

Great Escapes

Last minute holiday planning ? Seat assignments and rooms are vast disappearing, so do give me a call as soon as you can, if you think you'd like to get away in December. Looking further ahead, the Euro exchange rate is lower right now than it's been in months, so if you're considering Europe this winter, spring or even next summer, , this is a good time to book hotels and prepay them!

Diana M. Hechler

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Spotlight On... Santorini!

How 'bout that volcanic eruption in 1400 BC? Wasn't that a beaut?

What's left is magical, unique, enchanting Santorini, nestled in the Cycladic islands south of Athens.

Whether you arrive by plane or by boat, sooner or later you're going to have to go UP, since the major towns on the island are all on top of the cliffs. It makes for dramatic vistas of the vast blue sea, the caldera (the volcanic remnant), and other islands.

If you come by boat, skip the donkey ride up the cliff and opt for a taxi or the gondola instead. If you're tempted to take the stairs, start counting up to 585.

You can head for Fira, the main town at the top of the steps for major shopping expeditions: sandals, jewelry, clothing, bags, and ceramics are all waiting.



One of the more interesting places to stay is tiny Oia, on the northern tip of the island, where historically workers had adapted caves for living. Two decades after the 1950 earthquake destroyed many of the houses, someone realized that they could convert those old caves into hotels.

Now, little Oia sports exquisite hotels hollowed into the cliffs. Hotel entrances are on top and steps lead down to multiple levels of rooms and suites. Terraces and infinity pools afford breath-taking views. Even if you don't stay there, go for lunch and enjoy the spectacular scenery. At night, the lights along the cliffs make create a fairyland.

Beach lovers can head for one of the two black sand beaches on the island: Kamari and Perissa. Black, you say? Yes, black — because of the volcano.

Archaeology lovers have had to wait for the wonderful ruins at Akrotiri to reopen. A modern roof collapsed 5 years ago

and the site has been closed since, but locals assure me that the reopening is imminent. Beautiful frescoes from the Minoan era have been excavated there.

A wonderful excursion is a cruise to the Caldera, the remnants of the volcano. Some trips include time to climb up to the top of the cone and to swim in the warm springs at the base of the island. Just be careful not to touch the rocks or to wear silver in the water. The high sulfur concentration can be ruinous for clothing.

An excursion usually includes time to swim near the White Beach and the Red Beach. The crystalline waters mean that you can see the bottom from 30 feet up. The color of the water ranges from indigo to light green and it's all gorgeous.

Santorini does have several vineyards and visitors can sign up for a wine-tasting tour. Local wines have come a long way since the Retsina days. Dive in!

Diana Hechler on the Top 25 Agent List of Travel Agent Magazine

I am very proud to have been selected as one of America's Top 25 Agents by Travel Agent Magazine. Announced in late August, the travel advisors were chosen on the basis of professionalism, expertise, outstanding service to clients, and recommendations by clients and suppliers. If you would like to read my Profile, you can do so at the following link: www.travelagentcentral.com/agent-profiles/top-25-agents-2011. I would like to thank you all for your support over the past 12 years. I absolutely love what I do and am never happier than when discussing your next great vacation!

Your Friends and Neighbors Say...

Resort Excursions

A family of 4 or 5 should always consider private excursions over groups. Pricing is not that different and the value of a private guide and schedule is terrific.

Eileen G.

Globe Theater London

In summer, plan your visit for the morning. During performance season, opening hours are limited.

Carol M.

Madrid

Don't overlook the temporary exhibitions at the major museums. They can be wonderful!

Carolyn M.

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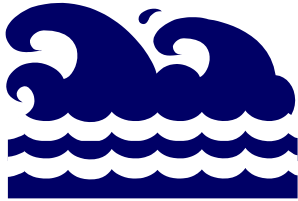
Black Sea vs. Black Sea

Yes, you read that right. For you cruise-lovers, be aware that a Black Sea itinerary is very different on a river cruise than a regular sea-going vessel.

Uniworld, Viking, Avalon and AMA Waterways all offer river cruises that touch the Black Sea, but the Black Sea portion is tagged on to the end of a sailing primarily through Romania and Bulgaria. You might begin in Budapest, sail down the Danube, and end in Bucharest with an option to add several days at a Black Sea town after the voyage concludes.

By contrast, a Black Sea voyage with SilverSea or Regent will probably begin in Athens, bring you through the Straits of Marmara and the Dardanelles, past Gallipoli and Istanbul and into the Black Sea itself. Your port calls may well be in Bulgaria and what used to be southern Russia, now called Ukraine. Typical cities visited would include Sevastopol (with its amazing Soviet-era secret submarine base), Yalta where you can visit the Livadia Palace where FDR, Churchill, and Stalin hammered out the end of WWII, and Odessa, which boasts a magnificent opera house and a harbor area undergoing revitalization. Don't forget those steps immortalized in Eisenstein's movie *Potemkin*! Typically, you would disembark in Istanbul.

Both itineraries are interesting, but they are different and you need to be sure you're on the one you are envisioning. Another reason to call your friendly travel professional (moi!)



Cunard's Queen Elizabeth is about to set off on a Canada/transatlantic crossing, followed by a Holy Land voyage, as I write this. This brand new ship is considerably smaller than the Queen Mary 2, but offers the same elegant experience, emphasizing Cunard traditions, historic ambiance, and personal attention. I dined aboard the ship last night and my dinner was outstanding. If you'd like to skip the jetlag on your next jaunt to England, definitely consider taking the boat!

Cruise Facts

Q. *Everyone talks about visiting Alaska by ship, but why shouldn't I just pick up a car and drive around?*

A. Great question and the answer is all about terrain. Alaska covers an enormous territory of course and if you fly to Anchorage, you can certainly drive up to Denali National Park and even up to Fairbanks. You can even take the long Dalton highway all the way up to Prudhoe Bay, above the Arctic Circle. However, Anchorage and Fairbanks are very small towns themselves and an afternoon of sightseeing in each place is plenty. Then, you've got a lot of driving to do. The trip from Anchorage to Denali will probably take you about 7 hours. From Denali to Fairbanks is another 5 hours.

You could also drive south from Anchorage to Seward and Homer or Whittier. Again the destinations are tiny little places, although they can serve as jumping off points for excursions (by boat) elsewhere.

Notably, for a first-time visitor, the scenery that really grabs people's attention is the Inside Passage, south and east of Anchorage. Here you'll find incredible ocean glaciers, great whale-, bear-, bald eagle-, and seal-watching, and good opportunities for hiking, biking, and kayaking. Skagway, landing point for the Yukon Goldrush miners, is located here and has a particularly amazing story to tell.

This part of Alaska is inaccessible except by water or small plane. When you fly over the region, you can see just how impassable the mountains are. So, a cruise ship or the ferry system (known as the Marine Highway) is really the most efficient way to get around.

The Marine Highway does offer regular service between the Inside Passage towns, but why do all that baggage hauling yourself, checking in and out of hotels every day or two? The cruise lines do a great job of providing your floating hotel room and transportation, allowing you to spend your days having fun. Choose from big ships, little ships, luxury, mid-market, and mass market, even Disney. Call me so that I can explain the differences and make sure the itinerary is the right one for you and your companions.



LONG-RANGE PLANNING DEPARTMENT

Southeast Asia is a great place to “dive in” to Asia for a first visit, but there are a couple of things to keep in mind when you’re planning your trip.

First, you’re going to want to do this with hotels, guides, and transportation as part of one big arrangement. The language barrier both oral and written can be a huge obstacle when something unexpected occurs. You would be wise to have a local company handling your arrangements and on stand-by for problem-solving. (I have a great partner for all of SE Asia—except Burma!)

Second, it’s hot there — really hot. You might want to consider avoiding the summer and instead, taking advantage of spring and fall — and spring vacation if you’re travelling with kids. (Summer monsoons bring rain.)

Third, prepare to be very busy. An 7 or 8-day itinerary for even these small countries might well have you on-the-go from breakfast to dinner. It’s a good idea to plan for an extra day somewhere in the middle to slow down the pace, catch your breath, and have some unstructured time.

Thailand and Vietnam get most of the attention these days. Be aware that even a small country like Vietnam requires 7 days minimum to see the highlights. Ditto for Thailand. Best not to try to combine them into one itinerary. They are vastly different cultures and they deserve a week each. However, it is very easy to add on a 2 or 3-day visit to Angkor Wat in Cambodia from either country.

The nicest surprise will probably be the caliber of the hotels, even in Vietnam. Things have changed a lot since 1969 (!) and you will find yourself in exquisite settings, with lovely rooms, good food, and excellent service. I loved my trip to Vietnam and I hope to send more of you to experience the modern era in a beautiful place.



Top Ten Reasons to Visit The Cotswolds

1. You’ll finally learn where and what The Cotswolds are (England, just north and west of London).
2. You can successfully integrate the words “peradventure” and “twee” into your vocabulary.
3. You often feel a bit “peckish” around 3:30, but it’s nothing that a nice cuppa and scones with clotted cream won’t cure. Perhaps a strawberry or two?
4. As a fan of historic automobiles, you know that the Heritage Motor Center in Coventry showcases the beautiful Aston-Martins, MGs, and Jaguars of the past. You want to know what MG stands for, don’t you, and why California played a role in its demise?
5. Ever since Guy Fawkes’ unsuccessful attempt to restore a Catholic monarchy, you’ve wanted to see exactly where the plot was hatched and why.
6. The *trebuchet* in your backyard is misfiring the projectiles and you need to consult the experts at Warwick Castle.
7. You need a fresh dose of English gardens.
8. Your Shakespearean insult mug broke and you need to replenish your stock in Stratford.
9. It’s time to decipher Bangers & Mash, Kippers, and Soldiers. Do you eat them? Do you throw them? Are they weapons of war?
10. You love gorgeous scenery and charming towns.

Global Entry FastPass

When I reentered the US in September from Greece, I used the Global Entry fast pass kiosk at JFK for the first time. I passed through Immigration in about 20 seconds! There WAS no line for me.

Global Entry is a US Gov’t. one-time screening process for a “cleared traveler” database. It’s great!

I would like to host an interview/final confirmation party for all clients and friends who have completed the online application later this fall. The TSA staff will come to my home, saving you a trip to the airport for your formal interview and bio-metric scanning.

We need to have 20 applicants to bring in the TSA staff,

Go to <http://www.globalentry.gov> to fill out the on-line application.. It may take 3-4 weeks for the initial process to complete, so get started ASAP. It’s very easy and straightforward.

Don’t forget to e-mail me afterwards so that I can determine when we’ve got enough people to schedule our “TSA party”!



Let Diana Hechler plan your next vacation!

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Family Forum



Q. I'm considering a European vacation for my family this summer. Where will we find the best beaches?

A. Greek islands rule, but Corsica, Sardinia, and Elba offer possibilities, too. You'll find golden sand and resort hotels aplenty throughout.

But keep in mind that major European beaches are not 'free-style' like our are.

You'll be expected to pay for an umbrella and 2 chaises for

the day and those chaises are lined up with military efficiency in rows.

The French Riviera offers Cannes and St. Tropez, but many of the other towns there have rocky beaches and no sand. Conditions are very crowded in July and August as the locals frolic on their holidays, too.

Spain's Costa del Sol is another possibility, but the tenor of the towns varies dra-

matically from tacky to elegant and you need to pay careful attention to your destination.

The Amalfi Coast? Gorgeous, but most of the beaches are not suitable for swimming. Visitors use the hotel pools, instead.

For a family vacation in Europe, I'd probably focus on sites other than beaches and head out to Montauk when you get home!



Cliffside improbable Oia, on Santorini

FUN FACTS

Q. What is the current record for the longest non-stop flight?

A. On, November 9th, 2005, a Boeing 777-200LR left Hong Kong, flew 11,664-nautical miles and landed at London's Heathrow Airport on November 10th. The flight lasted 22 hours and 42 minutes and saw two sunrises!