

Going on a Research Cruise for the first time

These are a few notes to help explain the process of going on a cruise, from preparation, getting to the ship, life on board to getting back. They have been put together by a PhD student, so should not be considered official or relied on as comprehensive but I hope they help. It should also be noted that all cruises vary depending on who's organising them, whether you leave from the UK or abroad and which ship you are on. I have left out issues of science as these are too detailed and variable and scientists tend to be good at organising science. There are lots of details to be dealt with and life on board is strange but most people find cruises to be amazing experiences where you learn and experience a huge amount. If your PhD does not include one, it is often possible (and perfectly reasonable) to find a place on another cruise – it is considered better to have a student learning about a cruise and doing something useful than having an empty berth and cruise experience is part of the training that goes with an oceanography PhD.

Cruise preparation

What to send and how

You need to have protective gear with you to work on deck. This always includes hard hat and steel toe-capped boots but also cold/wet weather clothes including an X4 insulated suit if working in high latitudes. A boiler suit is needed for other cruises and can be useful on a cold cruise. These are generally too heavy and bulky to carry with you to the ship so you can send a personal equipment box to the ship with them in. Suitable boxes can be acquired by asking around – your supervisor or other students who have been on a cruise are good bets. Cardboard boxes are fine so old computer boxes can be used. You will need to sort out buying safety gear (see your supervisor or the PSO) though X4's are often borrowed. Boxes (including those containing science stuff) may have to go up to 2 months before you sail if the departure is abroad as they will be sea freighted or put on the ship when it leaves the UK.

Your personal equipment box also allows you to send other things you don't want to carry out, such as some bulky clothes, CDs (more than you think you'll need – you will probably listen to a lot of music), books and your favourite food (so long as it keeps well). Good options for food include microwave popcorn and dried fruit as well as the obvious chocolate, sweets and biscuits. For cruises leaving the UK, boxes will be driven to the ship (they normally sail from Glasgow but do occasional dock outside the NOC) soon before the cruise leaves. When packing the box, consider how long it will take for it to come back at the end of the cruise and whether you will want things in that time if you can't carry it back on the plane.

It is also worth taking photocopies of travel information and passport (preferably in someone else's bag) and receipts of any newly purchased expensive items in case customs question whether you bought it abroad or to help any insurance claims if they get stolen.

Getting to the ship

Transport arrangements/costs

Assuming you are not leaving from and finishing in Britain, you will probably fly on crew tickets. These are flexible in case the cruise plans change and can be changed to accommodate holiday plans. You can fly out up to a week before the scheduled departure. Time ashore before returning is less strictly limited, I believe, but you should be aware of the possible need to get back soon after docking to deal with your samples, though 'someone else' can often be found to do this. The baggage allowance is 40kg for crew tickets so you can take extra equipment or spares if needed. You may however be on normal tickets with 20kg allowance and there will probably be a charge for changing these for holiday reasons (that will be covered if it is for cruise reasons).

Keep your boarding passes as proof you have used the flights – they may be needed when claiming costs back. The process of claiming back costs from NERC (NOCS pays initially and has to be reimbursed) varies considerably. This will mostly be sorted when you get back though I would try to get the process clear beforehand. Allow extra time for check in as you will have e-tickets and the routes can be quite strange - having a single ticket to the Bahamas caused all sorts of immigration hassles for one cruise!

A taxi is arranged (and paid for) to go to and from the airport unless you say otherwise and you are collected from the airport by the ship's agents and taken to the ship or hotel. The agents also sort out immigration – you leave the country when you start the cruise.

Time ashore

You will be put up in a hotel when ashore which the agent will pay for and arrange travel to and from (or you stay on the ship). Some currency will be needed for personal costs ashore. Getting money from ATMs is now easy in most countries but beware of the security risks associated with it. At the end of the cruise the master can often arrange some foreign currency, the cost of which goes on your tab.

The ship's agents are responsible for you while ashore in the country of departure so they need to know where you are staying if you have holiday time and they will check that you leave the country on your scheduled flight – keep them updated about changes in plan via whoever is organising travel arrangements in NOC – don't contact the agents directly. It is perfectly normal to have some holiday time, especially after the cruise as you will need time to recover from the cruise (they are hard work, but worth it). It is worth asking around to possibly organise something as a group.

The insurance for the cruise currently provides holiday cover for 7 days. This can be extended in advance, or possibly from the ship. This is prone to change – don't trust this as being accurate but check with the university insurance office. Some travel insurance requires your trip to start and end in Britain (it won't), others that you purchase it before you leave Britain – if you get extra cover separately check this at the time.

Life on board

Domestic Stuff

Domestically, life is pretty easy. You have 3 hot meals a day provided, though shift patterns mean that most people only get to 2 (you can ask meals to be put aside). Vegetarians and special diets are coped with (provided they are told on the RRS12 form beforehand) and there is some choice at most meals. Food is good and fresh stuff lasts for 4-5 weeks. There is always bread, cold meat, jam, cereals and milk available. There are washing machines (with powder provided) and tumble driers. Bed linen and towels are provided and washed communally with replacements left outside the cabin (this is the prompt to put the old lot out). On RRS Discovery there are 2 cabins to each shower and one single room so you will always share the shower with someone of the same sex. Your cabin and shower may be inspected – it should be clean and relatively tidy (at least when they come and check it) and cleaning stuff is provided. It should be left in a condition you would be happy to find it in. The cabins are comfortably big – a bed wide and about two bed lengths long. There is a bed, day bed (ottoman-like thing), wardrobe, desk, UK plug (though think about this if on a foreign ship) and sink. There is plenty of storage space. It is very hard to say anything in general about the other people on board but I found literally ‘all being in the same boat’ (sorry, ship) made people generally helpful, understanding and generous but others have not been so lucky. RRS Charles Darwin is smaller, with more cabins to a shower but this is going out of service in 2006, to be replaced by RRS James Cook in 2007.

There is a lounge with a DVD and video player and plenty of DVDs and videos available (the DVDs can be borrowed and watched in your own room – a good way of getting time to yourself if you have a laptop or can borrow one), a library with an amazingly eclectic mix of books – taking your own is the best bet but there are some interesting books there, bar (run on a swipe card system) and the bond (shop) opens twice a week for chocolate, sweets and Discovery stash, again on a the swipe card. Warning: the chocolate can run out! Soft drinks are always available and are free but some squash is advisable if you like still and slightly less sugary drinks – the boat water tastes OK but not great. Mineral water is sometimes available. Fruit juice is available at meal times but not otherwise. The satellite phone costs about 50p/minute so it is affordable to occasionally talk to the real world, should you wish to. Cards for this are available from the master. You are issued with the swipe card when you are on board and the tab is taken from your account at the end of each month.

There is a gym which can be used in most conditions (though it is not safe to push yourself too hard if the ship is rolling!) and is the only real means of exercise. Many people put on weight during a cruise and it is a good idea to get reasonably fit before you leave and use the gym regularly (if not necessarily frequently). Many people also take a ‘project’ (e.g. airfix kit) to work on to keep themselves occupied as you do (generally) have a fair bit of free time – no time spent commuting, cooking, washing up, on internet and, if the wind gets up, taking measurements/samples!

E-mail transmissions will occur about 3 times a day and reduced size photos can be sent back as attachments. You get a username@sea.noc.soton.ac.uk address and e-mails are now free to send. Take e-mail addresses with you as you won't be able to get to your normal account (or the internet). Normal e-mail accounts should not be forwarded to this (to keep volume of e-mails down). The e-mails can be saved and brought back if you want. If you are going away for an extended period it is worth getting someone (you trust) to check your normal e-mails for anything that needs dealing with, and to keep accounts active.

Work and shifts

Workwise, you will either work shifts (probably one of: 4 on 8 off, 8 on 16 off, 12 on 12 off) or as and when you are needed. Work is 7 days a week (it also doesn't stop for Christmas – ship time is expensive!). You may change between work patterns during a cruise. If you are lucky then your sleep pattern adjusts. Sleeping on the ship is a personal thing – some find it very easy, others find the rocking and background engine noise off-putting. Bring ear plugs if you are a sensitive sleeper. You sometimes have to put something (e.g. lifejacket or blanket) under the mattress to create a wedge against the wall to sleep in if the ship is rolling too much! Make sure you have an alarm clock with you though you can leave notes to be woken up at a particular stage of work if you don't know in advance when this will be.

The most useful bits of kit seemed to be a pen knife (lots of tying things down with rope/string) and a USB pen, though there is also a wireless computer network that some computers link to. There is a PC on Discovery that can be used to store digital photos and burn CDs or DVDs – some blank disks are needed for this. Otherwise, many people take personal laptops, even if you don't you can probably use one to store photos on. String should be provided but a ball of it always helps.

Weather

Weather is obviously mostly dependent on where you go and when but in high latitudes you have to expect at least one big blow per cruise. Work will stop if it gets above force 8. Discovery has rolled to (and obviously come back from) 43° but the prospect is scarier than the reality. You do need to make sure things are tied down – don't assume a laptop will bounce safely (though they have done!). The boat rolls much more than it pitches so the orientation of things relative to the ship makes a difference. My experience is in the Southern Ocean – most cruises aren't as bad – talk to someone who has done a low latitude cruise if you want to know where to sunbathe!

Sea-sickness is very variable, some people just aren't, most are queasy on and off for the first few days and then fine and some struggle much more. It is very hard to know what the best strategy is, but being on deck helps most people. I took some tablets to begin with but not a full dose and not continually and this possibly allowed me to get used to it. Some people have trouble returning to land but this is quite rare.

Safety

You will be given a talk about safety that covers the specifics of the ship but the following are a few general points. The master ('old man') is responsible for you while you are on board. There are times when you are not allowed outside due to weather or near working equipment (certainly without appropriate safety gear). You have to think "will the old man be happy for me to do x" rather than "do I think it is OK for me to do x" as the answers to these may be different. If in doubt phone the bridge and ask the duty officer. You are allowed on the bridge in general but best to avoid it when watches are changing over or there is complicated maneuvering – always ask first anyway and appreciate it is their space. You are likely to get to know the master, officers and the rest of the ship's crew through eating together and when they are around the boat.

Wildlife

The amount of wildlife seen varies considerably between cruises but there is always some – dolphins, whales, seabirds, flying fish, turtles. Interesting sightings can often be a highlight as things can otherwise become repetitive. There is a NOCS marine wildlife webpage (URL below) with some reports and details of submitting sightings.

Post Cruise

Once you're back it is expected that it will take some time, about 2 weeks, to get back up to speed as you recover from the cruise and get personal things sorted – don't worry about taking time off to get things straight/see people – you will just have worked about 40-odd days straight – and they will have been odd!

Must have list:

Passport

Appropriate certificates – Sea Survival (ORIGINALS of these are essential for
 Medical being allowed on the boat)
 Dental

Account details for clearing tab (switch card + account number)

Useful Websites

<http://www.noc.soton.ac.uk/test/rsu/> - some details of the ships and a cruise programme
http://www.finance.soton.ac.uk/insurance/travel_summary.htm
http://www.noc.soton.ac.uk/marine_wildlife/intro.html