



I've never really been interested in a cruise before, it always struck me as something older people did, or young adults who are champing at the bit for a good booze up and all-inclusive buffet.

...I certainly never imagined myself hopping aboard as a single mum of a tween boy where our interests were bound to clash.

I must say I was a bit nervous; I'd heard mixed reviews about cruises before and it was just me and the tween tackling the waves together for 10 days straight. My fingers were crossed that he would find a friend and give me a bit of sun-bed time.

Having now been and experienced it for myself I can totally relate to the mixed reviews. My review is also mixed with great, good, not so good and repetition.

Would I do it again? Actually yes, I would. As a single parent it's a good way to enjoy downtime and actually take a break from the housework and seemingly endless tasks that take up our spare time.

Cruising solo with a tween (who by the way, did NOT find a friend) gave me 10 days off everyday chores and left me feeling relaxed and happy, which is often not the case after an overseas adventure.

I should mention that we were on the cruise for NYE and it was one of the best parties I've been to for the midnight countdown. No need to travel, great live DJ, all the props like hats and party poppers, kids were allowed on the dance floor and best of all, no need for an Uber home!

Here's some of the nitty gritty for you single parents considering a solo cruise with a kid.

Booking and Checking In - The low down

Booking was all online and as straight forward as one would expect. There are emails with checklists and reminders of what needs to be completed before departure and the regular customs and international travel information, all helpful if you've booked the trip as early as we did. The few questions I did have were answered easily by a quick phone call to the cruise line.

I thought the Overseas Passenger Terminal in Sydney previously seemed chaotic and a bit confusing, but I couldn't have been more wrong. It was completely stress free and very streamlined. They took our bags straight away and we were through customs and on the ship within 15 - 20 minutes flat. Perfect for us single parents, it's amazing how fast kids (even the tweens and teens) can turn into evil little you-know-whats when expected to stand in line for too long, right?

From check-in it's obvious that a cruise is a well-oiled machine, a production that has been practised many times over. Guests were very efficiently ushered and herded aboard with ample time to check out their suites and the entire ship before departing the dock.

At our room our cards were waiting for us and they became our life, identity, passports, credit card and room key, all in one for the duration of the trip. We quickly realised that a lanyard was required and promptly made that purchase (TIP: bring a lanyard if you're planning to board a cruise). A very easy system that I rather enjoyed throughout.

Accommodation - How big is my room?

I found myself quickly raising the bar on the cabin style to ensure we had a comfy base where we weren't tripping over each other. Personally, I can't be confined to a room without at least fresh air, preferably a balcony.

There are options available for smaller budgets, if you're a bit tight on cash (being a single parent and all, it's bloody expensive out there!) but let me tell you those 'interior' rooms are tiny and don't even have a window to break up the atmosphere. Someone commented that they wouldn't know whether it was day or night if they spent too long in their room.

If you've got a bit of extra cash it's definitely worth the spend for the creature comfort of a balcony and larger suite. Most days I retreated to the balcony with a drink whilst Master 11 tried out the TV and I'm VERY happy that I had that space, even if for a short 10-15 minutes. Also, handy when the kids are sleeping and you want to relax for a bit without creeping around the room.

Dining - To eat or not to eat?

The dining options are many and varied but after a few days' variety is not a word I'd use anymore. Like anything you find your favourite and then stick to it for a while.

Food is available 24/7 so you won't go hungry. In fact, with the buffet and restaurant plus room service, you'll eat way more than you usually do (I know I certainly did!). Some of the food was average and some of it was nice, but again even with a change in the menus it's hard to dine at the same places all the time.

You can order takeaway from the restaurant to take back to your room or bring your plate from the buffet to your room. It's a great option to be able to do that but remember your room size, if you don't have a roomier cabin or balcony then maybe eating in your room is not the best move!

Most dining options are included in your package so you could do the whole cruise without spending a cent on food. You can even come and go to the ship for meals when it's docked for a day on the islands. We mixed it up a bit and spent a bit extra at the cafe and sushi bar on board.

Activities - Mum, I'm bored... (not really)

The activities seem to be endless and at first you squeeze in as many as possible and then become a regular at the ones you fancy. The crew in charge of fun do a great job in hosting the activities and getting crowd participation. The daily list of fun (delivered to our room every night or available on the App) is well attended and the regular cruisers have perfected the art of scheduling their day to ensure early arrival seating. For us newbies good seats were hard to find and turning up to an already-started event seemed to be how we rolled.

As for being a travelling duo of tween and Mum there were many clashes of events. Most of the families I spoke to raved about how their kids loved the kids club (even the teenagers right up to 17 yo). So much so that they were starting to feel like they were missing out on a family holiday as their kids were playing and dining with friends instead. Master 11 yo however wouldn't have a bar of it, kids club was not going to win him over any time soon - even after attending the 'gaming tournament' that was sure to tempt him.

Our fate it seemed was to share our days with tween friendly pastimes. The good thing here is that a cruise ship is way more relaxed on their rules with kids. For starters we could both sit at the bar and enjoy our drinks whilst listening to live music. This was the case with every bar on the ship. There was only one that didn't serve any soft drink or AF drinks for kids.

Kids dancing on the dance floor near the bars was absolutely fine and kids were regularly out and about past their usual bedtimes with parents. A nice vibe for us single parents wanting to socialise a little after dark. For a small cost the kids club is open from 9-12 pm, if you want 'adult' time to yourself.

Activities such as comedy shows were varied to the early PG rated show and then the adults only version later at night. I was genuinely surprised at how funny and clever and the PG rated comedy shows were. Kudos to the comedians who produced the shows, there's a certain skill in making kids laugh whilst telling dirty, funny or inappropriate jokes to the adults.

Bars and Socialising - Cocktail or mocktail?

Bars and social areas are well equipped with family games, pub games and X-boxes giving adults a chance to enjoy a drink without having to entertain the kid(s). Our personal favourite was the Sports Bar which had plenty to watch, play, drink and of course, the daily sports trivia (probably our favourite activity).

There was an adult only pool and bar area with live music but it was hard for me to steal time away to get there.

Different drink packages are available or you can purchase individual bottles or drinks as you would at any other bar. I was led to believe drinks were exy prior to the cruise but that's not true, prices are about the same as if you were drinking at your local.

The younger crew favour the oversized share cocktails such as fishbowls, whereas families were taking advantage of the package. At \$119 per day and up to 15 drinks included, I stuck to purchasing individually ...for obvious reasons, solo travelling with a tween, 15 drinks per day was not on my list of things to do!

Internet - Should I or shouldn't I?

The internet was available and reliable during the cruise. Although I chose not to purchase it (which was a real detox diet for me and Master 11 yo) it was available to purchase for 24-hour blocks or the entire cruise.

The packages offer different levels of access and speed and the one night (our last night) that we purchased it we had no problems with it at all. Not having it for the duration of the trip however, was actually a nice change.

Shore Excursions - Get me off this ship!



The day trips to the islands are a great break but it's only a day and apart from booking mini tours you don't get to see or explore too much. With a tween however, a snorkel, towel and sunshine are all that you need. The islands were beautiful with their crystal-clear water and fine white sand and corals.

Most islands have local tours and snorkelling equipment for hire at much cheaper rates but I guess that is always a bit of a chance as you won't know what's available until you're there. The tours are a bit exy and are pretty short.

It is nice to get off the ship for a while though, it breaks the repetition for the day/week which is great.

Random Thoughts and Observations

I was really surprised with the pools; they were much smaller than I thought and at times very crowded. As you would expect the surrounding sun beds were taken early and it was hard to get one on the pool deck. You could get one on the upper decks but let's face it, tanning wasn't exactly on my schedule anyway.

The gym was well stocked with equipment and the facilities were very nice. Personal trainers were available to book and offered personal programs as well as classes such as yoga and body sculpt (at a small cost).

The spa is very elegant and at the higher end of the market with facials and body treatments that you would expect at an upmarket hotel. Detox programs plus wrinkle and lip treatments were also offered by a reputable Doctor, which I was surprised about given it was a cruise that has more families than single travellers. However, the spa was a very busy and popular place.

Pros and Cons Wrap Up

I'd heard that a cruise has been likened to a 'floating RSL' and I can see the similarities in the never-ending buffet and daily list of activities, games, movies, bar and well, the sheer size of it. All of which are generally filled at most times of the day. But to be honest, I can't really see how else you would manage such a large group of people all essentially sharing a holiday. As it turns out there was approx. 2,600 people on board our cruise.



Pros:

- From the moment you step on board you're on holiday, no airports, no delayed flights, no transfers to your hotel or resort
- No cooking, cleaning, driving kids to activities or friend's houses - everything you need is right there on board
- You could go through the entire holiday with minimal spending, if you wanted to
- Kids clubs are well run and very popular
- Laundry services are available and well-priced, if you don't want to take home loads of washing
- The crew are great and really put in the effort to making your time fun
- You get to visit places you might not otherwise visit
- You can watch a movie in a sun bed by the pool, with a cocktail (where else can you do that?!)

Cons:

- Repetition, repetition, repetition
- Food can be average, eating takeaway every day/night becomes a bit much
- You WILL end up eating more than usual and come back heavier
- There are boring bits when you feel like there's nothing to do (of course, that depends on who you're with and what you're able to do - I couldn't hit up the Casino when I was bored!)
- You don't get to really see, explore and experience the islands or destinations you visit as you only get one day on each excursion - this was a real con for me. I like to immerse myself in the cultures and really see/experience places I go
- Did I say repetition?

If you do end up cruising solo with a kid, embrace the cruise life and get in to it. Participate in some of the activities, don't feel bad for laying around in your room or near the pool (after all you are there to relax), prepare to eat eat eat and book the biggest room you can afford.

As I said earlier, I disembarked back in Sydney feeling relaxed with no jet lag ...now that is a bonus.

Happy cruising! ...or not!