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Best Dancing at Sea

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Vicki Baum, the Austrian writer whose novel "Menschen im Hotel" inspired the Academy Award-winning film "Grand Hotel," once said: "There are shortcuts to happiness, and dancing is one of them."

If dancing is a shortcut to happiness for you, then dancing at sea can be a quick step to bliss. Why? Cruise ships offer dance aficionados a wide variety of enticing venues, from trendy nightclubs playing the latest club music to posh, outdoor dancing under the stars, elegant ballrooms and many a dance lounge in between. Better still, thanks to "Dancing With the Stars" and other popular dance shows, there has been a boost in dance-themed cruises where you can perfect your skills -- including "Dancing With the Stars" theme cruises complete with professional dancers and celebrities.



Before we share our favorite ships for dancing at sea, here are a few good things to know about shaking your booty at sea:

If you prefer a smoke-free atmosphere when you dance, head for the nightclubs on [Holland America](#), [Celebrity](#), [Norwegian](#), [Princess](#) and [Royal Caribbean](#), as well as [Crystal](#)'s Palm Court and [Cunard](#)'s ballrooms. Clubs on other ships can get a bit smoky.

Most Europeans love to dance, so you'll find the dance floors busy on European lines like [Costa](#) and [MSC](#). These ships feature more dance space, too. While American lines tend to have larger casinos than dance clubs, European ships divvy up their space the opposite way.

Single ladies (or those without dancing partners) can hit the floor with a dance host on Cunard, Crystal, [Silversea](#) and Holland America. Crystal's dance hosts -- known as "Ambassador Hosts" -- are all carefully screened, cultured and well-traveled gentlemen ... and accomplished ballroom dancers. Cunard's "Gentlemen Hosts," while not expert dancers, are proficient in the basic steps of social ballroom dances, including fox-trot, waltz, swing, Latin rumba and cha-cha. Crystal and Cunard have dance hosts available on all sailings, while Holland America and Silversea offer them on select sailings.

Single men can find a dance partner, too, thanks to Crystal's new "Ambassador Hostesses" program. These female counterparts to the line's Ambassador Hosts debut on three "Ballroom at Sea Experiences of Discovery" voyages in 2014 and 2015 to cha-cha, swing and waltz with solo gentlemen during evening dance sets, live orchestra performances and dance classes.

Dance theme cruises are another great place to find dance hosts and improve your dancing skills while meeting others who love to dance. You can find special cruises for salsa dancing, ballroom, swing, line dancing and more.

Wendy Olsen, owner of Dancers at Sea, which is in its 19th year, organizes roughly 10 dance cruises a year. Each offers group dance parties, lessons in ballroom, as well as nightclub dances like bolero, salsa, Argentine tango and swing. Her cruises have one of the best ratios: one dance pro or host/hostess for every three passengers.

John Ranivand, founder of Dancing at Sea, organizes four to five dance themed cruises a year for 60 to 90 guests on a variety of cruise lines. Some Dancing at Sea cruises have a special focus, Tango and Latin for example, and all are taught by the group's instructors, typically two to four per cruise.

Keep in mind that a great night of dancing is as much about whom you're dancing with as it is where you are dancing. Gayle Robinson, an Atlanta-based mortgage broker and organizer of an annual "Dancers & Friends" cruise, prefers Celebrity. However, her favorite shipboard dance experience happened when she least expected it -- on a Carnival cruise with her high school classmates.

"I ran into 80 salsa dancers doing a group cruise," she said "Lucky me! Best time I've ever had on a cruise, period. Laughing till I cried with my classmates and dancing with some of the best dancers I've ever run into."

I made a similar discovery on Holland America's Eurodam, right after I told my friend that dancing on Eurodam might not be as fun as Royal Caribbean's packed nightclubs. Boy, was I wrong. We met several men from a gay men's group cruise, all dressed for their pajama party night, and danced until the club closed on several nights.

So, whether your idea of dancing is to shimmy, shake, sway, rock, cut a rug, or shake your bum, you're sure to have fun on one of our favorite cruise lines for dancing at sea.

Trendiest Clubs at Sea

The Trophy Goes to: Norwegian Cruise Line's Norwegian Getaway, Norwegian Breakaway, Norwegian Pearl, Norwegian Gem and Norwegian Epic

Why: It is hard to beat NCL when it comes to trendy nightlife -- and its Bliss Ultra Lounge, a decadent Vegas-like club, is a winner. On Norwegian Getaway and Breakaway, Bliss features an expansive LED wall that runs the length of the club and lights up in sync to the music. On Norwegian Pearl, Gem and Epic, dance music plays all day while you bowl at Bliss' mood-lit, 10-pin bowling alley. In the evening, Bliss transforms into a high-energy lounge with music videos playing on plasma screens, shadow dancers entertaining the crowd and the club's resident DJs spinning the hottest music. Don't miss Broadway dance show "Burn the Floor" on Norwegian Breakaway and Getaway for inspiration.

Runner-up: Celebrity's Solstice-class ships -- Solstice, Equinox, Eclipse, Silhouette and Reflection

Why: The line's futuristic-looking nightclub Quasar (available on all Solstice class ships except Reflection) has a garage-style door that opens to allow partiers to spill out into the ship's adjacent Entertainment Court. Sitting and sipping a drink in Quasar's retro-chic bubble chairs, which swing from the ceiling (on most ships) is almost as fun as dancing. Celebrity gets kudos for keeping Quasar open past the scheduled closing time when the place is hopping. Unlike DJ driven Quasar, Celebrity Reflection's Sky Lounge offers live music, including songs and swing dances of the '40s era with a modern twist, as well as nights dedicated to funky Motown.

Best Ballroom Dancing

The Trophy Goes to: Cunard



Why: Ballroom dancing has been a longstanding hallmark of the line, attracting dancers from around the world. It's easy to see why: Queen Mary 2's elegant Queens Room is, by far, the biggest and best ballroom at sea. The ballroom spans the full width of the ship and features a 1,225-square-foot rectangular dance floor, crystal chandeliers hanging from the two-deck-high ceiling, a resident orchestra and multi-tiered seating that offers great sight lines of the dance floor and the sea. While not as large, Queen Victoria's Queens Room is equally elegant with cantilevered balconies overlooking the floor,

ornate frescos and backlit glass panels.

Dancers at Sea's Olsen has sailed with Cunard 19 times, in part for the floors. "They are truly the only ocean liners in the world with a rectangular wood floor with give, which makes it easy on the feet and knees to dance for three or four hours."

New to ballroom? No worries! Cunard's social hostesses facilitate daily ballroom dance lessons, all taught by acclaimed professional dancers. A wide variety of dance genres are offered and include cha-cha, waltz, foxtrot, rumba, country and western line dancing, Caribbean and '70s style. Cunard's gentleman hosts are on hand during lessons to assist female guests traveling solo.

In addition, the Queens Room on both ships (as well as on Queen Elizabeth) is home to the line's Royal Nights-themed balls, which include a Black & White Ball and an Ascot Ball, featuring a competition for best hat.

Runner-up: Crystal Cruises

Why: Crystal offers Ballroom at Sea theme cruises and a full-length production show "Dancing with the Crystal Stars." The show is held on most sailings and is a combination of professional dance performances and the "Dancing with the Crystal Stars" event. The Crystal "stars" are crewmembers who have used their time off within the week to train in a variety of ballroom, Latin and swing dances. Their rehearsals are filmed to create short behind-the-scenes video segments, which are shown, along with their final performances, during the show.

Of course, guests can take spins around hardwoods to live music in the Palm Court on both Crystal ships, as well as in Crystal Serenity's Stardust lounge or Symphony's Starlite lounge. Plus, Crystal's cruises normally include complimentary group dance classes on all sea days. These are taught by dance-instruction teams, made up of professionals -- often champion dancers -- who also perform several times during a cruise. Past teams have been American, British and Australian, but they teach mostly American dance styles. The instructors also offer private lessons: \$100 for a 45-minute class, \$75 for 30 minutes.

Best Dancing Under the Stars

The Trophy Goes to: Costa Cruises

Why: Dancing is a favorite onboard activity for Costa's international mix of cruisers, and the lido deck attracts dancers, day and night. During the day, you can take an alfresco lesson in everything from bachata and cha-cha to salsa and merengue, all led by expert dancers. At night, the energy is high, thanks to hundreds who come out for the themed, open-air dance nights. (Think pop, rock, disco and more.) If the weather turns, some Costa ships have you covered, literally, with their retractable magrodomes. Music varies from zippy Italian jazz groups to Latin duos, big-band classics and even American rock and roll. After the lido deck party is over, head to the disco, which gets going after midnight and is usually open until 3 or 4 a.m.

Runner-up: Norwegian Epic, Breakaway and Getaway

Why: Spice H2O, which materializes when the aft pool deck is converted to a dance floor at night, is the place for sultry Ibiza-inspired beach club parties. Dance while you watch the huge LED screen display everything from charging bulls to flamenco dancers and tap-dancing geishas.

Best of the Big-Ship Clubs

The Trophy Goes to: Royal Caribbean's Freedom- and Oasis-class ships

Why: You can almost dance 24/7. Be-bop with DreamWorks penguins and pandas at a parade, salsa in Latin club Bolero's, disco during family nights, fox trot pre-dinner, dance under the stars at the pool parties, shimmy alongside the Village People as you watch go-go dancers on Main Street, and groove to DJs dropping beats into the early morning at trendy nightclubs.



And that's not all. Freedom and Oasis ships feature "Club 20 by Absolut." These South Beach-style dance parties feature electronic music customized by celebrity DJs from New York City's Scratch DJ Academy, sheer Absolut banners billowing in the breeze between the bar and dance floor and dancers dressed as cocktail glasses flanking the DJ booth. With all this, you can't help but dance and shout "tonight's gonna be a good night!"

Runner-up: Carnival -- especially, Carnival Sunshine, Carnival Breeze, Carnival Magic, Carnival Dream and Carnival Valor

Why: Many Carnival dance clubs have multimillion-dollar sound and light systems, along with a wall of video screens displaying music videos ... or videos of you out on the dance floor. Carnival's DJs are trained under the "DJ Irie Spin'iversity," led by the award-winning DJ Irie, a renowned DJ who has entertained crowds from South Beach to Las Vegas.

Carnival Breeze has the silvery Liquid nightclub, complete with dance "cages." Carnival Dream's Caliente is South Beach-themed with a large dance floor great for blending into the crowd. Carnival Valor's One Small Step's lunar theme celebrates Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon, complete with moon-crater decor, LED lights that create a multicolored volcano effect, a ceiling with images from the Hubble telescope and special-effect lighting that simulates shooting stars. Plus, One Small Step's white marble dance floor contains inlays of white granite to make it appear as if you're dancing on the moon.

Playlist Productions shows "Motor City" (R&B themed), "Latin Nights," and "Studio VIP" (think '70s-inspired Studio 54) morph into all-out dance parties at the end of the shows -- available on nine ships, including Carnival Breeze and Carnival Sunshine. Note: Smoking is allowed in Carnival's clubs.

Best for Dance Classes

The Trophy Goes to: Holland America Line

Why: Holland America brought the spirit of the uber-popular "Dancing with the Stars" show to sea (not to mention some of the DWTS pros, too, for select sailings). Holland America's "Dancing with the Stars: At Sea" experience is onboard all of the line's ships throughout the year. You have the opportunity to participate in dance classes and compete to be named champion of your cruise. At the end of the year, 15 guest finalists -- one representing each ship in the fleet -- receive free passage to join the "Champions Cruise" and compete for the Holland America Line

Mirror Ball trophy. This year's will be held Dec. 6 2014 on Westerdam.

Better still, there are six theme cruises featuring celebrities and pro dancers from the TV show. During the theme cruises, you can participate in dance lessons, meet the dancers and watch a production starring the celebrities and dance pros. On the docket this year are pro dancers Kym Johnson and Tristan MacManus and celebrities Sabrina Bryan and Carson Kressley. Theme sailings depart to Alaska in June and July and the Caribbean in late November and early December.

Runner-up: Carnival

Why: Country steps, '70s disco moves, hip-hop and dance moves from Michael Jackson's "Thriller" music video are just a few of the things you can learn in 30-minute beginner level classes, taught by Carnival's dancers. Classes for kids are offered, too.

Best Themed Dance Party

The Trophy Goes to: Celebrity Cruises

Why: Mix and mingle with Celebrity's pro dancers and musicians at several interactive theme parties. "Groove" is a retro-style '60s party that includes music from The Beatles, while "Sizzle" is a hot Latin party. For a big-band party, complete with a full orchestra and Celebrity dancers leading the fun, try "Live @ Sky" dance nights. You can prep for the party at a Celebrity "Let's Dance" classes. They teach everything from salsa and jive, to hip-hop and ballroom.

Runner-up: Norwegian Cruise Line

Why: Don't miss the "White Hot Night Party," when one onboard venue is transformed into a winter wonderland, complete with an arctic blast for dancing in the "snow." Dancers dress in all white, and onboard entertainers dressed in angel wings mingle and invite you to dance. Rehydrate with signature cocktail Angeltini -- a combination of coconut rum, creme de banana and cinnamon schnapps. Don't have anything white? Pick up one of NCL's "White Hot" shirts and a feather boa in the ship's gift shop.

Best Dancing for Parents at Sea

The Trophy Goes to: Disney Cruise Line's Dream and Fantasy

Why: Disney Fantasy's The Tube nightclub, located in the ship's adults-only Europa district, has a London feel with a Union Jack dance floor, mod furniture and shiny red English phone booths that you can hop into and watch the action. Dream's adults-only Evolution club takes its inspiration from butterflies and has a contemporary vibe. Want to dance with your kids? Don't miss the "Sail-Away Celebration" party and "Pirate Night" party where you can spin little ones, plus dance with the boisterous Chip and Dale chipmunks, who shimmy their way through the crowd.

--By Christine Koubek, *Cruise Critic* contributor



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