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By [Jan Ross](#) ~

Until I went on a Caribbean cruise on the Carnival Liberty recently with a bunch of girlfriends I always thought "duty-free" was a bunch of hooley. Yes, I said hooley. Now I'll go get out my walking stick and go get one of them new-fangled perms all the gals are talking about. And I think I might have just lost the point I was trying to make by using the word "new-fangled."

I thought "duty-free" was just another excuse to get all those vacationers into the shops to stuff their shopping bags full of items that could be had back home for roughly the same price. Y'all? I was wrong.

This is the first cruise where I have actually gone to one of those shopping talks they have before they embark at a port. Previously, I had traveled with my husband who was about as interested in shopping as he is in packing a rabid marmoset into his suitcase. So, really? Not very interested.

I have always shopped when we were vacationing because well. I have *always shopped*. Do I really need to clarify? But I basically just wandered around, going where I wanted and buying what I wanted. I always ended up with nice things but I was apparently shopping *the wrong way*. This right here? This is *the right way*.

1. Duty-free is not a rip-off. "Duty" refers to a tax or fee placed on goods by local governments. Shop owners who import goods in certain areas (like the Caribbean) and sell them to buyers who are leaving their country aren't charged a duty on these products. This allows sellers to pass the savings along to their customers, giving smart shoppers the opportunity to grab fantastic merchandise at bargain prices. So, that designer purse, watch, perfume or those precious jewels actually are a *bargain*. *And this is precisely what you can tell your husband.*

2. First, go to the shopping talks. I thought these were a silly waste of time – I already know how to shop, by God! – but I was completely wrong. I'm sure the cruise ships get some sort of kickback from the shops they recommend but, on the other hand, you are guaranteed that the gold bracelet you buy is the best price and won't turn your wrist a lovely shade of green after you have been wearing it for a week. These shopping experts will also help you get the best price and often have freebies at the talk and coupons for more freebies at the shops. That free teeny-tiny topaz necklace may seem like a waste of time but think how much your little niece will like it for a souvenir. And you save money on souvenirs and can buy more stuff or yourself. *Truly a win-win shopping situation.*

3. Go to the stores they recommend. Many of these stores are chains and have locations on all the islands so if you can't make up your mind, you can probably find something similar at the next stop. These are also the stores that depend on their cruise customers so they truly will give you a great deal.

4. Go to other stores. There are plenty of other shops on the islands – you do not have to stick to just the few they recommend. I like refrigerator magnets from every location I visit and Christmas decorations – yes, I am THAT person – so I like to browse at all kinds of stores. Tee-shirts, local cookbooks, kitschy jewelry – if you like this kind of stuff, as I do, you will do fine looking in all kinds of places. These fun purchases don't have to be expensive and beautifully made.

5. Buy that expensive item you have always wanted. My best friend marched into a Louis Vuitton store on St.



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Thomas and bought a beautiful and rather expensive purse. She was very, very happy with her purchase and I could not quibble because a.) she had been wanting that purse for years b.) it was for an anniversary present and c.) most important – she knew that, even though it was expensive, it was actually half the price she would pay in the States.

6. Do your research. My friend knew that Louis Vuitton purse was half price because she had done her research. If you are even considering an expensive purchase while you are in the Caribbean, do your research before you go and find out if that Hublot watch is a steal. It probably is. (I realize you have probably never heard of a Hublot watch before now. *Neither had I before I wrote this article.*)

7. Do even more research. Every location you visit in your travels all over the world has specialties to purchase. The Caribbean is no exception. Before you make your shopping plans, do your research about what to buy that is actually from the Caribbean. When I went to the Dominican Republic the first time, I found that the beautiful blue stone, Larimar, is actually found there. I had never heard of Larimar before I did my research but was prepared when I arrived and bought several pieces, then bought a beautiful bracelet the second time I visited. Larimar is available all over the Caribbean and is truly beautiful and unique – similar to turquoise but a lighter color – and you should think about picking up some when you are there.

8. If you love it, buy it. Even though I said above that you could probably find that item at another store at the next port, don't count on it. If you truly love it and it's the right price, don't dither. You will never regret buying something you love but you will always regret not buying it.

9. Make a list. My family is thrilled when I forget that I already bought them a present and then proceed to buy them another one at another location. And then wait? Did I buy them one yet? And proceed to buy yet another one. If you are buying for a number of people, make a list ... even if you are buying for yourself. Believe me, I have experienced the shopping frenzy after which you get back to your stateroom and realize you already bought a silver bracelet at the last port almost exactly like the one you just purchased. Oh. THAT'S why it looked so familiar!

10. Get a business card. Many of the stores have a web site so, if you ignored my above advice about buying what you want, you might be able to get it online.

Now, go shopping! And remember what Dolly says "Money is like manure; it's no good unless you spread it around!"

About the author: Jan Ross is a freelance writer and travel blogger at: <http://www.wanderlustwonder.com/>. When she is not writing or traveling, she is shopping.

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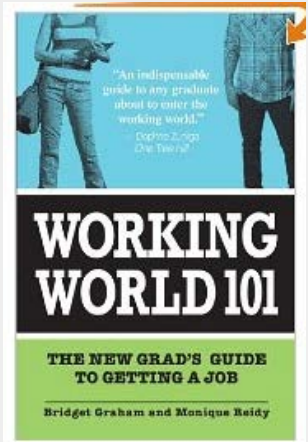
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