

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

GETTING SOCIAL

With on-board Wi-Fi costs now lower than ever, it's easy to share images



HOW TO CRUISE

TECH SAVVY ON BOARD

Navigating your way around a ship is easier than you think, says *Frances Marcellin*

As someone who is used to writing about technology, often covering transport and travel, I have become fascinated by the booming cruise industry. Technology is transforming these floating hotels into smart cities. When I heard Luca Pronzati, chief business innovation officer at MSC Cruises, describing the line's new generation of ships as "like smart, connected cities, but with the added complexity of being at sea", I couldn't refuse an invitation to check this out for myself.

Admittedly I had the jitters. I was worried about getting on, getting off, finding my way around a 4,500-passenger ship and everything in between. Waving goodbye to my husband and kids, I flew to Barcelona and headed for the Muelle de Adosado cruise terminal, where the towering MSC Meraviglia was waiting. Once on board, it didn't take too long to figure out how the MSC for Me app, public interactive screens, cabin TV and wearable bracelet, available for the first time on Meraviglia, all worked together to streamline and enhance life on board. These are the top ten ways in which I can see technology helping first-time cruisers at sea.

AT YOUR SERVICE

A robot called Pepper can help passengers find their way around the ship



BEFORE YOU GO

Embarkation can be lengthy and confusing – even more so first time round – but technology is simplifying the process. On many ships, such as MSC Meraviglia, all documentation, such as uploading your photo and receiving digital boarding information, can be done via online check-in. You can also start booking excursions and other activities before you sail. Royal Caribbean also offers a new smart check-in system, so that you can avoid check-in counters and queues. Carnival's pre-cruise service allows you to register all your details before you go, from passport credentials to food preferences, and you will be sent your wearable Ocean Medallion (the size of a coin, this can be worn as a bracelet or necklace) in advance. The Ocean Medallion (and partner Ocean Compass app) launched in November 2017 on Princess Cruises' Regal Princess.

'Phone apps allow you to make a dinner booking from any spot on the ship'

GO KEYLESS

Veteran cruisers know exactly how they will carry their cruise identification card (essential for getting on and off board) and room key (same card) around on board. Some hang a lanyard around their neck while others may plump for a discreet money belt. But some cruise lines have put millions into developing multi-faceted wearable technology that solves the problem entirely.

Royal Caribbean's WOWbands (\$4.99/£3.70 or free depending on ship and class of travel) look like watch straps, but use radio frequency technology to open your cabin door. You can use Carnival Corporation's wearable Ocean Medallion (free to all guests) with the Ocean Compass app to order food, drink and retail items on demand. It also unlocks your cabin door as you approach.

MSC Cruises' MSC for Me interactive wristband (below) works with an app to provide 130 smart features, including a digital way-finder and a speedy reservation service.

DIGITAL WAY-FINDING

On a 13-decks-plus ship, finding your way around is not as difficult



as you might expect. Interactive maps are becoming far easier to use than expected thanks to the digital way-finder on the MSC for Me app. Just indicate where you want to go, and a map will demonstrate how to get there from your current location.

The Ocean Medallion also offers intelligent navigation, similar to a car or phone GPS app, and Royal Caribbean and Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) offer interactive digital signage on board.

A rather futuristic option is available on some AIDA Cruises and Costa Cruises ships in the form of a robot called Pepper, which provides guests with information, including how to get from A to B on board.

SMART DINNER RESERVATIONS

Smartphone apps such as MSC for Me (MSC Cruises), Ocean Compass (Carnival Corporation), iConcierge (NCL) and Royal iQ (Royal Caribbean) allow you to make a dinner reservation from anywhere on the ship. Some hi-tech vessels also have tablet stations and interactive screens for making personal reservations.

MSC Meraviglia has 114 interactive screens that allow you

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to book dinner as well as other activities, such as the theatre or spa, with few clicks and a swipe of your wearable bracelet. These then appear automatically in your personal agenda.

STREAM YOUR FAVOURITE TV SHOW

Experiencing your first cruise is likely to be a unique and exhilarating experience. However, with thousands of people on board, you may appreciate the odd date with your Netflix account.

For a long time, connectivity at sea was slow, patchy and pricey, but the tide is turning. However, if you do want to stream on board, use packages with unlimited data usage to avoid racking up a huge bill. On Royal Caribbean ships the best option is Voom (Surf & Stream package:

\$17.99/£13.50 per device per day); Xcelerate from Celebrity Cruises offers speeds high enough for streaming movies (\$143/£107 per person for a four- to six-day cruise); and on Carnival ships high-data activities can be accessed with a Premium deal (\$25/£18 per day).

Carnival is launching MedallionNet soon (prices currently unavailable), which it says will be the fastest internet connection at sea and will provide pervasive cabin coverage.

GEO-LOCATE THE CHILDREN

As they say, "strange things happen at sea", which may be a worrying thought for parents on cruises. With MSC Cruises' wearable bracelet, however, you can monitor your children in real-time and know where they are at any moment. The kids' bracelets interact with the thousands of sensors on board so that you can

localise your child in any of the ship's public areas (cabins not included) in seconds.

Carnival's Ocean Medallion can also help parents keep an eye on their children's whereabouts.

DITCH THE CREDIT CARD

Life on board a hi-tech ship means that you don't have to worry about losing your purse, bringing even more peace of mind for first-time cruisers.

With MSC's interactive bracelet (or the Cruise Card) you can pay for everything, from your shopping session at the 100-metre high street to your evening meals. The wearable technology means staff quickly know who you are and your first language, which adds a sparkle to the customer service.

The design of the Ocean Medallion (which can be linked to any number of credit cards) will make paying extremely easy. Not only can you order drinks to be served instantly to wherever you are sitting (the "Here & Now"



SMOOTH SAILING

Carnival Breeze: Ocean Medallion, left, and Ocean Compass app, right, introduced by Carnival Corporation

service), but you can also request some for later at whichever event you may have booked ("There & Then"). The Medallion automatically triggers the payment process on the waiter's system.

PERSONALISED PAMPERING

MSC for Me and the Ocean Medallion really up the stakes when it comes to personalising the cruise experience for passengers. Carnival's new system is designed to be in tune with whatever you are doing in real-time, even if that is the opposite of what you initially specified. For example, if you have asked for exercise recommendations but actually spend more time watching shows, the suggestions will relate to what you're doing rather than what you planned to do on board.

Personalised recommendations (such as which bottle of wine to try) will be offered on MSC Meraviglia in the not-too-distant



future as part of the digital concierge service.

ENTERTAIN OLDER CHILDREN

There are all kinds of activities for children on MSC Meraviglia, from sports to PlayStation gaming, but cutting-edge technology is also being used to inspire and entertain a tech-savvy generation.

A modern take on arts and crafts can be enjoyed with the HP Sprout, scanner and 3D printer. Here children (around 7-12 years old) can design their own creations in the computer and then print 3D versions to take home.

For older children (usually 10-plus), the focus is on helping them share technology rather than isolating themselves on smartphones. An interactive multimedia table, resembling a giant iPad, helps them to interact:

sending messages and sharing music are two of the most popular activities.

SHARE MEMORIES INSTANTLY ONLINE

With the costs of connecting at sea more reasonable now than ever before, it should be easy to share details and images of your cruise with family and friends.

On MSC Meraviglia you can instantly share images on social media (Wi-Fi packages start at £4.90/£4.30 per day), but there is also a photo gallery where you can find professional photographs taken during the cruise (the costs of photo packages vary).

Carnival's Ocean Compass features a "Constellations" collection, which brings all on-board photos together for viewing, sharing and purchasing.

The days of cruise passengers feeling disconnected from the rest of the world while at sea are gone, which is good news for first-timers who may not have got their sea legs yet.