengers about what kind of activities they had been doing on the shore. Travel savvy, yes. Motivated, some. Informed about the customized shore excursions, not at all. None of the passengers I met realized that the ship could tailor shore activities for them. Janet, a hospital executive who has been on 10 international cruises, said she enjoyed the bus tour but would have preferred hiking if she’d known it was an option. Victoria and Havier, a couple from Mexico City, had their Nova Scotia kayaking excursion canceled due to low enrollment, but it hadn’t occurred to them that the cruise line could arrange one privately. Peter and Bill, two 50-something New Yorkers, had taken the bull by the horns and arranged for their own rock climbing lesson in Acadia.

“We figured, why not? Here we are with these great mountains, and we’re going to shop or sit on a bus all day?” said Peter. It hadn’t occurred to them to ask the ship to set it up for them. But now that I mentioned it, they had some requests for the shore-excursion specialist for Boston tomorrow.

Which meant I’d better get to him first. I had a very specific request in mind for Michael Braathen, who coordinated port activities for the Symphony. I’m quite familiar with Boston (actually, I live just 20 miles to the south), so I decided to design my own dream day of fitness. The best jogging route in Boston is along the Esplanade, a loop around the Boston and Cambridge sides of the Charles River. I was also planning a stop at the best place to buy new running shoes, Niketown. But the highlight of my day would be a visit to the new hot fitness club I’ve always wanted to try, the LA Sports/Boston.

I felt entitled to a dream day of *something*. In spite of the fact that I’m on a cruise, I really hadn’t been able to relax. The first time I called home, I found out a huge porcelain platter had fallen from the mantel and crashed on the floor beside my one-year-old daughter. The next time I called, my husband told me that he’d locked himself out of the house, and had to snip through five screens before finding an open window. Later, the dog had run away again. Not relaxing.

I had in mind a yoga and spa splurge. The catch is that The Sports Club/LA Boston is members-only, so I decided to test Crystal’s clout and the shore-specialist’s powers of persuasion. They tried valiantly to arrange a day pass, but apparently there were limits to what even a 21st-century Julie McCoy could do. However, we found a loophole: nonmembers can gain entrée if they purchase two spa treatments. One facial, one hot-stone massage and twenty sun salutations later, I am almost relaxed.

THE NEXT MORNING WE ARRIVE IN NEWPORT, the last active stop before a day at sea and then the cruise’s disembarkation point, New York. The ship’s own shore excursions are tempting, with tours of the Gilded Age mansions on Bellevue Avenue. But this is, after all, the home surf of the America’s Cup sailing races. So we arrange for a noontime sail on the 72-foot schooner Madeleine.

It is a perfect fall day, the epitome of autumn windbreaker weather. We tack and jibe inside Narragansett Bay, passing massive Fort Adams (home of Newport's jazz and folk festivals) and Hammersmith Farm, the childhood home of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy.

The water is calm, the wind is warm, and my mind is as much an empty canvas as the mainsail. I have called home this morning, and everyone is healthy, well-rested and well-fed. The dog has been found, and the clipped screens are under repair. At the moment, my only responsibility is switching position from port to starboard as the boom swings from side to side. And even this is an exercise in comfort – to stay sitting on the sunny side – rather than necessity.

I am relaxed.