

Cruise Lite

Mother and daughter seek low cal on the high seas.



The Expert Fly Girl

Fly Girl believes that travel can solve all of life's relationship problems. Need some help? Submit your question at spiritmag.com or write to:

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Dear Fly Girl,

I love to cruise, and for this year's trip I've chosen the Mexican Riviera. My 24-year-old daughter has never been on a ship but has always wanted to go. The only thing holding her back? She's nervous about the 24-hour buffets and all-you-can-eat mentality. She has gained 40 pounds in the past year because of prescription medication. She's determined to lose the weight but is afraid the cruise will sabotage her efforts. How can I convince her to come with me?

—Concerned Parent

Dear Parent,

The medical consensus says that healthy weight loss should not exceed two pounds per week. That would be a minimum of 20

weeks to goal in your daughter's case. But 20 weeks of counting calories and busting butt at the gym does not mean the Loser—a

complimentary term, in this case—stops living. Cutting down on potato chips and Dairy Queen Blizzards: yes. Giving up a possible once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see our colorful neighbor to the south while living the *Love Boat* life: no way!

Fortunately for you, cruise lines have modernized along the lines of top resorts in an effort to appeal to a younger crowd. No longer floating hotels for octogenarians, modern cruise ships now feature onboard amenities such as gyms and spas, and onshore adventure excursions. Holland America's *ms Oosterdam* (hollandamerica.com), sailing to the Mexican Riviera through the spring, boasts a window-wrapped gym for scenic workouts on the high seas. Yoga classes, volleyball and basketball courts, and a thermal suite of pools and steam rooms in the spa add to the waist reduction. The line's *ms Ryndam*, which sails to Mexico through December, and starts up again in February, even has tennis courts. Carnival's Mexico-bound *Spirit* and *Elation* ships (carnival.com) keep you moving with a jogging track, aerobics studio, and a digital golf coach. In port, all the cruise lines offer active excursions such as snorkeling, kayaking, and bicycling to keep the chips and salsa in check.

Now, indulgence is admittedly still the onboard operative. However, bear in mind that for every chocolate fountain there's also a salad bar. Another Mexico-bound carrier, Princess Cruises (princess.com) offers "personal choice dining." You can eat wherever, whenever, and with whomever you wish, banishing the traditional system of assigned tablemates that was depressing enough to encourage overeating. The line also offers healthy "spa cuisine" selections on its menus.

Best of all, if you follow Fly Girl's onboard/onshore activity regime, you'll be too tired to attend midnight anything, let alone buffets. Bon voyage!

—F.G.

Dear Fly Girl,
I've lost my holiday spirit. While I love the idea of Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa—the colorful lights and good food and the time with family—the idea of spending days in a shopping mall to display my love through money bums me out. How can I recapture the delights of December?

—*The Grinch*

Dear Mean One,

From Seuss to Scrooge, the literary world teems with complainers, those jolly-free souls who can't distinguish the greed of the season from the generosity. The holiday decorations at the local mall that go

up when the Halloween jack-o'-lanterns come down—if not sooner? Ebenezer would be proud. But the charitable gift giving and the softening of men's hearts toward one another? Well, at the risk of sounding like the Ghost of Christmas Present, open your heart and feel the love, my good fellow.

Fortunately there are places where the holidays thrive free from merchandise mania. It's a season of light and luster reflected in holiday décor that goes tastefully beyond the plastic Santa-and-reindeer-set on the roof. Check into the Mission Inn Hotel and Spa (missioninn.com) in Riverside, California. The annual Festival of Lights drapes two million electric bulbs around the 1902 historic hotel and Victorian-garbed carolers stroll the grounds. Further south, 100,000 lights illuminate the Quail Botanical Gardens north of San Diego (qbgardens.org). You'll feel like you've entered a winter wonderland—but without the snow.

Oh, you're dreaming of a white Christmas? Then head east. See *A Christmas Carol* performed at Chicago's Goodman Theatre (goodmantheatre.org) or at Trinity Repertory (trinityrep.com) in Providence, Rhode Island. Couple the latter with a day trip to Old Sturbridge Village (osv.org), a living history museum in Massachusetts. There, you can learn the history of Yule logs, stockings, and mistletoe. In a similar vein, take the entire Scrooge family to Colonial Williamsburg (history.org) in Virginia. You'll witness historic and relatively frugal holidays before the marketing machine monopolized the season.

But nearest and dearest to Fly Girl's heart is December in New York City. Admire the towering fir tree—adorned with 30,000 lights—in Rockefeller Center as you twirl and spin on the ice rink. With a bag of roasted chestnuts warming your hands even the elaborate Macy's (macys.com) windows in Herald Square will seem more entertaining installation art than naked sales pitch—provided you lock your credit cards back in the hotel safe.

—FG.

*Dear Fly Girl,
I love my wife, but after 10 years of marriage, some of the spark has gone out. She feels the same way. I was thinking a change of pace might help. Where can we go to put zest back in the relationship?*

—Flame Out

Dear Fire Starter,

The seven-year itch isn't regulated. It can happen at eight, nine, and, sadly, even after 12 months of marriage, depending on the parties in question. You've already logged a good decade. That puts you in the best position available to heed that for-worse wedding vow.

There's hope in travel. Nothing will bond you two like a new adventure in

which the only thing familiar is your spouse. She very well may look newly enticing against an exotic backdrop.

But should the purple mountain majesties or the fruited plains not work their subtle yet sensual charms, Fly Girl suggests you bet on a sure thing: a casino. The possibility of fortunes gained at a slot's pull, the risk in every blackjack hand, the communal lust that binds craps throwers around a table...there's a crackling electricity in the air generated by the promise of easy money. As with that first cocktail, everyone looks better when betting. Unless of course you're losing, but the idea here isn't to actually wager the weekend cabin, the SUV, the pure-breed dog, but to soak up the setting. Las Vegas reigns at just this, offering loads of restaurants like the showy Mix atop The Hotel at Mandalay Bay (mandalaybay.com) and theater like Cirque du Soleil's *Zumanity* at New York New York Hotel and Casino (nynyhotelcasino.com). You'll earn a sure return for your money while sharpening your senses.

But if the lights of Las Vegas overwhelm you, try one of the new casino resorts springing up in satellite locales around the country. MGM Mirage of Sin City just opened a sprawling, sparkling new MGM Grand Detroit (detroit.mgm-grand.com) in downtown Motor City. Relax in-room with plasma TVs and marble showers, or feed each other olives at on-site restaurants from super chefs Wolfgang Puck and Michael Mina. Atlantic City, an hour's drive from Philadelphia, has been making a comeback, largely fueled by the Borgata (theborgata.com). Opened in 2003, the 2,000-room casino hotel boasts a branch of New York's Old Homestead steakhouse, a grand indoor pool, and an innovative spa with water-bed-like flotation treatment tables. Here's hoping a casino stopover adds kindling to the fire.

—F.G.

*Dear Fly Girl,
I'm 30 years old and ashamed to admit that I don't know how to ski. I'm athletic and fit, but my childhood vacations were filled with endless miles of sand, not snow. Where's the best place to learn as an adult?*

—Ski Virgin

Dear Future Skier,
Welcome to Ski Land. There is no shame in showing up late. Awkwardness, yes, if you consider those frightfully snug and heavy boots that make you walk like Frankenstein's monster, but that issue even curses the experts.

At the risk of insulting the good people of New Hampshire, Fly Girl is going to rule out the East. The famed slopes molded pro Bode Miller, but you're not Olympics-bound—yet, anyway. Instead, Fly Girl sends you straight to the West, home of long runs and soft-when-you-fall snow. You need both a bunch of green (aka beginner) runs and a well laid-out mountain that keeps the aggressive skiers from cutting off your gentle turns as they bomb downhill.

Take your pick of resorts by flying to Denver and then driving 70 miles west to the string of Rocky Mountain resorts arrayed along Interstate 70. Begin with Keystone (keystone.snow.com) where you can even ski at night. Follow up with the well-planned runs of Copper Mountain (coppercolorado.com), and the historic miner's town of Breckenridge (breckenridge.snow.com). Less than an hour from Salt Lake City, the resorts of Park City, Utah—including Deer Valley Resort (deervalley.com) and Park City Mountain Resort (parkcitymountain.com)—provide a friendly introduction to skiing (see Playtime Park City on page 102 for more details). Finally, Lake Tahoe in the Sierra Mountains on the California-Nevada border makes a fine backdrop for an alpine tour. On the north shore, Northstar-at-Tahoe (northstaratahove.com) tames the terrain with gentle greens that will have you graduating to nonintimidating blue (aka intermediate) runs in no time; only a quarter of the resort is reserved for experts.

Whatever you do, don't learn from anyone related to you by blood or other bonds. Leave the instruction to the pros. And, no, you won't be shuffled off to ski school with the 3-year-olds riding the Magic Carpet. Most sizable ski resorts place adults into their own groups and away from that embarrassingly easy lift. Private lessons are great but costly. Most group lessons are small enough to provide enough individual attention from the instructor, a better bang for your buck. Half-day lessons are the best place to start, allowing for the likelihood that mental—and physical—fatigue may set in by midday. Use the latter half of the day to practice on the bunny slopes or nab a primo spot by the fire in the lodge before everyone else shows up. You'll discover the après-ski tradition is every bit as vital to the sport as parallel turns.

—FG.