

# How to Create a 5-Star Travel Experience Without a 5-Star Budget

#### Quick Introduction

#### NOTE FROM GINA

The definition of luxury is "the state of great comfort and extravagant living." Cool, sounds great. Sign me up. Unfortunately, anything deemed luxury or 5-star in travel often comes with a hefty price tag. Uh, not so cool, and I guess that's what is meant by the "extravagant" part. Unfortunately, most people don't have the means to fly first class to the Four Seasons on a regular basis, but still want to feel pampered on vacation. I know I do!

Over the years, I've had the privilege of vacationing in the traditional "luxury" sense, and I've also stumbled into some 5-star experiences at times when I was more focused on a backpacker type trip. It's taught me that it's more than possible to have a truly 5-star vacation experience without spending a 5-star budget. I've put together some of the top tips I've learned from these travels so you can start your 5-star travels, too!

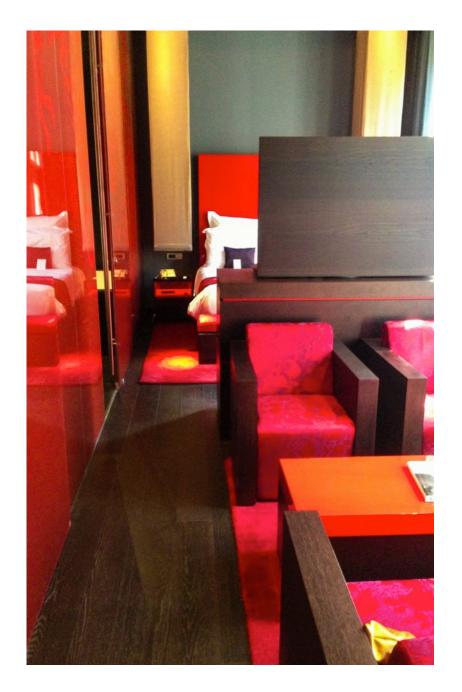
Have more travel questions? I might address them on my blog: <a href="https://www.onedayinacity.com">www.onedayinacity.com</a> or in one of my guidebooks: <a href="https://www.amazon.com/author/ginatarnacki">www.amazon.com/author/ginatarnacki</a>.

Happy 5-Star Traveling! (Without Spending a Fortune),
Gina

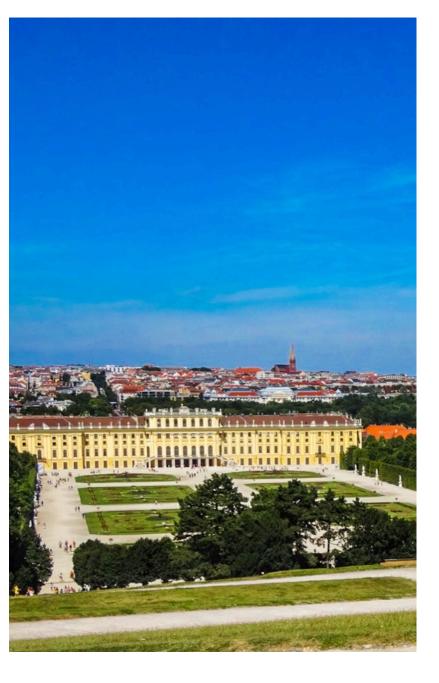


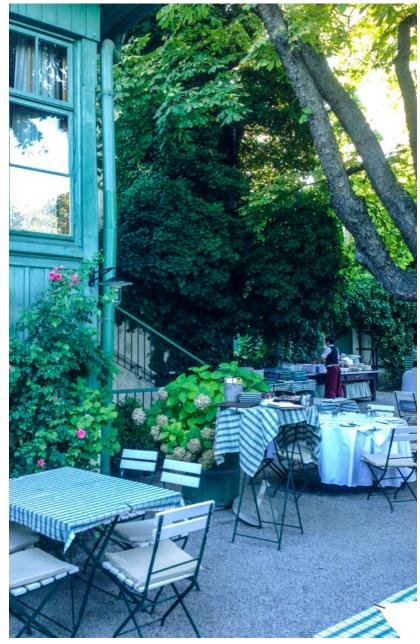
#### WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS

PLUS A BONUS CRUISE SECTION AT END!











ACCOMMODATIONS

How to feel like you're staying in a 5-star hotel

FLIGHTS

Tips for upgrades, lounge access & more

TOURING SITES

Put together a 5-star itinerary for your day sightseeing

DINING

You don't have to spend a fortune to eat well

MORE TIPS

More strategies for luxurious travel

# ACCOMMODATIONS

# THE ALLURE OF AIRBNB

Airbnb is all the rage right now and Airbnb is a good way to get luxury amenities and comfort without paying luxury hotel prices. I've used it several times, both renting an entire apartment and a room while the owner was home. I've always had a good experience, but I'll be honest it does make me a bit nervous sometimes as there aren't really any checks and balances for Airbnb besides user generated reviews. Here are some tips to help you find a great place to stay when using AirBnb. Plus, the next page has additional tips on an alternative option to AirBnB that I often use now.

#### **AIRBNB TIP 1: REVIEWS**

This is the most important one in my opinion. A single overall 5-star review isn't good enough, either. If possible, you should choose an accommodation that has at least a dozen good reviews – the more, the better, with detailed comments about the reviewer's stay.

#### **AIRBNB TIP 2: GOOGLE MAP IT**

Pictures online can be deceiving. Look at the accommodation's location in Google Map Streetview so you can see what the neighborhood around it looks like. What type of businesses are nearby? What does the exterior look like? Is it in good condition? Does the neighborhood have the ambiance you had in mind? Is there an adorable café or delicious restaurant within walking distance? Score!

#### AIRBNB TIP 3: TALK TO THE OWNER

Staying with the owner? Make sure to use the message function in Airbnb to ask the host questions and get a better pulse on what they're like and make sure your personalities mesh well enough to live together for a couple days or longer.

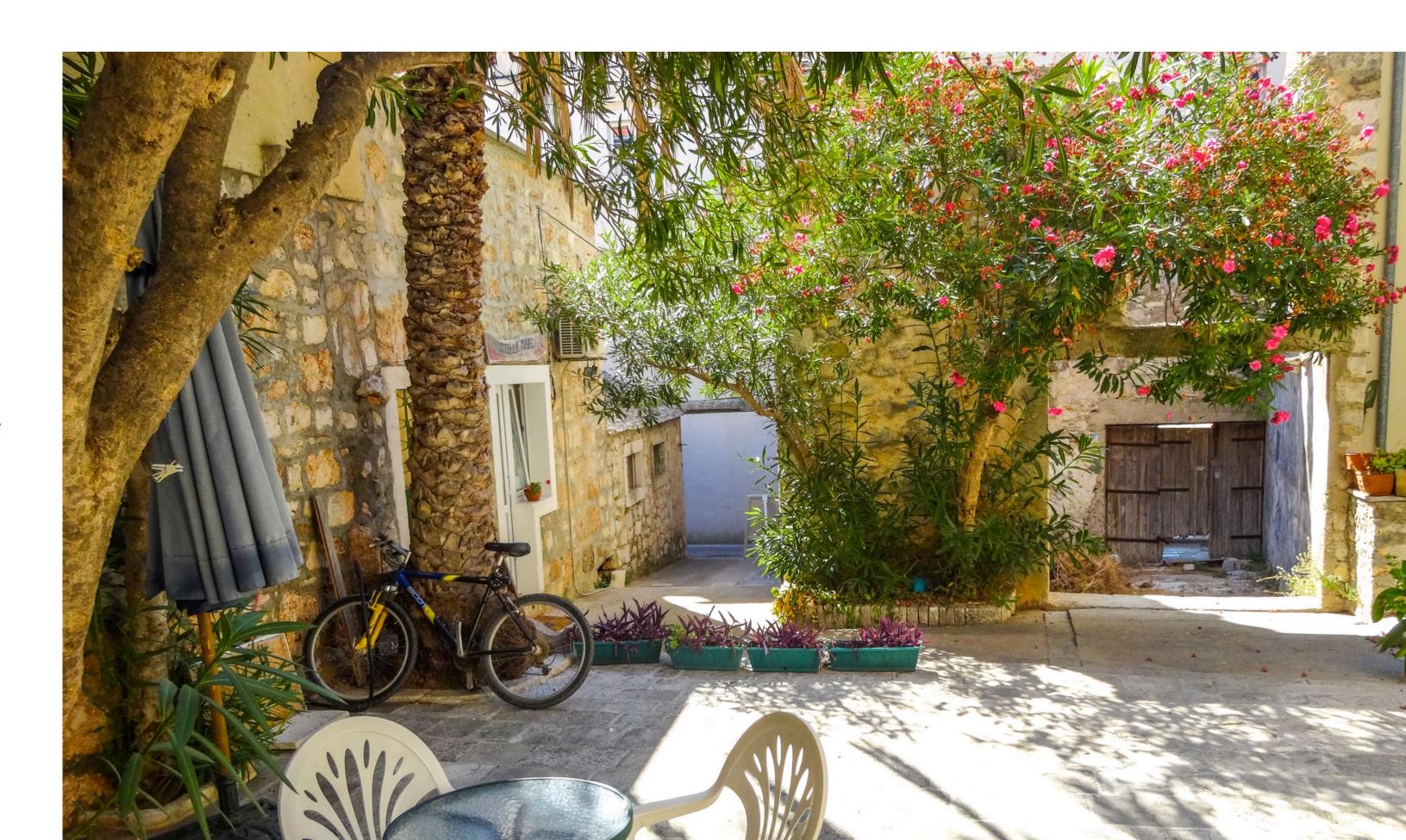


### AN EXAMPLE CONDO IN KAUAI, HAWAII

For my first vacation with my daughter when she was a baby, we went to Kauai and my husband and I decided accommodations with a kitchen and separate bedroom was a must so we didn't have to eat out for every meal and we could enjoy a glass of wine and conversation after she went to bed. Finding that via a hotel is insanely expensive in Hawaii – even if we decided not to have a kitchen. Instead, we used Homeaway.com and found a one-bedroom corner unit overlooking a scenic golf course in gorgeous Princeville. We were in walking distance to the St. Regis – arguably the best hotel on the island – and since all beaches are public ones in Hawaii we were able to hang out on the beach in front of the hotel and go get lunch at the hotel on its lovely patio — without having to pay an exorbitant fee to stay overnight.

#### PROPERTY MANAGERS

As I mentioned earlier, I've had good experiences with Airbnb, but I'm also weary about the process, particularly if traveling with children. I enjoy staying in apartments, though, so my compromise for this is to go through a property management company with a good reputation to rent a place. A lot of housing owners in popular vacation areas don't live in their property year-round (or ever) and want to make money off of it when they're not there – but they don't want to deal with the hassle of renting it out, cleaning it, and dealing with tenants. That's where professional vacation property managers come in.





# WHEN YOU SHOULD SPLURGE ON THAT 5-STAR HOTEL

Certain destinations have amazing hotel accommodations for not that much. Southeast Asia is known for this, as are some Eastern European cities. It's rare to be in a place where you can stay in a luxury hotel for under \$200 a night so if you find yourself in such a situation and you can afford it, I say go for the pampering if it's in your budget!

Here are some websites that can help you find some luxury hotels:

- Mr. and Mrs. Smith: https://www.mrandmrssmith.com (unique travel blog solely focused on luxury hotels)
- Booking.com: <a href="http://www.booking.com/index.html?aid=934502">http://www.booking.com/index.html?aid=934502</a> (I really like this site for Europe hotels and it often has upscale guesthouses and B&Bs in addition to hotels. Also, the link listed is my affiliate link book through it and I get a small commission at no extra cost to you, which helps me cover the costs of running One Day in a City.)
- Tripadvisor: <a href="https://www.TripAdvisor.com">https://www.TripAdvisor.com</a> (filter by luxury)
- Small Luxury Hotels of the World: <a href="http://www.Slh.com">http://www.Slh.com</a> (for the traveler looking for a boutique hotel ambiance)



## FLIGHTS



# ELEVATE YOUR FLYING EXPERIENCE

#### **Points and Perks**

Get a credit card that doesn't just get you air miles, but also allots you access to lounges and perks like priority boarding. The fees are expensive, but if you travel a lot you're going to feel much more like a 5-star traveler thanks to the many travel perks. Here are a couple of the best credit cards for travelers to check out:

- Chase Sapphire Reserve
- American Express Platinum
- United Mileage Plus Club

Want to find more points-based travel deals? Check out <a href="www.ThePointsGuy.com">www.ThePointsGuy.com</a>. It's a great resource.

#### **TSA Precheck**

If you fly around America a lot (and don't get first class access), this is the single best thing you can do to to improve your flying experience, in my opinion. You'll get through the security TSA checkpoint fast (sometimes in five minutes compared to two hours in the regular line), plus shoes stay on and liquids can stay in your bag. If you have small children, TSA Precheck is a must-must-do. The process is pretty easy. Fill out the paperwork online and then make an appointment at the appropriate office for fingerprints and signatures.

## TRAVELING WITH SMALL CHILDREN



#### ANEXAMPLE

#### EASY STROLLER & SWING

I'm using Kauai as an example again! We used Kauai Baby Gear while there and had a baby swing and BOB Stroller (just like the ones we used at home) waiting for us in our apartment upon our arrival. Our daughter loved the swing at the time so it kept her happily content while we were in our apartment rental, and when we left the unit we had the great functionality of the BOB stroller which easily went over sand and rocky trails – much better than the travel stroller we would have brought with us.

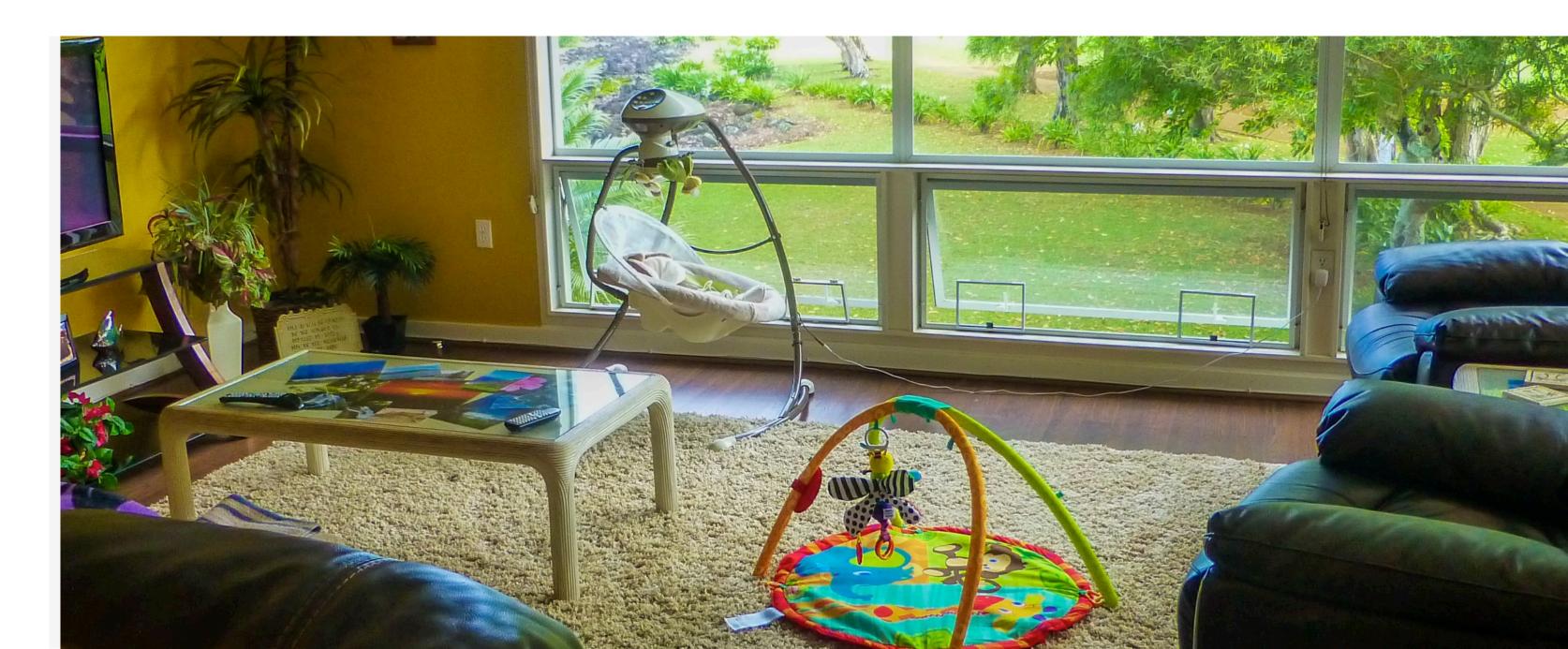
#### RENT BABY EQUIPMENT



One of the most annoying things about traveling with babies and young children is the sheer amount of stuff you have to bring with you. Save yourself the hassle of checking it on a flight and hauling it to a rental car or through public transportation and instead, rent it when you arrive. Check if the city you're visiting has a local business that rents out baby equipment. I like to check reviews on Yelp, too, to ensure others have used the products and found them to be in pristine condition.

#### GO ON A CRUISE

Traveling with small children doesn't feel glamorous most of the time. Are the stressful trade-offs worth it to see your child's eyes light up at all the new, exciting things to see? Yes. But...sometimes it's nice to have a small break. A cruise makes this easy to do as the ones that tailor to families have high-quality daycares and kid clubs. You can have a date night with your spouse, or go to the spa, or just enjoy laying by the pool (head to the adult-only one) without worrying about watching over a little one for an hour or two.



## TOURING SITES

#### PLAN OUT YOUR DAY VISITING TOURIST SITES

#### HIGH-END INSPIRATION

Having trouble figuring out your itinerary for a day? Guess what, many of the luxury tour companies list out what they do on their websites. Score! So while you may not be transported in a luxurious vehicle from site to site while being regaled with tales from your historian tour guide, you can see which sites and activities the high-end tour operators deem must-dos while in the destination and try to recreate it. Some tour company websites to peruse include:

- Abercrombie and Kent
- Insight Vacations
- REI Adventures
- National Geographic
- Kensington Tours
- Regent Seven Seas Cruises

#### **EXPERT GUIDES**

An all-day guide can be expensive. So instead figure out what you are most looking forward to doing and then get an amazing guide for that one thing.

## GUIDE EXAMPLE: TOURING COLOSSEUM

While in Rome, I wanted to see the Colosseum, but I wanted to learn as much as I could about its history while there, too. I wasn't sure exactly when I'd get to the Colosseum during my day in Rome so didn't want to book a guided tour. Instead, when I showed up I looked for tour representatives about to start a tour (they're not hard to spot) and after asking how long, what was covered, an who would be leading the tour, I was promptly added to a group tour about to start. Plus, we got to skip the ticket line and get right into the Colosseum!

#### DON'T GET LOST: MAP TRICK

Don't want to get a phone plan or worry that your plan for one will fall through? Here's a workaround I've used before. Find Wifi (pretty much any café will do if you aren't in a hotel with it that morning), download a map of the city in whatever GPS map app you use, drop pins and save them, then follow the blue dot (that signifies your location) when you're out and about to make sure it's going in the right direction toward those pins. That helpful little blue dot works without Wifi like magic (if you have GPS on your smart phone – most do).

# ONE DAY IN A CITY Make the most of a destination when time is short ROME TRAVEL GUIDE



#### MORE ITINERARY HELP...

# ONE DAY IN A CITY GUIDEBOOKS

If you're short on time somewhere and trying to figure out the best way to spend your day, I cover just that in my One Day in a City eGuidebooks. See if I have one for the destination you're headed to by visiting Amazon.com and typing in Tarnacki (which will bring up my guidebooks in the search listings) or go to my Amazon author page:

http://www.amazon.com/author/ginatarnacki

Don't have an Amazon Kindle? No problem! You can also purchase ebooks through Amazon and have them delivered to your iPad or other tablet thanks to the Kindle App (just search in your app store and download it).

## DINING



#### Finding Gourmet, Authentic Cuisine

For some incredible dining experiences while traveling that don't require shelling out hundreds of dollars or making a reservation months in advance, try these tips:

- Get some home cooked meals for some homemade authentic cuisine, stay at a pension that has glowing reviews for food.
- Eat at the "hot" restaurant in town for lunch if offered it often has the same quality ingredients and sometimes even similar menu options, but for a cheaper price.
- Ask a local the key here is to ask a random local. The maitre'd at the hotel you're staying at isn't always the best choice, but the friendly barista at the café you visit for morning coffee or the owner of the Laundromat you're using may have a good recommendation
- Put a meal together on your own visit the local supermarket and get inspired.

# MEALS ON YOUR OWN: MAKE A PICNIC

When I was a college student I spent a week in Paris with some friends on spring break from our study abroad program in England. We were staying in a hostel and didn't have money to splurge on eating out in restaurants, but the hostel had a lovely common area with French bistro style tables, so each night we went to the local supermarket and got cheap yet good quality wine, massive baguettes, and an assortment of cheese. Back at the hostel we laid our spread out and feasted on it while we drank and talked and wrote in our journals. It was delicious and fun and we definitely felt like we were living a 5-star life.

# ADDITIONAL TIPS

#### USE A TRAVEL AGENT

Did you know that for many types of trips, a travel agent will be more than happy to assist you – and won't charge for their services? If you're traveling on a cruise or to a resort, or basically looking to do any package-style trip (plane, hotel, car) they can help arrange everything. Why are they doing this for you for free? Because they get a commission from the hotel, airlines and other travel companies they're working with. A travel agent will be able to help you figure out the property or cruise line that's right for you, let you know if there are any specials going on that might help you stay at a nicer place than you otherwise would have been aware you were able to afford. They also often have access to upgrades and special amenities that the general public doesn't have access to. Plus, a good travel agent will give you customized, 5-star service. They'll also be able to help you if you run into any hiccups during your travels. Remember the volcano in Iceland several years ago that stranded thousands of travelers? Those with a travel agent to help them back at home definitely had an upper hand for getting on a flight home sooner – or at least help figuring out a nice place to stay during the wait to get home.



PUT ON THAT SMILE

# IT DOESN'T HURT TO ASK... JUST DO SO IN A FRIENDLY MANNER

Asking for an upgrade on a flight rarely works anymore (though if traveling with a lap baby *do* ask if there are any open seats they can move you next to for more space), but hotels sometimes will accommodate an upgrade to a better room if they have availability. They're not always going to suggest it though, so ask when you're checking in. For example: "Are you full this week? If not, any chance for an upgrade to an oceanview room?"

#### BE FLEXIBLE

#### **BOOK LAST MINUTE**

Be open to leaving on a trip with a day's notice. There are a lot of last minute travel deals, especially in Europe through travel agencies, where you can take a really nice trip with hotel and airfare included for super cheap if you book a day or two before you leave.





# MAKE YOUR CRUISE MORE LUXURIOUS

If you're already sailing on a 5-star cruise line, then hey – lucky you, you are set for some luxurious pampering! If you're not on a 5-star cruise line, there are still ways to make it feel like you are. Cruising is actually quite awesome in that regard.

#### **SPECIALTY RESTAURANTS**

I have eaten at a number of specialty restaurants onboard a variety of cruise lines. Sometimes these are included in the cost of the cruise (usually for the luxury cruise lines), but typically it's extra, and the specialty restaurants nearly always require a reservation. Why? Because those in the know know that even if it's an extra fee, it is well worth the price. Most specialty restaurants hover around \$25 a person, but you're easily getting a meal that would cost you triple that or more on land. It is 5-star dining made affordable.

Since specialty restaurants can be high in demand, reserve a table before your cruise departs or as soon as you get on the ship. The most popular restaurants can fill up fast, especially on certain nights. Which brings us to another important specialty restaurant tip: the night you book your reservation should also be carefully considered. You don't want to book a specialty restaurant if you're in port late – what if you end up wanting to stay in port through the evening and enjoy a restaurant in town? You also may not want to do it on one of the theme nights in the main dining room, for example formal night if you're into that (which you should be, they're so fun! more on that below) or the lobster night, or another culinary theme highlighting a port you've just sailed to.

#### **FORMAL NIGHTS**

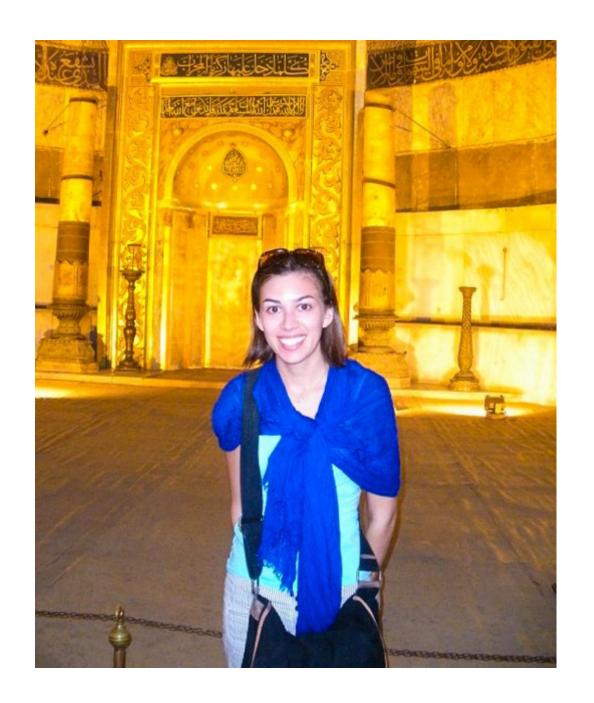
Formal nights get a bad rap. To the point that some cruise lines now pride themselves on not having them. Frankly, I don't get that. If they were every night, yes that would be annoying, but once or twice during a cruise that lasts a week or two is just pure fun. I mean, when else do you get the chance to dress up like you're going to a gala? For most of us, the answer is rarely or never. (And if you really don't want to do a formal night, you can dine in a specialty restaurant that night or on the Lido deck or get room service.) Plus, for all you ladies out there who have old bridesmaid dresses hanging up in your closet, a formal night on a cruise is the perfect chance to wear it again!

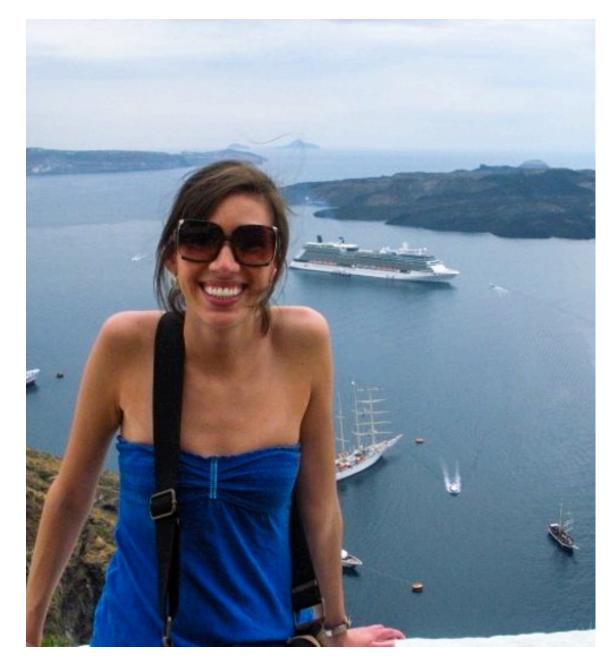
#### **Formal Night Attire Tips:**

- You can typically rent a suit onboard.
- Fancy cocktail dresses usually suffice and short is also typically fine (though each cruise line has a different dress code so be sure to double check). But you won't look out of place going super formal and dressing in black tie attire either.
- If you really want to go all out and feel like a celebrity, get your hair done at the salon beforehand (most cruise lines have them onboard).

#### SPA

Spa treatments are often less expensive during days in port or on embarkation day. Sometimes cruise line extend the embarkation deals to early the next morning so if you're busy running around exploring the ship when you board, this can be a good option and a massage or other treatment is a great way to officially start your cruise.





#### TO DO OR NOT TO DO ...

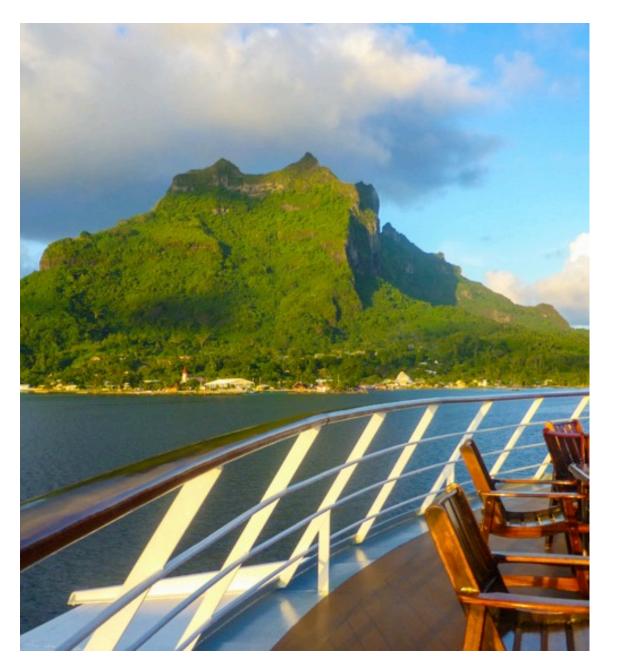
#### SHORE EXCURSIONS

The top two complaints I typically hear about shore excursions through a cruise line is that they're expensive and have a "people as cattle" feel to them. I often disagree with the latter statement, since I think knowledgeable planning can eliminate that feeling, but have to digress about the former. So, it's tricky to know how to tailor your time in port to continue feeling like you're having a 5-star vacation -- it's easy to feel like that on your cruise ship, but it's sometimes harder in port – especially if on a budget. This is why I often suggest figuring out your day in port on your own to make sure it's exactly tailored to what you want to do without having to break your budget – and then research, research, research and plan, plan, plan to make sure your day goes as you envisioned and – very important – you get back to the cruise ship in time (something cruise lines guarantee if you book a shore excursion through them).

But...sometimes there's that once in a lifetime opportunity that you don't want to take chances on, and if there's one thing I know about cruise line shore excursions it's that they may be expensive, but they rarely skimp on quality.

In other words, plan your day in Athens on your own, rent a 4-wheeler and explore Mykonos on your own, but *do* book that shore excursion to the wineries of Tuscany while in port in Florence if that is the Mediterranean activity you have been dreaming about and lusting for. Sure, you may be able to find an outside vendor who offers it cheaper, but being whisked off the ship first in port and not having to think about where to go to find your tour or worrying if they really will get you back in time before your cruise ship leaves will elevate your day to a 5-star experience – one you can afford since you did other ports of call during the cruise on your own.





#### SHORE EXCURSIONS CONTINUED...

#### DON'T MISS THE BOAT

Speaking of time, nothing ruins a cruise faster than literally missing the boat, so don't stress yourself out by trying to fit too much in if doing the port day on your own. The cruise will leave without you if you're not back by the scheduled departure time. Also, always have a backup for getting to the ship. Planning to take the metro or train back to the harbor? Awesome...but what are you going to do if that train stops running due to a sudden strike (it happens). Do you have enough cash for a taxi back? Do you know where to get a taxi? Do you know how to say "cruise ship harbor" (or other necessary phrase to get to your ship) in the language of the country you're in? Prepare all these things beforehand to ensure your trip stays relaxing and fun.

Want to do the day on your own, but worried about transportation options? Make your day a bit more luxurious by splurging on the cruise line's transportation into the city center if offered. You'll be on an air-conditioned, comfortable bus and can take in the views on your way. The bus will drop you off and pick you up later that day -- typically in the same spot to make it easy to find, but make sure you confirm the location.





#### ABOUT GINA

CREATOR OF ONE DAY IN A CITY

Gina Tarnacki is an accomplished travel writer whose work has appeared in USA TODAY Travel, 10Best, TripAdvisor, Matador, About.com, Sport Diver Magazine, Porthole Magazine, and the Travel Channel Cities App, plus many other travel-related sites. She is a travel expert who honed her skills and knowledge working in media and marketing for an online travel agency that specialized in cruising and other leisure travel. This background led Gina to develop a passion for teaching others how to make the most of a destination when time is short. Her blog, <a href="http://www.OneDayinaCity.com">http://www.OneDayinaCity.com</a>, shares travel tips and other stories from her travels. Her travel guidebook series continues her desire to educate people on how to get the most out of a destination when time is short.



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How to Create a 5-Star Travel Experience Without a 5-Star Budget

By Gina Tarnacki

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