

Cruise Review: Costa Cruises: Italy, Greece, Croatia (Venice to Venice), November 2014



At my last email, I had just arrived in Venice and was ready to embark on a Adriatic cruise. I had 10 days in between the Florence art program, and the OAT trip to tuscany/Umbria, and the best solution for me was some kind of tour or cruise. It is late in the "season" in this part of Italy so my choices were limited. The Costa cruise to the Adriatic seemed the best solution. And afterwards, I wanted to stay two days in Venice.

I don't have a "trip summary" to send you, but what follows is the cruise review I am posting on www.cruisecritic.com the cruise-world counterpart to tripadvisor. I hope this information will help others who decide to embark on the Costa Fascinosa in the Adriatic.

I had a love/hate relationship with the cruise. It wasn't bad, but you had to make it what you wanted to be. The capacity of Costa's Fascinosa is about 3780 people and the occupancy was

99%. 1500 of those were French. There were only 127 English-speaking folks and 25 Americans on board!

I loved my cabin -- it was large, comfortable, no stains or burn holes in the carpet. The ship is only 2 years old, so everything is reasonably fresh. The cabin had three closets and lots of drawers for my stuff. It felt good to "unpack" and stay awhile.

The first few days dinners (I had first seating) were a problem. First night, I was assigned to a table with a Dutch couple. They made a valiant effort to speak English, but it was almost painful. They were also upset as they had come with friends and the couples had been separated. Next night, I showed up at "my" table and there were four French people sitting there. The waitress walked me around to the two maitre'd to find me a table. I was put at a table for 4 -- all by myself.

I was not looking forward to dinnertime the third evening. But I showed up at my newly assigned table to find two American couples -- all teachers! One couple had been in the Peace Corps in Ghana and Fiji. I was happy at last.

As for lunches..... it is open seating, and they try to fill up the tables as you walk in to the restaurant. The first afternoon I was walked to a table with a really nice French couple who spoke a little English. The next afternoon, I was put at a table with a group of Jehovah's Witnesses from Austria and after some slight pleasantries, they tried to convert me! The third afternoon it was

two Spanish men living in Majorca one of whom wants to do the Santiago de Compostela walk, so we had a nice conversation (in Spanish!) about it.

As for the ports - where I could I tried to strike out on my own, but in some places it is just more convenient to take the shore excursion: Corfu and Santorini. I realized how big business these excursions are when I counted 28 buses waiting at the Port of Dubrovnik!

It was an interesting experience!

XXXXXX

Review of Costa Fascinosa for cruise critic.com

I had cabin 7395 on the Costa Fascinosa (Venice to Venice - November, 2014) which was nice size, comfortable and had a balcony with two chairs and a small table. There were three closets -- two clothes closets and one with shelves and a safe. The room had twin beds, made up as one king size bed, and there was a sofa that could be made up into another bed for three people in the room. I was by myself so there was plenty of room. Three people in this cabin would be tight.

Be aware that this company can be considered the “Ryanair” of the cruise world. When you pay a discounted amount for a cruise, the ship will make money from you in many MANY other ways.

First some pluses:

1. personnel such as cabin stewards, waiters/waitresses are wonderful, considerate and seem to have your best interests in mind.

1. The food is imaginative and very good - menus have several courses and you can make substitutions, such as fresh fruit instead of a calorie-laden dessert. One of my table-mates who had been on three Costa cruises, said this was the best food of the lot.

3. Room service, especially for breakfast is especially prompt. They were right on the button with the delivery time I requested on the days we were in port early (Santorini, Corfu and Dubrovnik). This is especially important as departures for the excursions start early.

4. The ports of Bari, Corfu, Mykonos, Dubrovnik and Santorini are interesting.

1. The ship has some nice packages -- for wine, soft drinks or bottled water. They are a decent deal. If you don't have a drinks package you will not get water (even tap water) at lunch or dinner.

6. No problems with hot water or water pressure in the shower. Water from the tap tastes tinny - which is a good reason to buy their bottled water package.

7. Passenger makeup is mainly Europeans (mainly French (1500!) on my sailing), Italian, German, Dutch, Spanish and small groups of Austrians, British and Americans.

Things to be aware of :

1. Embarkation is a horror. You would think since Costa runs this cruise just about every week for nine months of the year, that they would know how to handle this procedure. My advice is to go early (embarkation starts at noon) or go late (just before 4pm) to avoid the pushing, shoving crowds around 2 to 3:30pm

1. Make sure the Maitre'd assigns you a dinner table in your language group. I was first at a table with a Dutch couple who didn't speak English. The next night my table was given away to a group of French and I ate alone at a table for 4. Finally I was assigned to a table with four people who spoke English. I could hear the angels singing Alleluia!

Lunch is open seating, so you can usually find someone in your language group to sit with.

3. Everything is extra. There are charges for: in-cabin continental breakfast (5-euro per person), water, juice, iced tea, etc. at meals, cappuccinos at breakfast, coffee at lunch and dinner, fresh orange juice at breakfast (though a tang-like concoction is complimentary) and a service charge for room service (unless you have a “premium cabin”).

4. there are no “port talks” - showing slides, or providing information for those who want to go on their own how to get into town, etc. If you ask at the customer service desk -- no one knows anything, though they are happy to sell you an expensive tour, or shuttle ticket (usually around 10 euro.)

5. Because of the design of the ship, it is difficult to find a “promenade” where you can walk outside. The only places you can be “outside” is by 9th level the pool and buffet areas which are noisy and crowded, and (I was told) on a veranda the 4th level of the ship.

Some suggestions:

1. If you arrive in Venice by train, use the Cooperativa Portabagagli di Venezia to transfer your luggage from the station to your stateroom. It is the biggest bargain of the week at 5 euro per bag.

2. Bring some cheap wire hangers with you. The hangers in the closets are lovely, but very wide so there are only 6 in each of the two clothes closets.

3. bring your own bar of bath soap. There is a dispenser in the shower for something that serves as body-wash as well as shampoo. I liken this to janitor-in-a-drum

4.If you need to charge several electronics at the same time, bring or buy an extension cord - Italy uses either two or three pronged plugs. There is one 110 and one 220 outlet in the room. There is another outlet behind the bed, but two lamps are plugged into it and it is hard to get to as you have to move the beds to access it. There is an outlet in the bathroom about two inches from the ceiling, impossible for anyone less than 6 feet tall to reach.

5. check the "My Account" page on your interactive TV every day. Also check every receipt you are given for drinks, water,etc. At one dinner, I was billed for a bottle of water I never asked for or received, and also for a very expensive ship-to-shore phone call I never made. It is best to take care of these problems right away as,no doubt, others might also have account problems on the last day.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR PORT STOPS

This is what I did in port and it worked well:

1. In Bari, walk out of the terminal and turn left -- just outside the port entrance you will see cute little sightseeing trains. Cost is 20 euro for a 1 1/2 to 2 hour tour. There are also pedicab tours for 25 euro per person (2 people in a pedicab). This is the exact same tour that the ship offers for 30 euro traveling in 50 passenger busses. The guides are multi-lingual and the little train drops you off in front of the ship when the tour is over.

1. In Corfu, there were two excursions sold:
 - a. Visit to Corfu and Achelleion (#801)
 - b. Visit of Paleokastrita and Corfu Town (#802)

But only one excursion was really offered (a) and those who were on the bus who had signed up for excursion b, found that it didn't exist and they had automatically been put on excursion a. They were not happy that they hadn't been told about the change. Be forewarned!

So, in Corfu it might be best to do an excursion as the ship shuttle (7.50 euro) just drops you off at shopping area, which is good for about 45 min. and you don't see too much of the island.

1. In Mykonos, head right to the water taxis on the same dock as the ship, and for 2euro, take a beautiful 15 min. ride in to the center of town. Look for the nearby “Taxi Square” if you are interested in negotiating for a tour of the island. But I enjoyed walking the town, up and down the white-washed lanes and without working too hard, found all the “important” places by myself: the Windmills, “Little Venice,” several churches and lots and lots of stores. Because November is the “end of season” many of the stores offered substantial discounts.

If you want to save about two minutes time, buy a round-trip water taxi ticket right after you get off the boat.

Be forewarned that the ship charges 10.95euro (round trip) for its shuttle and their bus does not leave you in the center of town, but at a bus park about a 15 min. walk away. The water-taxi is much more convenient experience.

1. In Santorini - the best use of time was to take an excursion. I took the “Oia Villages Tour”. Our ship moored by the “New Port” at Athinios (about five miles from the main town of Fira) and used tenders. At the end of the tour, we were given cable car tickets down to the port of Fira and we were tendered back to the ship. Those on excursions leave the ship first. So if you are on your own, you will have limited time in Santorini as you wait for the excursion folks to disembark.

Our local guide was Chrysa and she was excellent. Pray you get on her bus! She spoke English well, answered all questions, was very personable and helpful to everyone.

Santorini and its villages are built on cliffs and there is quite a bit of mountain driving. If you are prone to motion sickness, try to sit near the front of the bus.

The only negative is that it was a 45 min. queue to board the cable car at the end of the tour.

I found Santorini was a good place to use an ATM's (rather than in Venice) as it seemed safer.

Special note: the excursion I hoped to take to the archaeological site of Akrotiri (which dates to 1630BC), and is one of the 10 best archaeological sites in Greece, was cancelled. So when our "Oia Villages" excursion got to Fira (the main town), I went to the Museum of Prehistoric Thira, which presents items from the site and also from the Cycladic era (2700-2300BC). It is a gorgeous little museum and very manageable.

1. Dubrovnik is very easy. Taxis are right on the dock and charge 10euro (for 4 persons in a taxi) for the ride to the gate of the old city. So buddy up with someone. You will be left right at the Pile (pronounced pee-lay) Gate. The main event in Dubrovnik is to walk its magnificent walls. The

ticket office (right across from the big fountain at the entrance) opens at 9am and they accept only Kuna (Croatian currency) or credit cards. No euro. Cost is 100 kuna (equivalent to 12.50euro). Go, even if it is raining -- it is worth it for the views. It took me 50 min. to do the entire circuit but I didn't stop for many photos. There is a clean and supervised toilet (free!) half way thru. Also, there is an exit about 3/4 of the way around if you are running out of time.

Merchants in the old city seem to prefer cash Kuna or euro - no credit cards.

In conclusion (and I know this has been long), get the best cabin you can on this ship. I had a balcony and loved it. The room was my sanctuary from the crowds and the commotion of 3700+ people.