



The Ultimate First-Time Cruise Planner (SA Edition)

- Save money
- Avoid mistakes
- Cruise confidently

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Welcome Aboard

Hi, I'm Phoebe 🙋🏽

In the last 30 days alone, my cruise content reached over **1 million viewers**, and I've helped **150+ families** plan their first cruise with confidence

This planner was created from real cruise experience and hundreds of South African first-time cruiser questions.

Inside you'll get a step-by-step plan to:

- choose the right cabin (and avoid the worst spots)
- budget for the real costs (so nothing surprises you)
- pack smart (without overpacking)
- master Durban embarkation + smooth disembarkation
- cruise with kids confidently (what's free vs paid)

Keep this open on your phone—this becomes your cruise companion.



Why This Planner Saves You Money

**Most first-time cruisers overspend by accident.
Not because they're reckless — but because nobody explains the fine print.**

This planner protects your money, your peace, and your experience.

You'll avoid:

- surprise charges
- noisy cabins
- stressful embarkation
- wasted spending

Think of this as your personal cruise mentor in your pocket.

Your Cruise Timeline

30 Days

Confirm dates, cabin strategy, budget plan, and documents. Decide on drinks/WiFi approach.

14 Days

Complete web check-in, upload documents, plan parking/transport, start packing essentials.

7 Days

Final packing + carry-on. Download MSC App, plan first-day schedule, set spending limits.

Embarkation

Arrive early, carry essentials, book shows early, relax—your plan is done.

Before You Book

Make the smartest decisions **BEFORE** you pay

Choose your sailing strategically:

- school holidays = fuller ships + higher prices
- out of season = better value + calmer vibe

Pick your cabin location with intention:

- mid-ship = less motion
- avoid under pools/nightclubs for noise

Quick win: early booking = better cabins + more promo options.

HOW TO FIND THE BEST CABIN ON A CRUISE SHIP

Mid-Ship
(Best for Stability)

Forward Aft (Back)

Deck 9 Plan

Pool Deck

Deck Levels Avoid Pools & Clubs Mid-Ship

Cabin Categories

Inside Cabin Oceanview Cabin Balcony Cabin

Cabin Number Guide: 1025

1 = Deck 10 Even = Port Side
 Odd = Starboard Side Even = Starboard Side

Booking Packages: What's the Difference?

BELLA	FANTASTICA	AUREA
Basic	Better Location	Best Cabins
Lowest Price	Free Breakfast in Cabin	Drink Package Included
Assigned Cabin	Priority Booking	Spa & Perks

Phoebe's Tips:

- Pick Mid-Ship for Less Motion
- Ask: What's Above & Below My Cabin?

Understand Ship Layout

Cruise ships have:

- Decks = floors
- Forward = front of ship
- Mid-ship = middle (best for stability)
- Aft = back of ship

📍 Mid-ship cabins = less movement
Perfect if you get seasick.

Cabin Types

Inside Cabin

- No windows
- Cheapest
- Dark (good sleepers love this)

Oceanview Cabin

- Window
- Natural light
- Best value for money

Balcony Cabin

- Private balcony
- Fresh air
- Luxury experience

Suite

- Bigger space
- Priority perks
- Higher cost

Reading the Deck Plan

On the booking site you'll see a deck map.
Here's what to look for:

- ✓ Choose mid-ship
- ✓ Choose decks with only cabins above & below

Avoid cabins:

- under pools
- under gyms
- under nightclubs
- next to lifts
- near staircases

Why?

- ➔ Noise early morning
- ➔ Foot traffic
- ➔ Hard to sleep



Cabin Numbers

Cabin numbers tell you:

- First number = deck
Example: Cabin 1025
➔ Deck 10
- Even numbers = one side
- Odd numbers = opposite side

(You don't need to stress about sides unless
oceanview/balcony)

How to Actually Book

Option 1: Through an agent

- ✓ They pick for you
- ✓ Ask them:
 - mid-ship
 - quiet area
 - away from lifts

Option 2: Online

- ✓ Click "Choose cabin"
- ✓ Open deck plan
- ✓ Zoom in
- ✓ Click your preferred cabin



Smart Booking Tips

- ✓ Book early = more choice
- ✓ Mid-decks (8-11) are best
- ✓ Families: ask for interleading rooms
- ✓ Seasick? Avoid front & back
- ✓ Want quiet? Avoid entertainment decks

PHOEBE'S INSIDER TIP



**Don't just accept the first cabin offered.
Your cabin location can change your entire cruise
experience.**

Summary of Best & Worst Deck Areas

Sleep better. Cruise calmer.

Choose mid-ship decks for a smoother ride.

Avoid:

- cabins near lifts (foot traffic)
- cabins under pools/gyms (early noise)
- cabins near clubs/bars (late noise)

If you're prone to seasickness: lower decks + mid-ship are your friend.



Budget Planner

Budget like a pro:

- 1) Decide what you WILL pay for (drinks/WiFi/excursions).
- 2) Set a daily limit for each person.
- 3) Keep a small "oops fund" for unexpected treats.

Use the printable budget tracker included in this planner.

An example of why budgeting is key!

Drinks:

Example:

2 cocktails at R130 each
= R260 per day
= R780 for a 3-day cruise

That's already more than some drink packages
for 10 or more drinks



Hidden Onboard Costs

The Cruise Money Leaks Nobody Warns You About

Drink Packages vs Pay-As-You-Go

What's free:

- Water, tea, coffee, juice at buffet
- NOT free at bars

What costs extra:

- Alcohol
- Soft drinks
- Specialty coffee
- Bottled water

Why people overspend:

Paying per drink adds up FAST (R80-R150 per drink)

Smart move:

- ✓ Buy a drinks package if you drink more than 3 per day
- ✓ Packages must be bought for everyone in the cabin

WiFi Packages

Reality:

WiFi is NOT free on cruise ships.

Options:

- Social media only
- Browsing
- Streaming

Cost:

Charged per device, per day

Tip:

- ✓ Buy before sailing (cheaper)
- ✓ Turn airplane mode ON
- ✓ Use free port WiFi

Medical Centre

Nothing is free here

- Consultations
- Seasick meds
- Bandages

Tip:

- ✓ Pack your own meds
- ✓ Travel insurance is a MUST



Hidden Onboard Costs

Specialty Dining

Included:

- Buffet
- Main dining room

Extra cost:

- Steakhouse
- Sushi
- Chef's table

Cost range:

R300 – R900 per person

Worth it?

Yes, but treat it as a special night out

Spa & Salon

Not included:

- Massages
- Facials
- Hair
- Barber
- Teeth whitening

Hidden trick:

They offer discounts on port days
when ship is quiet

Shore Excursions

Not included in cruise fare

Costs:

R800 – R3,000+ per person

Cheaper option:

- ✓ Book with locals at the island
- ✓ Walk around
- ✓ Beach day DIY



Hidden Onboard Costs

Kids Paid Activities

Free:

- Kids clubs
- Pools
- Shows

Paid:

- VR games
- Arcade
- F1 simulator
- Babysitting after hours

Parents get caught out here because kids swipe the cruise card 😅

Tip:

- ✓ Set spending limits on kids cards

Photos

You WILL be tempted

- Boarding photos
- Dinner photos
- Island photos

Cost:

R300 – R600 per photo

Tip:

- ✓ Use your phone
- ✓ Ask crew to take pics

Mini Bar & Fridge Confusion

Important:

- It's NOT a fridge you can use freely
- Sensors charge you automatically
- Removing items = charged

Hack:

- ✓ Ask room attendant to empty it
- ✓ Use your own cooler bottle



Hidden Onboard Costs

Currency & Island Spending

On islands:

- Cash is king
- Umbrella rentals
- Chairs
- Drinks
- Souvenirs

Example from your comments:

- ✓ Umbrella R460 onboard
- ✓ Locals charge less than R400

Casino

Hidden danger 😅

- Easy to swipe
- Drinks make it worse

Set a strict limit!

Laundry

No self-service laundromat

- Charged per item
- Expensive

Pack enough clothes!

Retail Shops

Duty-free temptation:

- Perfume
- Watches
- Bags

Budget or avoid 👁️

Phoebe's Insider Tip



Pro tip: set a daily spend limit and check your onboard account each night.

Packing Like a Pro

Pack for comfort + convenience:

- carry swimwear & essentials in your hand luggage (checked bags can arrive later)
- plan outfits for: pool days, casual dinners, and at least one smart evening
- bring a two pin plugs + power bank

Included: printable packing checklist (adult + kids) with blank tick boxes.



Kids Cruise Survival

Family cruises can be amazing—when you plan smart.

Know the difference:

FREE:

- kids clubs (age groups)
- family activities + shows

PAID:

- arcade/VR games
- certain specialty treats/activities

Phoebe's Insider Tip



PPro tip: keep a simple routine (nap/quiet time) so evenings stay peaceful.



Free vs Paid Fun

Know what's included so you can plan your spend (and avoid surprise charges).



Island Money Guide

Budget for island days like a local:

- carry cash (small notes) + a card backup
- confirm prices before buying
- pack sunhat+ sunscreen optional water shoes

Pomene/Portuguese Island can be affordable when you go prepared.

Phoebe's Insider Tip



Pro tip: Local are open to negotiations, especially when its time for you to leave



Island Safety Tips

Simple habits keep your day stress-free:

- stay in groups
- watch phones/wallets
- don't carry all your cash
- keep kids close near vendors
- return to the ship early (ship time matters)

Your best souvenir is peace of mind.

Phoebe's Insider Tip



**Pro tip: You can head back to the ship after lunch,
the ship will be emptier and more to enjoy**



Durban Port Tips

Make embarkation smooth:

- arrive 2 hours early
- have documents ready before you queue
- plan parking vs Uber in advance
- pack a carry-on with valuables + meds

Phoebe's Insider Tip



Pro tip: eat before arriving—queues happen.



Web Check-In Explained

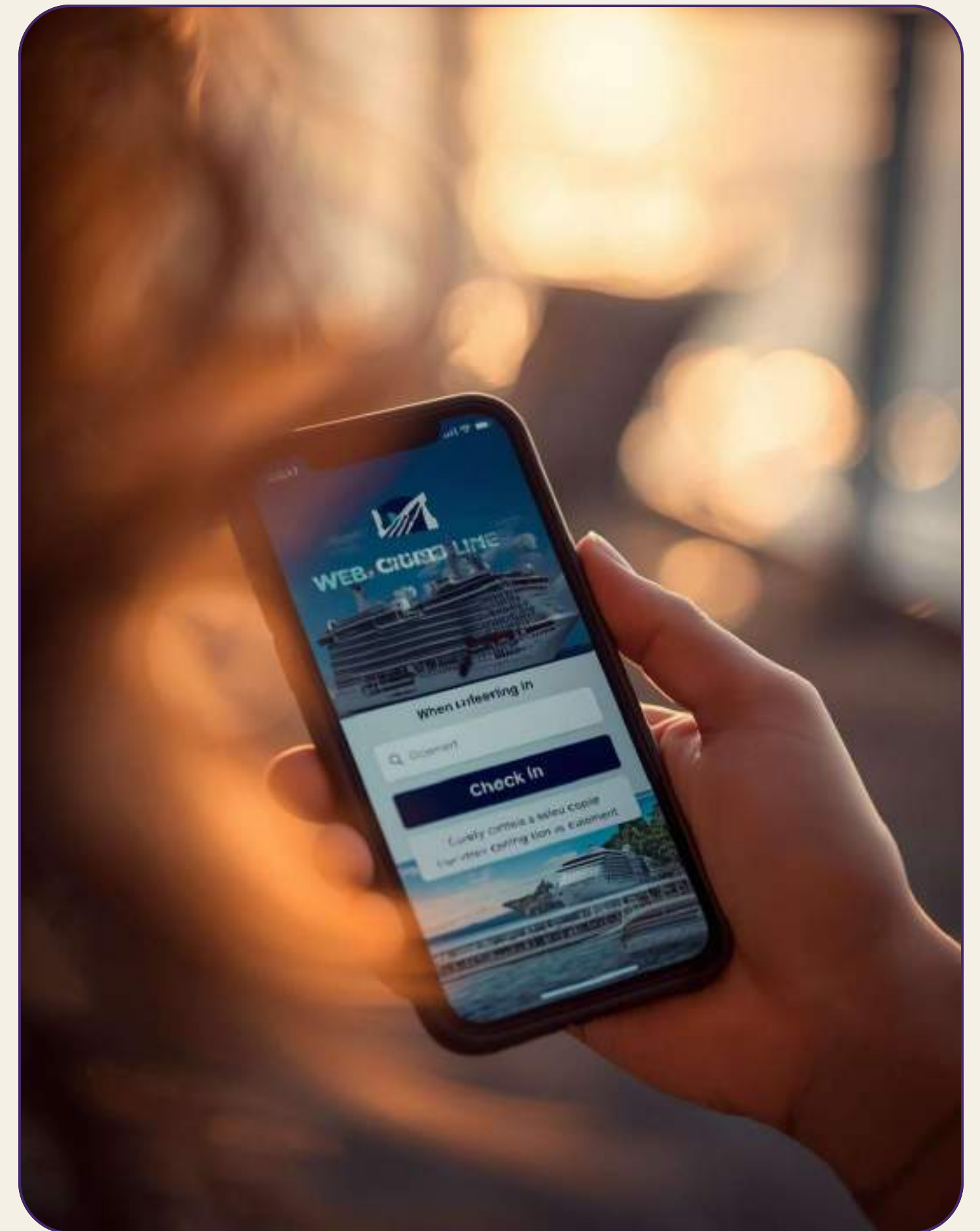
Web check-in is your fast-track to less stress.

DO:

- upload required documents clearly
- double-check names match passports
- take screenshots of confirmations

CARD LINKING:

- optional (not always required)
- you can add a card onboard if you prefer
- set spend controls for peace of mind



MSC App Hacks

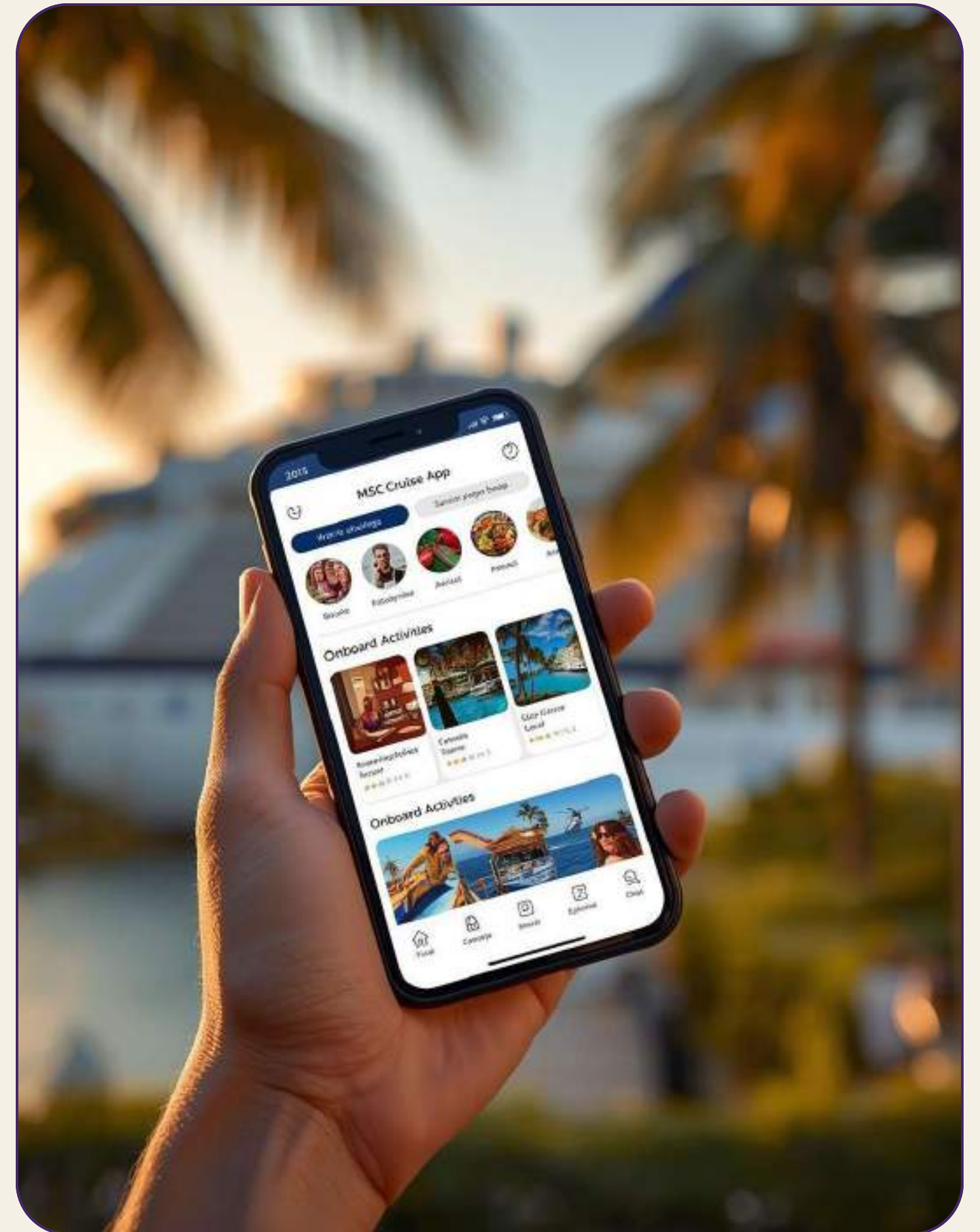
Use the app to cruise smarter:

- check your onboard account daily
- book/track activities
- view schedules
- use the chat feature to find family members

Phoebe's Insider Tip



Pro tip: create a family group chat so you're not running around the ship looking for each other.



Voyager Loyalty Perks

If you plan to cruise again, Voyager membership is worth it.

Perks can include:

- onboard savings
- priority benefits (tier-dependent)
- potential upgrades/offers

Phoebe's Insider Tip



Pro Tip: register and keep your member number saved for future bookings.



Cruise Etiquette

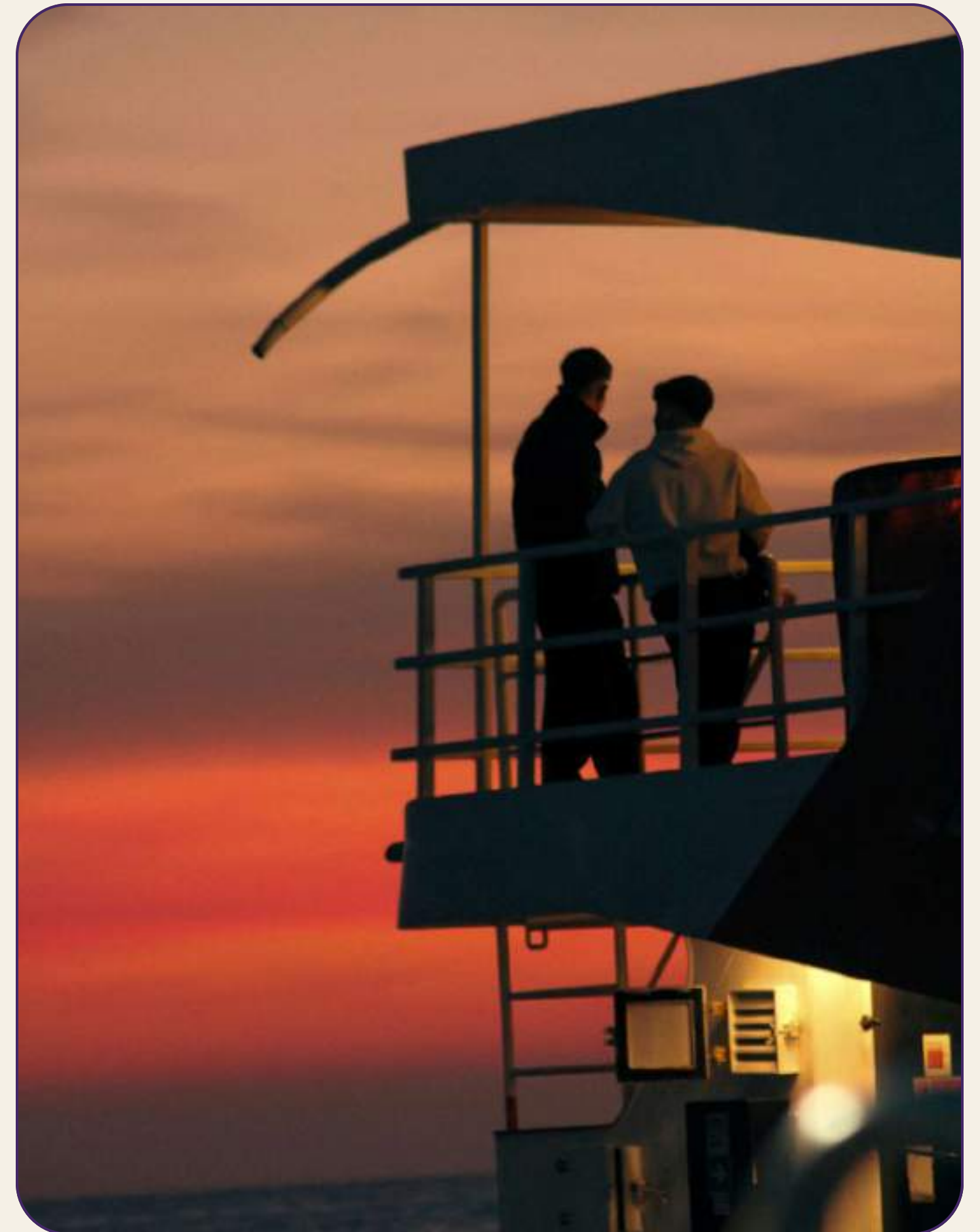
Your behaviour can impact how pleasant your cruise is.

- Don't reserve deck chairs
- Be on time for dinner
- Respect quiet hours
- Dress code matters in dining rooms
- Don't push in queues (yes, I see you 😅)

Phoebe's Insider Tip



Pro Tip: Be Patient, Respectful and Kind to All.



Disembarkation Tips

Choose the exit style that fits your schedule:

SELF-ASSIST:

- carry your own bags
- fastest option (best for early plans)

ASSISTED:

- ship handles luggage, use stickers as instructed
- slower, but easier for families with lots of bags

Phoebe's Insider Tip



Flight tip: book flights after midday when possible.



Bonuses + Printable Lists

Everything you need—ready to print

Included printables (blank tick boxes):

- Adult packing checklist
- Kids packing checklist
- Documents checklist
- Budget tracker + daily spend limits
- Cruise countdown (30/14/7/1 day)
- Island day essentials list
- Notes pages for your trip

These are designed to be printed OR used on your phone.



You're Cruise Ready!

You're no longer "just trying" a cruise.
You're cruising prepared.

You've:

- ✓ budgeted
- ✓ chosen smart
- ✓ packed right
- ✓ avoided the traps

Enjoy your holiday — you've earned it.

And remember...

Confidence makes every trip better.



Bonuses + Printable Lists

Everything you need — ready to print

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Printable: Adult Packing Checklist

DOCUMENTS & ESSENTIALS

- Passport
- Boarding pass (printed + phone)
- Travel insurance proof
- Bank cards + small cash
- Emergency contacts
- Medical letters (if needed)

CLOTHING

- Swimsuits (2)
- Cover-ups
- Casual outfits
- Smart evening outfit
- Light jacket/cardigan
- Sleepwear
- Underwear & socks
- Hat/cap

Printable: Adult Packing Checklist (continued)

TOILETRIES

- Sunscreen
- After-sun/moisturiser
- Personal medication
- Plasters
- Travel-size toiletries
- Hand sanitiser

TECH

- Two pin plug adapter
- Power bank
- Chargers
- Headphones
- Phone waterproof pouch

CABIN HACKS

- Packing cubes
- Laundry bag
- Wet bag for swimwear
- Magnetic hooks (optional)

Printable: Kids Packing Checklist

DOCUMENTS

- Birth certificate copy
- Consent letter (if required)
- Medical aid details

HEALTH & SAFETY

- Medication + thermometer
- Sunscreen + after-sun
- Plasters
- Insect repellent (optional)

CLOTHING

- Swimsuits
- Sun hat
- Light jacket
- Pyjamas
- Extra outfits

SHOES

- Water shoes
- Comfortable walking shoes
- Flip flops/sandals

ENTERTAINMENT

- Small toys
- Activity book
- Colouring + crayons
- Approved snacks

Printable: Documents & Web Check-In

BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME

- Passport valid
- Boarding pass saved/printed
- Travel insurance proof
- Kids documents ready
- Medical letters (if needed)
- Emergency contact list saved

WEB CHECK-IN

- Names match passports
- Documents uploaded clearly
- Confirmation screenshots saved
- Cabin number noted
- Embarkation time noted

ONBOARD ACCOUNT PLAN

- Decide: link card now or onboard
- Set daily spend limit
- Discuss kids spending rules

Printable: Budget Tracker (Daily Spend)

Set your limits before you board, then track daily.

Category	Limit	Actual
Drinks	R _____	R _____
WiFi	R _____	R _____
Kids extras	R _____	R _____
Souvenirs	R _____	R _____
Excursions	R _____	R _____
Emergency buffer	R _____	R _____

Daily Spend

Day 1: R _____ Notes: _____
Day 2: R _____ Notes: _____
Day 3: R _____ Notes: _____
Day 4: R _____ Notes: _____
Day 5: R _____ Notes: _____
Day 6: R _____ Notes: _____
Day 7: R _____ Notes: _____

Printable: Cruise Countdown (30 / 14 / 7 / 1)

30 DAYS BEFORE

- Confirm documents
- Decide drinks/WiFi approach
- Create budget plan
- Plan parking/transport

14 DAYS BEFORE

- Complete web check-in
- Save/print boarding pass
- Start packing essentials
- Download MSC App

7 DAYS BEFORE

- Final packing
- Prepare carry-on bag
- Plan embarkation timing
- Set daily spend limits

1 DAY BEFORE

- Charge devices
- Lay out outfits
- Print documents
- Pack last-minute items (meds/toiletries)

Printable: Island Day Essentials

- Cash (small notes) + card backup
- Water shoes
- Sunscreen
- Hat/cap
- Sunglasses
- Towel
- Wet bag
- Phone waterproof pouch
- Hand sanitiser
- Snacks for kids
- Reusable water bottle

Island tip: Confirm prices before buying, and return to the ship early (ship time matters).

