

Cruising with Food Allergies: A Disney Cruise Line Review

by Lori Ketcherside, PassPorter Guest Contributor

A vegan mom, a dairy allergic preschooler, and a gluten intolerant kindergartener step onto a cruise ship ...

No, this isn't the setup to a joke, but rather my life last November. Would we starve? Would we enjoy any of the allergy-free offerings? Would we all live on steamed vegetables for seven days straight?

If there is one thing Disney does exceptionally well, it is their world-renowned customer service and nowhere does this Disney service shine more than in the instance of special needs. Given our various diets, going out to eat is a bit hazardous at best. When cruising hundreds of miles off shore, I had to go with a company I trusted to make that experience not only safe but downright magical. I had cruised with Disney Cruise Line (DCL) sans kids prior to becoming vegan, but after three allergy-free cruises, I've learned a thing or two;

☐ My Tips for a Safe and Sound Allergy-Free Cruise

☐1.) Make the cruise line take note. I make sure each of our dining differences made its way onto our passenger information. The special requests section of your online reservation form is set up to accept lactose-free, low-fat, vegan, and vegetarian diets. Food allergies and other specialty diets used to require a separate medical form to be sent in, but now a call to DCL will have everything ready to go. If you forget to note your diet ahead of time, they still try to accommodate your needs, but it may be in a more limited manner. It is impossible for the crew members to order specialty products once ship has (quite literally) sailed.

☐2.) Pack a snack. DCL allows factory sealed unopened snacks to be brought onboard in your day bag. I always bring a few tried-and-trusted snack items for quick and easy access.

3.) Get to know the Oceaneer Club counselors. When you register with the kids club, they will ask about your children's allergy needs in great detail. They ask what foods and ingredients, what degree of reaction, do they need an EPIpen, what form of allergy (ingestion, skin contact), whether you anticipate issues with certain activities (if they are making cookie dough, is that okay), and will you plan on your child eating meals in the clubs? The counselors will get to know your allergy child very well. Expect that the counselors may recheck this information every time you check your child in to the club or lab. I always carry the Wave

Phone (there are two in every stateroom), so that the counselors can quickly re-check. The crew members tend to err on the side of caution, which I found very comforting.

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□4.) Plan a special tea party. If you plan to go to Tea with Alice (or whichever character is hosting), mention allergies when you pick up tickets at guest services. They may be able to arrange an alternate snack for the tea (often fruit). In a pinch, we've brought our own snack.

□5.) Take care at buffets. Keep in mind that other guests may inadvertently cross-contaminate items sitting on the buffets, and plan accordingly. Mention your dietary issues to any server, and they should fetch a chef to walk you through the buffet and let you know what is safe. When you pick out something, they will make up a plate expressly for you to avoid cross-contamination, and deliver your plate. This takes a little patience and a little time. Occasionally I've experienced language barriers with the chefs, but they're always willing to talk until my questions were dissipated.

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□6.) Double-check. You can meet with the dining staff soon after you board. Go to the designated meeting place listed in your Personal Navigator, early on the afternoon of boarding, to make sure the allergy is noted with the dining team. If you're planning on specialty dining at Palo or Remy, check with them as well, to be sure they are expecting your dining needs. This is a great, relaxed time to ask any questions you may have about dining onboard with allergies.

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□7.) Try out room service. There are allergy-free options on the room service menu! Special requests may also be made through room service, but again patience is required. Not every person who answers the phone for room service may be knowledgeable about allergies. Unlike your serving team, they don't really get the opportunity to know your allergies. Soy milk is available free on request as well as that better-known special request, Mickey Bars.

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□8.) Eat on deck. Fruit is plentifully available on deck through quick-service counters. There is a cross-contamination risk with any of these locations, but if you talk to the chefs they will work with you. All quick-service locations on our cruises quickly brought out ingredient lists and tried their best to handle requests.

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□9.) Speak up. Get comfortable talking to your servers and your head server. The first night they get to know your particular food issue; I often found they brought it up before I could mention it. The head servers introduce themselves the first evening and explain allergy ordering to your table. My only hiccup for my kids' allergy meals in the main dining room was the portion size. Each received an adult-sized

portion. The servers worried that my kids didn't like Pad Thai (one of their favorites) because they ate a small amount of a large portion! They provide a dizzying array of burgers, fries, pasta, and traditional kid-friendly foods, allergy-free. For the more adventurous, they serve nearly any variation of the adult options you can think you or your child would enjoy, allergy-free. Dinner may take a little longer the first night, as they prep allergy-free food on request.

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□10.) Preorder future meals. After each dinner take the time to stay and talk to your server. Many stop by before dessert to let you preorder meals for the next day. You can ask for specific meals, check the next day's menu, or just put in a request for a general food type. Usually we would request the "chefs (vegan/gluten free) choice" for dessert. Your head server will make sure that your child's allergy-free meal arrives in the club during the scheduled lunchtime and that your dinners are ready for you in the main dining room.

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□11.) Eat all your favorites for breakfast, lunch and brunch. I find there are pretty good options for breakfast with allergies, and special requests go faster in the full-service dining room (there's one open for nearly every breakfast and lunch) than in the buffets. My son loved the gluten-free muffins and donuts, not to mention the short stack and the occasional omelet. My daughter loved the oatmeal with peanut butter and a fruit cup. My favorite meals on board always involve Palo brunch. The chefs there create some truly marvelous dishes when you give them free reign and seem to truly try to impress with my vegan meals. After one brunch, my husband Ben learned to ask to just split some of whatever they sent me.

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□12.) Stay safe ashore. If you book a port adventure through Disney, Guest Services or the Port Adventures Desk can arrange for allergy-free meals ashore, given appropriate notice. The evening before visiting Castaway Cay, talking to your head server is a must. Allergy-free meals will be ready and waiting for you ashore at Cookies or Cookies Too. Many discussion boards list bringing food ashore as a quick way to save cash during your DCL shore excursions, however, this violates health and agricultural quarantine rules in every port. Unless you wish to risk very hefty fines, I'd skip that recommendation. I'd never pay thousands for a sandwich, even an allergy-free one.

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□Happy sails!

About The Author: Lorelei is a Christian, wife, mother of two, vegan, budding food allergy specialist, Texan, bookworm, and terrible though enthusiastic photographer. She sunburns indoors on a cloudy day, but still looks forward to her next Disney Cruise next winter!

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