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**M**y wife Simone and I have been working commercially as voiceover artists for over a decade, and it's an industry where you have to be able to keep working even when on your travels. To that end, I've written in *SOS* about our experiences of recording commercial voiceover work in a home studio (<https://sosm.ag/sos-0611-voiceover> and <https://sosm.ag/sos-0711-voiceover>), and in hotel rooms and even cars (<https://sosm.ag/sos-1217-voiceover>). In fact, given that we spend so much time cooped up in the studio, we tend to jump at the chance for adventure any new gig outside the studio may offer — but the 'gig' I'll write about here promised to present more surprises than most.

We had to figure out how to keep our business running while enjoying a 12-day cruise holiday with Simone's parents Luciano and Beatriz aboard Regent's *Seven Seas Explorer*, an ocean liner christened in 2016 with a capacity for 750 guests.

# Session Notes

THE PRACTICAL CRAFT OF RECORDING

**Recording Voiceovers At Sea:** find out how a professional VO artist kept his business afloat during a 12-day ocean cruise!

Now, this was first and foremost a holiday and we therefore planned to take on as few new jobs as possible. But we couldn't risk being unable to meet the needs of our regular clients, who expect to receive recordings at short notice. If we couldn't deliver, they'd have to look elsewhere, so we knew from the outset that we'd have to spend part of our 12-day voyage around the Iberian Peninsula in front of a microphone. The question was, with no studio, and with all the noise and motion of the sea, the ship and its passengers,

how on Earth would we manage to produce professional-quality recordings? Where there's a will there's a way...

## All Aboard!

Boarding the cruise ship in Portsmouth, on England's South coast, was a lot like boarding a flight — in fact, throughout the trip, I was surprised by how much modern-day seaports resemble airports. We checked our heavy luggage outside before wheeling our hand luggage through the door to a security checkpoint.



When packing for air travel, I'm always careful to organise my recording gear for easy inspection. Unfortunately, I hadn't taken the same precaution for my first ocean cruise, and the boarding process was slowed down for everyone behind me when a guard at the X-ray machine asked about the electronics inside my carry-on. I had to unpack and repack my mobile studio: a Sennheiser MKH-416 shotgun mic, an Apple Mac Mini computer, an Apollo Twin interface, a pair of Sennheiser HD 380 Pro headphones and several zip-lock bags full of cords, plugs, wires and adaptors. I was also carrying two medium-length XLR microphone cables instead of one long one, figuring I could join the two for longer runs and use one as a spare if the other broke.

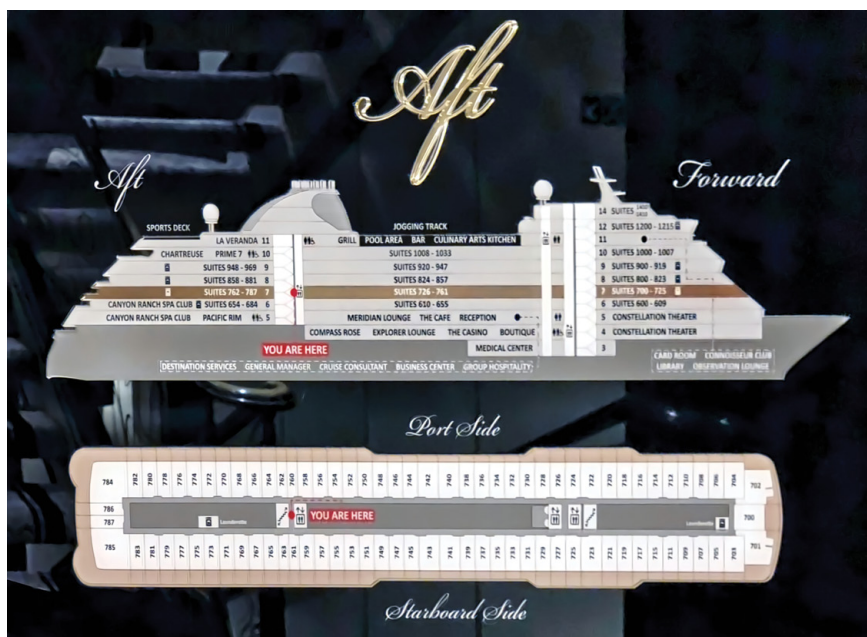
## Cabin Location

Where are the quietest suites on a cruise ship? Obviously, you'll want to book a room far from the engines (on the lower decks at the rear of the ship). But you should also keep in mind less obvious noise sources. For example, cruise ships have motorised propellers (called bow thrusters) both at the stern and at the bow. Also, expect heavy foot traffic and loud conversations near restaurants, bars, lounges, pool areas, and lifts/elevators, day and night. Thankfully, my mother-in-law had been on cruises before and she'd booked our room in the perfect location: close to the middle of the ship and on a middle deck. We had other passengers sleeping above and below us and there were no elevators or self-service laundry rooms nearby.

Our suite's central location came with an added benefit: it minimised the rocking and creaking. Cruise ship guests often pay more to book the luxury staterooms on the upper decks, where they enjoy sweeping views and closer proximity to restaurants and recreational areas. But the higher you move from the water line, and the closer you get to the bow or stern, the more intensely you'll feel the constant roll and sway of a sea-going vessel. I picked up some medication at reception, just in case I grew seasick, but our cabin was so well located that I never needed it.

## Cabin Acoustics

Opening the door to our cabin, I was thrilled to see another door leading to a spacious walk-in closet — the room came with a voiceover booth! Our clothes on hangers and the carpeted floor



Prone to seasickness? Then try to book a room mid-ship and mid-deck. The views won't rival those from the upper decks, but ambient noise and ship movement will be substantially reduced.



We stayed in suite 732, which was an ideal spot for a voiceover studio on the *Seven Seas Explorer*. Not only was it mid-ship and mid-deck, but it was also located well away from any noisy recreational and dining areas.

would provide absorption, the shelves and drawers would diffuse, and the wood-panelled walls and ceiling would reflect, creating, an acoustically balanced starting point for our recording space. Since voiceover recordings must sound as dry as possible, I hung our lifejackets on the wall directly across from our shotgun mic. The test recordings almost sounded great. But while I didn't hear any reverb at all, I did notice the hiss of air leaving a vent in the ceiling. Adjusting the thermostat in the room didn't switch off the airflow, though — and raising or

lowering the temperature only made the vent louder!

I contacted a crew member, asking if I could cover the vent with duct tape. He made clear that under no circumstances should a guest tamper with the ship's climate control or electrical systems. Covering an air vent or leaving electrical equipment plugged in while away from the cabin present safety hazards — and can, potentially, put passengers and crew in danger. So we abandoned our attempts to use the closet, and from that point on I rang maintenance with questions

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Two bulky, foam-filled lifejackets helped to reduce reverberation in our early cabin-closet 'booth'... but a noisy overhead vent forced us to move.



» while setting up our studio. For instance, could I connect an HDMI cable from my Mac Mini to the flat screen TV on the wall? And could I use an adaptor to plug a power strip into the wall socket near our recording station beside the sliding glass door that leads to our balcony?

### Booth With A View

The tests we ran in the cabin's main space sounded noticeably brighter than our earlier recordings in the walk-in closet,

so I decided to build an impromptu vocal booth using cushions from two deck chairs on the balcony. I placed one cushion on its side on a table, and then propped the second above and to one side of the first, creating a large, box-like reflection filter. Simone placed a small pillow inside and set the mic stand on top of it. We used an iPad to read scripts from a Dropbox folder and chose a metal pop-filter for our trip, since we've found that mesh models often tear when packed

in a suitcase. We used the same pair of headphones for recording and editing, and since nothing we recorded on the ship would require multitrack production, Adobe Audition CC was our software of choice. Thankfully, when it was shut tightly, the sliding glass door to the side of our station was remarkably soundproof.

### iZotope To The RXRescue

This table-top setup served as our recording booth for close to two weeks. Before each session I'd check the thermostat to make sure neither the heater nor the cooler was running. Then I'd close all doors tightly (including the bathroom and closet doors) before recording a few seconds of silence for iZotope RX6's de-noise algorithms.

I prefer the Spectral De-noise tool, though the Voice De-noise tool serves the same purpose. Two more RX6 tools that saved the day were De-plosive and Mouth De-click. Because of our unusually noisy studio, we recorded closer to the mic than usual, and even with a pop-filter in place, air bursts and saliva cracks could be heard on our tracks. I gave some thought to using Plugin Alliance's SPL De-verb tool, but the deckchair cushions and our proximity to the mic were working so well to tame the room sound that I decided against it. If you'd like to hear how our voiceovers sounded before, during, and after production, listen to the sample files on the SOS website: the raw audio we recorded on the ship (sample 1), the »

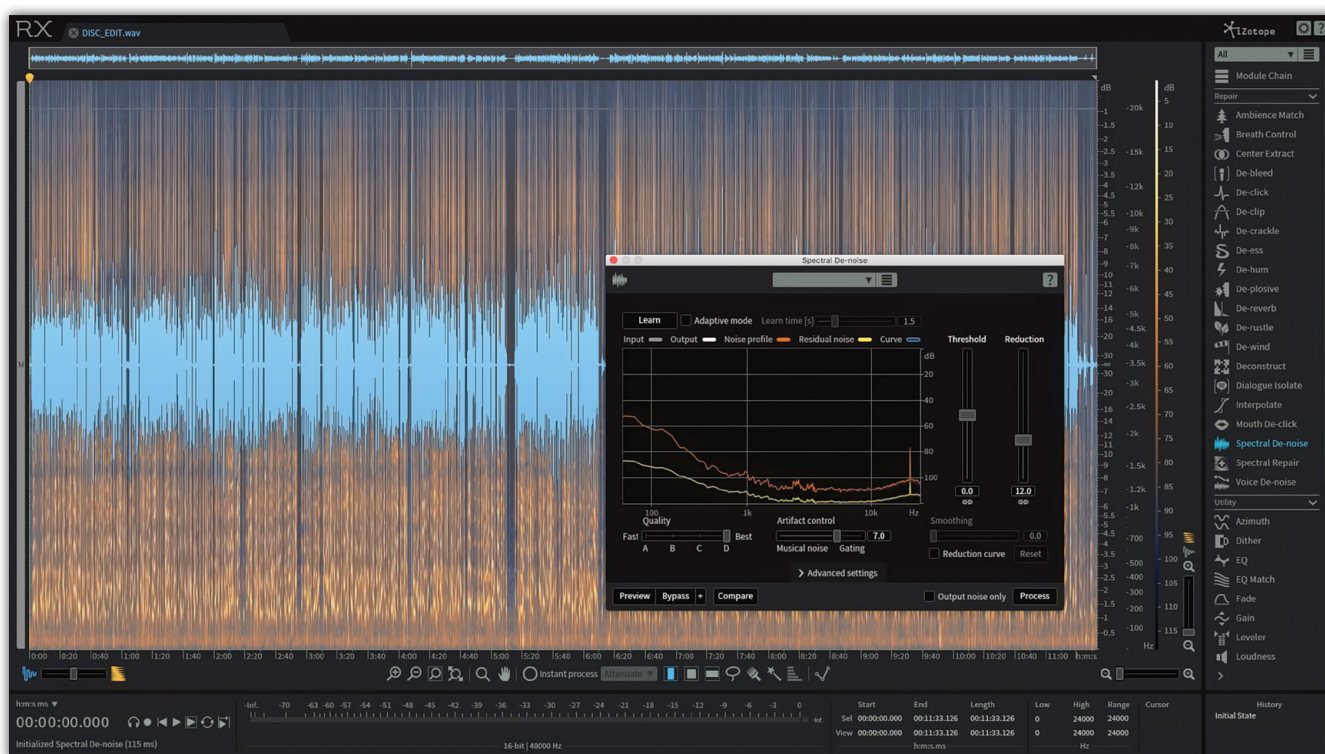


I noticed more 'smile' in Simone's voiceovers while recording at sea — proof, if ever it were needed, that the atmosphere of your studio is as important as the acoustics. Another curiosity: the horn of a passing ship makes for an effective watermark when recording auditions!



By pushing a folded magazine into strategic junctures inside the cabin, we reduced the sound of creaking during high swells and inclement weather.





As expected, this iZotope RX6 noise profile showed a lot of low-frequency noise coming from the ship. The source of the 20kHz spike remains a mystery, but thankfully I could tame both ends of the spectrum without compromising the recorded voiceover simply by applying high- and low-pass filters.

» edited audio we sent to the production house (sample 2), and the mastered audio that was delivered to the client (sample 3).

## Running Cables

Another perk of recording at sea is that you'll finally learn how to coil microphone cables correctly. Whenever we stay at a hotel, we normally leave cables on the floor, either nudged against a wall or strung out under the bed. But when your room is constantly in motion, leaving

cables on the floor really isn't a good idea. The second time Simone tripped, I decided to store all cables between sessions. At first, to save time, I quickly looped the cables over my elbow, feeling like a sailor winding a rope! But each time I tossed the cables back on the floor, I was greeted with a twisted mess. Finally, I did a quick YouTube search to remember how to coil the cables correctly: the trick is to twist the first loop in one direction, the second in the reverse direction, and so

on — resulting in a coil that you can toss across a room without a single twist to catch your step.

## In Search Of A Signal

Bandwidth is a valuable commodity when you record voiceovers at sea. There's no use going through the trouble of recording professional voiceovers in your cabin if you can't then upload files to your clients. Regent offer a free internet service on their cruises, but as with hotels, their basic package is not designed for audio — it's just about fast enough to send text messages! If you're looking to stream audio or video, then, you'll need to pay for an upgrade. And while the paid service is noticeably faster when you download large files, upload times still leave a lot to be desired. On top of this, the more passengers you have on board at any given time, the greater the competition for valuable bandwidth, and the slower everything moves into and out of the cloud.

We paid a daily fee of \$19 (USD) for the upgrade, but even so the internet service occasionally faltered when we were far from shore, or when the weather was bad. So Simone and I tried to schedule longer sessions — and especially those requiring live direction — for days when the Seven Seas Explorer was at a port-of-call. With most passengers out

## Audio Souvenirs

I imagine freelancing at sea would be less demanding for a singer than for a voiceover artist. If you were to record vocals for a song aboard a cruise ship, for instance, ambient noise could conceivably add an interesting atmosphere to the track. For our work, however, absolute silence was always the goal. Still, we did manage to find some good in the noise around us. Realising that our clients in São Paulo could use the ambient noise of a cruise ship in the work they produce, I often set up our Apogee MiC to capture what I think of as 'audio souvenirs': the blast of the ship's horn, the crash of waves against the hull, an emergency alarm test, the hustle and bustle of the ports-of-call, etc.





Learning how to coil microphone cables properly saved us time and probably prevented injuries between sessions — leaving cables on the floor of a seagoing vessel is a sure-fire shortcut to the infirmary!

on day tours, the Internet connection was faster and there was a lot less noise on board. A pair of Apple AirPods came in handy during live sessions, since we could connect to clients via Skype on my iPhone and use the AirPods to receive direction. We left the mic on the AirPods exposed in one ear, while placing our Sennheiser headphones over the other ear to monitor the voiceover.

It's worth pointing out that even with a strong Internet signal, obstacles are bound to arise when recording a live session at sea. For instance, off the coast of Bilbao, Spain, we had an important

## Swashbuckling Sound Engineer

Cruise Director Andy Heath introduced me to sound engineer Guillermo Escobar. Memo, as he's called by the crew, runs the sound and lighting equipment for the ship's stage shows and lounge acts. I asked if he had any advice on recording voiceover at sea. He pointed out that singers and musicians rarely record on the ship, since all the entertainment is pre-produced, but he did offer some pointers about working with sound at sea:

"Cruise ships are designed to maximise guest tranquility. That means most suites are located away from entertainment areas. Also, the cabin doors are fairly sound-proof and the hallways are carpeted, so conversations and foot traffic shouldn't cause problems. But if you want to reduce noise to the fullest, I'd recommend taking a moment to study the ship's schedule. Timing is important if you want to record in your suite. For instance, the two quietest times aboard are usually very early in the morning and early in the evening, when



Guillermo Escobar.

there are fewer guests and less housekeeping activity in the hallways. In the morning, it would be best to record before arrival at a port and in the evening before or after leaving a port. That way you'll avoid noise from the harbour or perhaps a PA announcement out in the public area."

client from the eastern USA on Skype. The session was going well until we were interrupted by an announcement on the PA system — inviting passengers to a poolside barbecue with a live band! We tried to make light of the situation, but the client clearly was not pleased; even though we'd been up front about our recording environment, the interruption came across as unprofessional. We later learned that the client had decided to go with another voice. The interruption may not have been solely to blame, but

it hadn't done us any favours. If it sounds like you're on a party cruise a client is not going to expect broadcast-quality audio and will likely choose a safer option.

### Last Port-of-call

But that wasn't the norm by any means, and by the time we docked in Barcelona, only 12 days after leaving Portsmouth, Simone and I had recorded close to 30 jobs. Since returning home to Brazil, I've seen/heard a few of them on the air too — and no one would be able to guess where those voiceovers were recorded. It goes to show just how much freedom audio professionals can enjoy today if we're prepared to take risks and manage them. You just need the right equipment, a little know-how, and lots of improvisational skills. Before weighing anchor, I'd like to thank my SOS editors Matt Houghton and Paul White one more time, because now that we've covered recording voiceover at home, on the road, and at sea, I imagine our journey has come to an end. Though at the rate our industry is changing, perhaps it won't be long before you read about our experiences of recording voiceovers in space! ■■■

*Jason Bermingham records VO from his home in São Paulo, Brazil, with his wife Simone Kliass. He's the author of SOS articles Producing Professional Voiceovers at Home (Parts 1 and 2) and Session Notes: Recording Voiceover on the Road. Visit [www.jasonbermingham.com](http://www.jasonbermingham.com) and [www.abrazilianvoice.com](http://www.abrazilianvoice.com) for more.*



A Shure MV88 with an iPad and the app Twisted Wave in the ship's library — a room you might have expected to be quiet but which proved to be just as noisy as any other when the ship was at sea!



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