

CRUISES WITH A SENSE OF PLACE

From line dancing in Texas to shimmying up coconut trees in India, experience authentic local culture for a cruise with a difference, writes Sarah Riches



“Swap generic waterparks for Mexican *cenotes*, identikit casinos for Japanese *pachinko* parlours”

Chanting monks in temples thick with incense conjure up memories of your trip to Kyoto – or was that Hong Kong?

That time you inhaled the scent of molten candlewax was surely in Cologne cathedral, or was it in Budapest’s basilica?

Temples and churches, vineyards and waterfalls: they’re all beautiful, but when you visit multiple destinations on a single cruise, it’s easy to forget which country you were in when you experienced them.

Try a traditional activity in the country it originates from, however, and you’ll learn about that nation’s culture, feel closer to its people and return home having had a richer experience.

For an insight into the regions you visit, swap generic waterparks for

Mexican *cenotes*, identikit casinos for Japanese *pachinko* parlours, and tourist trap aquariums for bioluminescent bays. Here’s our pick of cultural experiences you’ll never forget.

OUT: MALLS IN: CRAFT MARKETS

Five years from now, will you recall if you bought that jacket from Zara in a mall in Toronto, or in Montreal? By forgoing international chains for crafts handmade by indigenous artists in Canada (destinationindigenous.ca), you will help spread your wealth around the nation and strengthen oral traditions in First Nation communities, as craftsmanship techniques are passed down verbally through the generations. You’ll also return home with special souvenirs embedded with stories.

Get on board

P&O’s 24-night Canada cruise aboard *Arcadia*, return from Southampton via St John’s, Gaspé, Sept Îles, Quebec, Saguenay, Charlottetown, Îles de la Madeleine, Halifax and Sydney (Nova Scotia), departs on 25 September 2025, from £2,139. pocruises.com

OUT: DISCOS IN: LINE DANCING

Y’all should save your disco moves for your ship and don cowboy boots to line dance with Texans in Galveston. Founded in 2002, Buckshot Saloon is a family-owned and operated country dance hall that hosts live bands from Thursday to Saturday. It’s debatable whether their mechanical bull is authentic or not, but it’s still a bunch of fun trying it.

Previous page: sinkhole – Susanne Kremer/ACorner. This page: another sinkhole – Filippo Carlot/Shutterstock



Get on board

Carnival’s seven-night Western Caribbean from Galveston cruise aboard *Carnival Jubilee*, return from Galveston via Mahogany Bay, Costa Maya and Cozumel, departs on 11 January 2025, from £530. carnival.com

OUT: WATERPARKS IN: CENOTES

Make the most of your onboard waterslides, but once on land, splash about in *cenotes* – sinkholes that form when limestone bedrock collapses. While the groundwater pools are

common on islands at low altitude – particularly in Cuba and Greece – the name originated on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula, which has around 8,000. The Mayan civilisation believed they were sacred gateways to the afterlife.

Get on board

MSC’s seven-night Bahamas and Caribbean cruise aboard *MSC Seashore*, return from Port Canaveral (Orlando) via Ocean Cay MSC Marine Reserve Bahamas, Costa Maya and Cozumel, departs on 2 February 2025, from £519. mscruises.co.uk

OUT: INTERNATIONAL GIGS IN: REGGAE IN JAMAICA

While it’s enjoyable to watch Oasis/ Taylor Swift/UB40’s world tour, why not experience a musical genre in the country that gave birth to it? When reggae originated in Kingston in the 1960s, it was a voice for the marginalised, but now it’s so entrenched in Jamaican culture it’s taught in schools – and in 2018, Unesco recognised it as intangible cultural heritage. Book a cruise in time for Rebel Salute (18 January 2025) whose motto is ‘It’s more than an event, it’s a lifestyle,’ or attend Reggae Sumfest, which is held every July.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Swim in Mexican *cenotes*, listen to reggae in Jamaica, witness bioluminescence; line dance with locals in Texas



Get on board

NCL’s seven-night Caribbean: Great Stirrup Cay & Cozumel cruise aboard *Norwegian Prima*, return from Port Canaveral via Great Stirrup Cay, Montego Bay, George Town and Cozumel, departs on 2 November 2025, from £947. ncl.com

OUT: AQUARIUMS IN: BIOLUMINESCENT BAYS

Why visit an aquarium when you can get up close to sealife in the ocean? Go scuba diving, whale watching or, better still, snorkelling in bioluminescence. Like fireflies, some fish species, plankton and bacteria emit light in warm, brackish pools with narrow openings to the sea. While you can spot this rare phenomenon in British waters, you are more likely to catch it on Mudhdhoo Island in the Maldives and Mosquito Bay in Puerto Rico.

Get on board

Marella Cruises’ seven-night Tropical Shores cruise aboard *Marella Discovery*, return from Bridgetown via San Juan, Charlotte Amalie, Frederiksted, Roseau and Bequia, departs on 2 February 2025, from £1,531 including flights. tui.co.uk ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT A powwow in Canada; a tagine; morris dancers; a Dala horse

“The workshop sees dancers hop about in lines while waving handkerchiefs and tapping sticks”

OUT: NIGHTCLUBS

IN: MORRIS DANCING

Britain may be multicultural but dig deep and you can experience folk culture such as morris dancing, a rural jig with regional variations that dates back to the 1450s. Andy Richards hosts classes on Tuesdays at Cecil Sharp House in London. Based on the Cotswolds tradition, the workshop sees dancers hop about in lines while waving handkerchiefs and tapping sticks to energetic live music.

Get on board

Viking's 14-night British Isles Explorer cruise aboard *Viking Vela*, from London to Bergen via Dover, Dublin, Holyhead, Liverpool, Belfast, the Scottish highlands, the Orkney Islands, Edinburgh and the Shetland Islands, departs on 20 April 2025, from £6,690 including flights. vikingcruises.co.uk

OUT: PLASTIC TOY SOUVENIRS

IN: DALA HORSES

Swedish farmers in Dalarna province have been carving and painting Dala horses since the 17th century. The toy grew in popularity, and in 1939 a 2.5m version, painted red, was displayed at

the New York World's Fair. It's been a symbol of Sweden ever since. Carve and decorate your own in Stockholm (jr-work-shop.com). Organiser Sofia Ekvall says, “We talk about the tradition and the craft and show examples. Our focus is on carving, rather than painting.”

Get on board

Viking's 14-night Viking Homelands cruise aboard *Viking Jupiter*, from Stockholm to Bergen via Tallinn, Gdansk, Bornholm, Berlin, Copenhagen, Alborg, Oslo, Stavanger and Eidfjord, departs on 12 May 2025, from £7,290 including flights. vikingcruises.co.uk

OUT: GENERIC COOKING CLASSES

IN: TAGINE MAKING

You can make tagines anywhere, but to learn about Moroccan customs, cook one over mint tea at Chamsi Dib's home in Casablanca (travelingspoon.com). After visiting a souk where locals shop for regional produce, you'll dice and spice ingredients before cooking them in a tagine – a conical clay pot. Founder Aashi Vel says, “We believe in the power of food to foster connections between peoples and cultures. Experience Chamsi's hospitality and expert cooking skills,



and give back to the local economy. Learn Moroccan recipes passed down through generations, hear stories about living in Morocco and feel at home as you eat with a Moroccan family.”

Get on board

Marella Cruises' seven-night Sights and Delights Cruise aboard *Marella Discovery II*, return from Malaga via Lisbon, Cadiz, Casablanca and Gibraltar, departs on 14 November 2024, from £954 including flights. tui.co.uk

OUT: WRITING POSTCARDS

IN: CALLIGRAPHY

Forget postcards or WhatsApp – mastering Arabic calligraphy in the United Arab Emirates will give you something to write home about. Practise inky swirls at Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding in Dubai as you learn about the script, which reads from right to left. ▶

Powwow - Alina Reynold/Shutterstock; Moroccan dish - Pawel Kazmierczak/Shutterstock; morris dancers - Ian Francis/Shutterstock; horse - JR Work Shop



“Climbing coconut trees in southwest India is a memorable experience”



ABOVE Korean *hanbok* traditional dress
LEFT Hand-carving a mask in Sri Lanka

Panama to the Philippines. However, climbing coconut trees in southwest India is a memorable experience. The Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission Society (keralatourism.org) organises workshops with villagers who will show you how to clamber up palms using traditional *thalappus* (ropes).

Get on board

Pandaw's seven-night Kerala Backwaters cruise aboard *Kochi Pandaw*, return from Kochi via Thannermekkom Bund, Nattakam, Kavalam, Allapuzha and Perumpalam, departs on 8 October 2025, from £4,108. pandaw.com

OUT: MASS-PRODUCED MEMENTOS IN: HAND-CRAFTED SOUVENIRS

From El Salvador to Kenya, many countries tell stories with masks – but variations in each country make investing in a unique piece worthwhile. You can buy factory-made masks across Sri Lanka, but for a one-of-a-kind

memento, visit Ambalangoda on its southwest coast, which produces them by hand. Made from kaduru trees which grow around rice paddies, the masks depict demons, gods and animals. *Sanni* masks are used in exorcisms, *Kolam* for comic dances, while *Raksha* masks – which portray 24 demons such as the cobra and fire devil – are worn at festivals. Observe craftsmen and women carving masks and painting them with facial expressions at Ariyapala & Sons Masks Museum, or make your own at a class in Galle organised by the local travel firm Pepper (pepper.life).

Get on board

Azamara's 16-night South Asia Cruise: Maldives, India & Sri Lanka itinerary aboard *Azamara Pursuit*, from Port Louis to Singapore via Male, Kochi, Colombo, Hambantota and Sabang, departs on 28 November 2025, from £1,659. azamara.com

OUT: CASINOS IN: PACHINKO

Swap poker for *pachinko*, which is so popular you can find a pachinko parlour in most Japanese towns. You might hear them before you spot them, as the clatter of pinball machines ricochets around the arcade. While gambling for money is illegal in Japan, a loophole allows players to trade the steel balls they win for tokens which can be exchanged for



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Learn the Japanese art of *ikebana*, try Aboriginal bush tucker in Australia

and etiquette, especially through the decorum of wearing hanbok. They'll learn about the balance of simplicity and elegance that defines much of Korean culture.”

Get on board

Royal Caribbean International's nine-night Best of Japan & South Korea cruise aboard *Ovation of the Seas*, from Beijing (Tianjin) to Tokyo (Yokohama) via Seoul, Jeju, Kumamoto, Kagoshima and Kochi, departs on 6 May 2025, from £580. royalcaribbean.com

OUT: FINE DINING IN: BUSH TUCKER

Onboard celebrity chefs are a treat, but when you're in Australia, swap Michelin star meals for bush tucker – the food Aboriginals have lived off for 65,000 years. Book a one-hour Aboriginal bush tucker tour in Royal Botanic Garden Sydney and an indigenous guide will share their knowledge of edible endemic plants. The best bit? You'll also get to sample berries, finger lime jam and lemon myrtle tea.

Get on board

Princess's nine-night Queensland cruise aboard *Crown Princess*, from Sydney to Brisbane via Moreton Island, Airlie Beach, Cairns, Port Douglas and Willis Island, departs on 8 March 2025, from £820. princess.com ■

Have you had a distinctive ethnic experience? Tell #WorldofCruising on X, Instagram or Facebook

cash off-premises. But whether you win anything or not, it's an essential Japanese experience.

Get on board

Celebrity Cruises' 12-night Best of Japan cruise aboard *Celebrity Millennium*, return from Tokyo (Yokohama) via Mt Fuji (Shimizu), Kobe, Kochi, Hiroshima, Busan, Aomori and Hakodate, departs on 8 April 2025, from £3,385. celebritycruises.com

OUT: FLOWER GARDENS IN: IKEBANA WORKSHOPS

Swap Dubai's Miracle Garden for a lesson in *ikebana*, or Japanese flower arranging. The ancient art adheres to

strict rules, emphasising asymmetry and balance between opposing elements such as twigs with long branches and dried flowers juxtaposed with fresh blooms. Learn more while arranging a masterpiece with Mika Otani in Tokyo (atelier-soka.com).

Get on board

Cunard's nine-night Southern Japan cruise aboard *Queen Elizabeth*, return from Tokyo (Yokohama) via Beppu, Busan, Nagasaki, Kagoshima and Kochi, departs on 7 April 2025, from £1,319. cunard.com

OUT: FORMAL NIGHTS IN: DRESSING IN HANBOK

While some cruise lines encourage guests to glam up in cocktail frocks or suits on formal night, many have relaxed their dress code. But if you enjoy putting on the style, hire South Korean *hanbok* national dress in Seoul through KoreaTravelEasy (koreatraveleasy.com). Manager Cindy Lam says, “Trying on hanbok offers cruise-goers a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in traditional Korean culture. It's not just about wearing an exquisite garment; it's about experiencing a significant part of Korea's heritage and understanding the historical context behind the vibrant and intricate designs. Participants gain insights into the profound influence of Confucianism in Korean traditions



Vase - Anna Kim/Shutterstock; berries - Jackson Stock Photography/Shutterstock

Korean dress - anek.sooomphoom/Shutterstock; mask - Ruwon Wolpols/Shutterstock