

Behind-the-Scenes Secrets of Cruise Ship Workers - [Jessica Hullinger](#)



From an outsider's perspective, working on a cruise ship might seem like a dream job. What could be more glamorous than getting paid to travel the world by sea, without having to pay for housing or food? But as with many "dream" jobs, there are a few significant downsides to consider before you fill out an application. We spoke to a few cruise ship employees about what it's like to live and work on a floating hotel.

1. AMERICANS ARE THE WORST CRUISE WORKERS.

On most large cruise liners, the majority of staff and crew are not American. "On any given contract, you're working with about 64 nationalities," says Kat, who spent three years working for a major cruise line. There are a number of possible drivers behind this statistic, but one is that cruise ship employees work really long hours and almost never get a day off, which isn't particularly appealing to Americans used to a 40-hour workweek and relaxing on weekends. "On my worst contract, I was working close to 300 hours a month," Kat says. "Yeah, you might

be in beautiful places, but you're so tired sometimes you don't even want to go out and explore. A lot of times they won't even hire Americans because the rate of people quitting is so high.”



Americans are also more expensive to employ, even if they do the same work as their counterparts from developing countries. Sam, who worked on Princess Cruises for two years, says her monthly salary of \$1100 was higher than that of her Filipino boss. According to Sam, the official reason the ship gave was that the dollar is worth more to people from developing countries than it is to Americans, justifying the lower salary.

2. THE CREW IS TRAINED FOR PIRATE ATTACKS.

It's rare for pirates to take on a massive cruise ship, but it can happen, and if it does, the crew is prepared. Nolan, who worked for both Princess Cruises and Oceania Cruises, says he was trained to get all guests away from windows and spray the intruders with giant water cannons.

“Our ship can totally outrun their little dinghies,” he says. “We could spray them with water and they'd be helpless.” Other ships may be equipped with Long Range Acoustic Devices that emit loud, painful noises to deter attacks. That's how a luxury cruise liner [escaped](#) a pirate attack off the coast of Africa in 2005.

3. WANT TO LOSE WEIGHT? WORK ON A CRUISE LINER.

While passengers are feasting on steak and scrumptious seafood, the staff and crew aren't so lucky. "Imagine eating at your high-school cafeteria three meals a day, seven days a week for a year," [writes](#) one former cruise ship worker on Reddit. Kat recalls strange offerings like goat foot stew. The unappetizing food, combined with the many hours spent running the length of the ship, often mean crew members lose a significant amount of weight during their time at sea. "I would lose about 10 to 12 pounds per contract," Kat says.

Gavin, who worked as a waiter for a major cruise line, said the crew would occasionally get treated to whatever leftovers remained from the passenger buffet, but "it would disappear so fast."

4. CREW MEMBERS SOMETIMES MESS WITH PASSENGERS.



Life at sea can get a bit monotonous. "It got mundane really fast," [writes](#) one former worker on Reddit. "It was basically the same comedy of errors each day of the week, with a different 'cast' of passengers each week."

Some crew members shake things up by getting a rise out of passengers in the form of good old practical jokes. [According](#) to another former crew member, “a favorite was while in a passenger area say to another crew member, loud enough to be heard by passengers, ‘Meet you in the bowling alley tonight!’” Of course, there wasn’t actually a bowling alley on board. “Then we'd wait for the comment cards to come in: ‘Why do crew get a bowling alley when we don't?’”

5. AND THEY’RE PROBABLY DRUNK.

When they’re not working, employees are probably drinking and partying. “We partied our asses off,” Gavin says. “We joked about how it makes a frat house look like a monastery.” The staff get their own designated watering holes on board, referred to as the crew bars, where the drinks are dirt cheap. “At the passenger bars they were charging like \$15 for a drink and we’d go down into the crew bar and you could get a beer or mixed drinks for \$1.25,” Sam says.

And what happens when you give copious amounts of cheap alcohol to people who are cooped up together for months at a time? “It seems like a cliché, but everyone was hooking up with each other,” Sam says. “In a lot of the crew areas there were these huge posters about STD prevention.”

The crew is regularly threatened with the possibility of random breathalyzer tests (and drug testing), but even this isn’t always enforced. “There was a strict limit on our ship of no more than .04 blood alcohol content at any time,” Gavin says, “but as long as you didn’t make a fool of yourself, you wouldn’t get randomly breathalyzed, so people would break that rule all the time.”

6. HOOKING UP WITH GUESTS IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN.

So you spotted a cute crew member on your ship and are thinking of chatting them up? Good luck with that. Having sexual relations with a guest is one of the fastest ways for a crew member to get fired. This is mainly to protect the cruise line from reputation-damaging accusations of abuse. Ship security keeps a close eye on crew members day and night. That doesn’t mean hookups never happen, but if a crew member is caught in the act with a guest, they’re kicked off the ship at the next port.

7. YOU’RE ALMOST ALWAYS BEING WATCHED.



“It is safe to assume if you are outside of your cabin you are probably on camera,” Gavin says. “In the event of any kind of emergency, they could pull security footage at any time.”

8. YOU HAVE A LOT OF POWER OVER HOW MUCH THE CREW GETS PAID.

At the end of a journey, you might be asked to rate your experience and share any praise or complaints on a comment card. These reviews are taken very seriously and often translate directly into salaries and bonuses for workers. “For most people, their salaries are quite low and they rely on those bonuses,” Kat says. So if you leave a bad review and mention someone by name, you can be sure they’ll feel the impact on their paycheck.

“The very best thing you can do for a crew member is to write a glowing review, mentioning them specifically on your comment card,” [says](#) a former cruise worker on Reddit. “Their superior’s superiors take note of that.”

9. SOME CRUISE WORKERS HAVE DOUBLE LIVES.

“You get a lot of married people that have their own separate lives on the cruise ship,” Kat says. “I’ve worked with couples that have wives at home and a whole different relationship while they’re on the cruise ship. It’s kind of like a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy.”

Gavin says one of his fellow employees lived as an out-of-the-closet gay man while on board, but was still closeted on land.

10. THEY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT’S GOING ON IN THE WORLD.

“You stop following news and sports and pop culture,” Gavin says. “You’re really kind of isolated out there.” It can be difficult (and expensive) to find an Internet connection while at sea, so many ship workers completely lose track of current events while on contract.

11. THEY SPEAK IN CODE.

Crew members have shorthand codes for everything from fires to medical emergencies, which they can announce over the loudspeaker without alarming passengers.

Code Adam: a child is missing

Code Alpha: there’s a medical emergency

Code Oscar: man overboard

Code Bravo: fire on the ship

12. THE SHIP HAS MANY MAFIAS.

But not the kind that will make you an offer you can’t refuse. According to Sam, the crew members on her ship were split into “mafias” based on their country of origin, and each mafia dealt in specific goods. For example, the Indian mafia was in charge of getting good food for the crew parties, she says. Because Sam worked in the youth center, she was tasked with providing art supplies for crew costume parties. “That’s just one of the economies of the ship,” Sam says. “Everyone is always trying to figure out what they can get from another person.”

One former cruise ship worker [says](#) the Filipino mafia was known for getting good booze at all hours. “If you wanted anything after hours, they would get it for you! The crew bar would close around 1 or 2. If you wanted to keep drinking, but

were out of booze, you would just go to the Filipino mafia and get what you needed. You paid a huge markup obviously, but it was still pretty cool!”

13. THERE’S A MORGUE ON BOARD.

Roughly 200 [people](#) die on cruise ships every year, and cruise lines need some place to store the bodies safely until they get back to shore. As a result, many ships have small morgues on board that can hold five or six bodies. “We definitely had a morgue on board,” one former ship employee told me. “Because the line was for older demographics, we had people die on the ship pretty regularly.”

14. THEY WILL LEAVE YOU BEHIND.



If you leave the ship for an on-land excursion, make sure you get back before departure time. Cruise lines pay massive fines if they overstay their port time, so chances are high the ship will leave without you if you’re running behind. “You’re on your own,” Kat says. “They won’t wait.”
