



## Boatloads of Fun: Cruises Set Sail in Southeast Asia

By Matt Totsky

Southeast Asia is a fascinating place. With so many unique countries and interesting cultures to explore, it is difficult to know where to begin. A great way to sample a few destinations in one trip is by taking a cruise. Already a favored mode of travel in the Mediterranean and Caribbean, cruises in Southeast Asia are growing in popularity. Taking a cruise allows travelers a chance to see what's out there before committing to a one-stop vacation, cutting down on things like investigating hotels and other travel-related headaches.

Prices vary wildly depending on the type of boat you set out on. All-inclusive holidays on a massive floating resort are pricey, but feature things like luxury accommodations, all-you-can-eat buffets, entertainment, gambling, fitness centers, swimming pools and loads of pampering. There is always something to do in-between destinations (usually one full day on the water), but at a higher price. However, other less expensive options are available if you are committed to doing the research.

Our family of five took a cruise on one of the big-name luxury ships and we were pretty pleased with the experience. It was our first cruise and a lot of what was on the boat appealed to us; a place that

offers meals with as many lobster tails or as much filet mignon as I can eat is nothing but a good thing. It also gave us the opportunity to experience some new things that we ended up enjoying (art auctions) and others that we didn't care for as much (bingo).

Luckily the boat offered nearly-around-the-clock child care in the form of a "Kid's Club". From 9-12, 2-5 and 7-10, my wife and I unloaded our children so we could enjoy some time to ourselves (the kids actually preferred hanging out there and making new friends, as opposed to hanging out with us).

The boat set off from **Bangkok**, Thailand headed for Sydney, Australia, with stops in Southeast Asia's most popular places. Our first stop consisted of some fun-in-the sun on **Koh Samui**, Thailand. We could've gone snorkeling and jetskiing but instead we did nothing more than lounge around on the beach, with a massage, and a tasty Thai meal.

From there we went to clean, efficient **Singapore**. Since we had the kids in tow, we opted for a trip to Sentosa Island to experience Underwater World, Dolphin Lagoon and the Images of the Singapore Museum. This is a great family destination with much to keep young travelers interested and entertained.

Next up: **Ho Chi Minh City**, Vietnam. Our stop here included a tour centered around the Vietnam War, including a trip to Reunification Palace, which looks the same as it did on April 30, 1975, and a stop at the haunting War Remnants Museum.

Our last stop before setting sail for Australia was Malaysia. We arrived in **Kota Kinabalu**, (located on the northern tip of the island Borneo) and spent the day chilling out on the beach and snorkeling in the region's crystal-clear waters.

All off-the-boat excursions usually last one day and the cruise line can help arrange itineraries and activities. These are easy and convenient, but we found the on-the-boat tour fees were far too expensive. Instead we researched activities beforehand and booked our own side trips, ultimately saving a lot of money (sometimes more than half). This also provided much-needed flexibility for our day trips (see traveling with kids). Some excursions can even be arranged right when you get off the boat (especially if you're just hitting a beach). In Koh Samui we simply left the ship and found a taxi to the nearest beach. In Borneo, we knew we wanted to go to a small island for some snorkeling, so that side trip was pre-arranged through a local travel company. In both instances, everything worked out fine but the usual discretion and street smarts should be used when booking trips of this nature.

The bottom line about cruises is you have to commit to the boat experience to get the full benefits of your vacation. If the idea of spending half the trip on the open seas with a boatload of strangers does not appeal to you, then a cruise is probably not the best option (backpackers and extreme vacation types need not apply). But for those who like a bit of pampering, while at the same time seeing a number of exotic destinations, a cruise is highly recommended. You never know, you may become something of a cruise addict and get talked into booking another one right there on the boat (we did).