



ULTIMATE GUIDE

Planning your CRUISE VACATION



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A NOTE FROM *Eat Sleep Cruise*



Hi, and welcome to Eat Sleep Cruise. We're glad you're here.

If you're [new to the wonderful world of cruises](#), you likely have tons of questions.
That's where we come in.

As a thank-you for joining us, we'll share all you need to know about how to choose a cruise line, ship and itinerary; how to save money on your booking; what to do to prepare and pack for your voyage; and what to expect once onboard.

Even if you're a seasoned sea dog, you're sure to find something useful, whether it's below or on the [Eat Sleep Cruise website](#), which is packed with ship reviews as well as tips, tricks and hacks to help you [avoid common mistakes](#) and ensure smooth sailing.

For more cruise tips, be sure to follow us on social media.





INTRODUCTION to Cruise Travel

WHY CHOOSE A CRUISE VACATION

Let us be blunt: Cruises aren't for everyone – and that's OK. But, we're assuming if you've made it this far, you're at least curious about what a cruise vacation has to offer. There are some key points to consider to help you decide.

There are lots of [pros \(and some cons\) to cruising](#). Of course we're biased, but for us, the former far outweigh the latter, making cruises one of the best ways to travel. To start, when you step onto your ship, your accommodations, transportation, entertainment, and most meals are included in one price. So, in addition to generally providing a better financial value, cruises merge all of the logistics and planning into one convenient booking.

Then, of course, there's the travel aspect. You'll visit several destinations in one trip without the hassle of figuring out transportation between locations, booking several hotels, and unpacking multiple times. Instead, the cruise line handles all of that for you as your floating accommodations move from place to place, which is the biggest way [cruises differ from all-inclusive resorts](#) or other land-based vacations.

Cruises also provide a more affordable way to visit several locations in one go than if you were to book everything individually yourself in each of those places. They're also often the best – and, in some cases, only – way to visit far-flung regions like Alaska or Antarctica, which can be extremely difficult or impossible to reach by other methods of transportation.

As for the cons, travel by ship can feel more superficial. Instead of staying in the same location for several days, with a chance to truly immerse yourself in the culture, you'll visit a number of different ports, each for only a few hours at a time. Although some luxury, expedition and river cruises can give you a more thorough taste of a region than what you'll get on a large mass-market vessel, it's not the type of travel that will provide you with a super deep

dive. However, it can certainly help you to narrow down destinations to which you might want to return for a longer land-based stay later.

Additionally, mass-market mega-ships can make you feel like a number, particularly when you show up to tiny islands with several thousand fellow passengers. Plus, although sailings do include accommodations, meals and entertainment, they don't usually include extras like soda, alcohol, Wi-Fi, shore excursions or crew gratuities. For those items to be rolled into the price, you'll have to pay extra for a package or book a luxury cruise instead of a mainstream one – and the latter can set you back thousands of dollars more per person.



Insider info...

[Should I Go on a Cruise? 5 Questions to Help You Decide](#)

TYPES OF CRUISES



There are four main [cruise types](#) you should know before you decide which line and ship are right for you.

MAINSTREAM

Generally, these are classified as oceangoing passenger cruise ships that aren't all-inclusive. Within this category are premium cruise lines that offer some inclusions but not as many as luxury brands offer. Lines in this category include Carnival Cruise Line, Celebrity Cruises, Cunard, Disney Cruise Line, Holland America Line, Margaritaville at Sea, MSC Cruises, Norwegian Cruise Line, Princess Cruises, Royal Caribbean International and Virgin Voyages.

LUXURY

This refers to luxury oceangoing cruises, which include all or most extras – such as Wi-Fi, alcohol, crew gratuities and, occasionally, shore excursions – in their fares. There's often a bit of overlap between the luxury sector and the expedition sector. Some examples of luxury or semi-luxury lines are Azamara Cruises, Crystal, Explora Journeys, Oceania Cruises, Regent Seven Seas Cruises, Seabourn Cruise Line, Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours, Silversea Cruises and Viking Ocean Cruises.

EXPEDITION

[Expedition cruises](#) focus on nature and adventure. They visit less-traveled destinations, such as the Arctic, Antarctica and the Galapagos. Ships running these types of sailings are often small and can be bare-bones when compared to mainstream vessels. Cruise lines that offer expedition cruises are Hurtigruten Expeditions (HX), Lindblad Expeditions National Geographic and [Atlas Ocean Voyages](#), to name a few. Some cruise lines – including Celebrity, Seabourn, Scenic, Silversea and Viking– that mostly sail in the mainstream and luxury categories also operate expedition itineraries on select ships.

RIVER

River cruises are just that – cruises on the rivers of the world, rather than the oceans. River ships are often small (not more than three or four decks high) and regulated in width, as they have to fit under short bridges and through narrow locks. Popular river cruise lines include AmaWaterways, Avalon Waterways, Croisi Europe, Emerald Cruises, Uniworld Boutique River Cruises, Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours, Tauck and [Viking River Cruises](#).



Additional special cruise types worth mentioning include:

WORLD CRUISES

[World cruises](#) are lengthy sailings that cover several continents in the same journey. They cost tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars; segments are often available for booking for passengers who can't spend the time or money to take the full voyage.

THEME CRUISES

[Themed sailings](#) are often organized by third parties that charter all or part of a ship on a specific sailing date with the intention of bringing together people with shared interests. Examples have included everything from Star Trek and country music to CrossFit and knitting.

OCEAN CROSSINGS

These are sailings where ships cross oceans – most often for transpacific or [transatlantic sailings](#) – between their embarkation and disembarkation ports. They often involve lots of sea days with few port stops in between, if any at all.



REPOSITIONING CRUISES

When ships move from one region to another between seasons, these relocations, often sold at a discount, are known as [repositioning cruises](#). Although it's not always the case, they can also fall into the ocean crossing category.

CRUISES TO NOWHERE

Although these short voyages with no port calls are no longer allowed when departing from the United States (thanks to stronger government enforcement of the Passenger Vessel Services Act), you can sometimes still find them leaving from other countries. These days – with the exception of [Margaritaville at Sea's two-night voyages](#) to Freeport in the Bahamas – the shortest voyages you can find are generally [three- to four-day cruises](#).

POPULAR CRUISE DESTINATIONS AROUND THE WORLD

Cruise itineraries truly span the globe. Ships are able to visit all seven continents, including Antarctica, and just about every country with coastal frontage or a major river is accessible by passenger leisure vessels. Some destinations are more popular than others, though, with Alaska, [the Bahamas](#), [the Caribbean](#) and the Mediterranean holding the most appeal, particularly for those who are new to cruising.



ALASKA

Of these four regions, [Alaska](#) is the one most likely to be at the top of peoples' bucket lists. The Last Frontier offers a mix of remote wilderness, indigenous culture, gold rush history and unusual wildlife like moose, salmon and bald eagles.

It can be logistically difficult to reach and expensive to navigate on your own, which makes cruises such a great option. Most sailings leave from and return to either Seattle or Vancouver, and they visit ports that include Juneau, Ketchikan, Skagway, Sitka, Wrangell, Icy Strait Point and others with some scenic sailing tossed in so you can marvel at the [calving glaciers](#).

If you're looking for more Alaska tips, these articles are a good starting point:

- [Alaska Cruise FAQ](#)
- [40 First Time Alaska Cruise Tips](#)
- [Alaska Cruise Mistakes](#)
- [Expert Alaska Cruise Tips and Tricks](#)
- [How Much Does an Alaska Cruise Cost?](#)

BAHAMAS

[The Bahamas](#) encompasses hundreds of islands, and the select few that are regular haunts for cruise ships are wildly popular, thanks to their beautiful beaches, vibrant culture and plethora of seafood and water sports. The major ones are New Providence, home to Nassau, and Grand Bahama, where you'll find Freeport.

The Bahamas is also where you'll find many [private cruise line destinations](#), including:

- [Carnival's Celebration Key](#)
- [Carnival's Half Moon Cay, which it shares with Holland America](#)
- [Royal Caribbean's Perfect Day at CocoCay, which it shares with Celebrity](#)
- [Disney Cruise Line's Castaway Cay](#)
- [Disney Cruise Line's Lookout Cay at Lighthouse Point](#)
- [MSC's Ocean Cay](#)
- [Norwegian's Great Stirrup Cay](#)
- [Princess' Princess Cays](#)
- [Virgin Voyages' Beach Club at Bimini](#)

Although Bahamas ports make appearances on wider Caribbean itineraries, it's just as common to find Bahamas-only sailings.



CARIBBEAN

The Caribbean is vast and includes lots of small island countries, each with its own culture and history. Like the Bahamas, the [Caribbean islands](#) are close enough to Florida, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey and New York that they make excellent itinerary options for passengers departing from the U.S. East Coast.

The larger region is divvied up into three sections:

- **Eastern Caribbean:** On these itineraries, expect calls on Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Grand Turk, St. Maarten and the U.S. and British Virgin Islands.
 - **Southern Caribbean:** Here, you'll find stops in the French West Indies, as well as Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao, Dominica, St. Lucia, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, Barbados and Antigua.
 - **Western Caribbean:** Generally, these voyages feature ports in Jamaica, Mexico, Grand Cayman, Belize and Honduras.
-



MEDITERRANEAN

Although the wider continent of Europe has mass appeal for many travelers, the Mediterranean subregion is the most popular with cruisers. It's generally further divided into the Eastern and Western Mediterranean, with Italy serving as the border between the two and showing up on both types of itineraries. Depending on which you choose, you can revel in ancient cities, soak up sun and sand, stroll through museums and enjoy alfresco dining overlooking the ocean.

Cruises to the Eastern Med might include ports in Turkey, Greece, Croatia, Italy and sometimes even Albania, Malta and Montenegro. The Western Med comprises France, Monaco, Portugal, Spain and the Canary Islands.

OTHER

Other popular regions for U.S. cruisers include Bermuda, Canada and New England (especially during the fall when the leaves are at their peak colors), the California coast and the Mexican Riviera.

More far-flung and potentially more expensive options that pique passengers' interest – especially if they're seasoned cruisers – are Hawaii, Asia, Australia and New Zealand, the Panama Canal, South America and Africa.

RIVER CRUISES

The most popular regions for river cruises tend to be in Europe through the Rhine Gorge, where castles abound, and along the Rhone and Danube. Portugal's Douro is great for wine-lovers, and more seasoned travelers will appreciate voyages on Egypt's Nile and China's Yangtze. The Amazon, which flows through several South American countries, is another great option. So is the Mekong, which runs through Vietnam and Cambodia.

River cruisers who prefer to travel domestically appreciate U.S. river sailings, which ply American waterways like the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers and generally focus on small-town Americana.

EXPEDITION CRUISES

When it comes to expedition sailings, the most sought-after itineraries are those in the polar regions of the [Arctic](#) and [Antarctica](#), as well as voyages to the Galapagos, which are so untouched by humans that animals don't know to be afraid.



CRUISE Planning

HOW TO PLAN A CRUISE

Now that you know all your cruise options and all the places you can visit, you're probably ready to set sail.

But before you actually book, you'll have to do some cruise planning. There are five elements to consider: budget, destination, timing (duration and dates), cruise line and ship, and cabin type.

First, determine how much you're able to spend. Don't forget to include transportation to and from your cruise port, cruise gratuities, shore excursions and other incidentals like spa treatments, specialty dining, drink packages, Wi-Fi, souvenir shopping and other onboard activities that cost extra. Leave some additional funds for travel insurance, too. (See our "Budgeting for a Cruise" section below for additional tips and resources.)

From there, decide where you'd like to travel and for how long. Then, choose the general date range when you'd like to go. Next, determine which cruise line and ship are right for you. (See our "Choosing the Right Cruise" section below for more on each of the major cruise lines.) Note that, if you're hoping to drive to your cruise port, you'll be limited to the ships based in ports that are closest to you, which could help to narrow down your cruise line and ship considerably.



Insider info...

[A Complete Guide on How To Book a Cruise – Insider Tips, Tricks, and Advice](#)



Wander more, worry less
Request a no-obligation quote today at mei-travel.com
MEI-Travel

HOW TO BOOK A CRUISE

 [Contains affiliate link](#)

When it's time to actually book your sailing, you can go about it in several ways. If you haven't cruised before or if you're someone who's likely to have a lot of questions, you'll want to leave the booking to a professional, which won't cost you anything extra. We recommend [you contact a travel advisor](#) to handle the details for you. If this isn't your first voyage and you're already familiar with the moving parts of cruise planning, you can book your sailing yourself.

To book your cruise, you'll have two choices: You can either pay for the entire thing up front, or you can put down a deposit and make periodic payments. You'll just have to be sure to pay in full before your cruise line's final payment deadline, which is usually 75-120 days in advance, to avoid having your booking canceled.

Before booking, be sure to read the fine print on cancellation policies. If you decide to cancel your cruise, the amount of the refund you'll receive depends on how far out you are from the sailing date. The closer the cruise is, the less money will be returned to you. Depending on the type of fare you select, some deposits aren't refundable, regardless of when you cancel.

SEASONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Knowing the “when” of booking a cruise is just as important as knowing the “how.” There are several key time periods you should know about as you plan your at-sea vacation. Here’s a quick primer.

SHOULDER SEASON

This is the period between high or peak season, when cruise destinations and ports are at their busiest, and low or off season, when few travelers visit certain places or when cruise lines might not even sail there at all. During [shoulder season](#), you’re likely to find thinner crowds and lower fares, but you might have to sacrifice in the way of weather or make other trade-offs such as fewer tour options.

HURRICANE SEASON

Each year, between June 1 and November 30, it’s hurricane season in the Atlantic. That means tropical storms are common, and they can whip up into hurricanes quickly. This largely affects sailings departing from the East Coast of the United States and traveling to the Caribbean, Bahamas and, occasionally, Canada and New England.

Although officers on the bridge (a cruise ship’s control center) constantly monitor the weather and have technology that allows them to maneuver well out of a storm’s path, there’s a chance your itinerary could change (think skipped or reordered ports) if bad weather’s brewing. In exchange for the uncertainty, fares are often lower for cruises that depart during this time.

WAVE SEASON

The first quarter of each new year is known in the cruise industry as wave season. It’s when people begin thinking about their travel plans for the upcoming year, and cruise lines respond by offering deals. Although the discounts aren’t always deep, add-ons tend to be plentiful. Look for onboard credit, free Wi-Fi and drink packages, “third and fourth passengers sail free” promos and other extras that could provide value. Generally, wave season is less about when you actually sail and more about when you book your cruise.

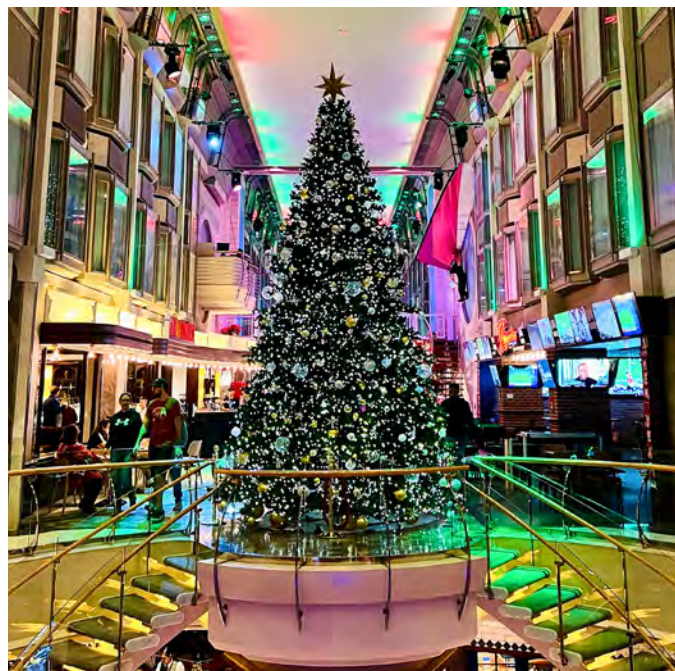
HOLIDAYS

Cruising during the holidays has both pros and cons. Although it means you won’t have to be around your extended family, cook a big meal or worry about cleaning up afterward, it also means you’re looking at potentially sky-high fares – especially if you’re mulling over a [Christmas cruise](#) or a [New Year’s sailing](#). Voyages during times when schools aren’t in session also tend to be kid-heavy, which is worth thinking about if you’re not someone who enjoys being around children.

As far as seasonality, there are also destination-specific aspects – like weather – to consider.

See below for links to more details on the best time to cruise to major regions, including:

- [Alaska](#)
- [The Bahamas](#)
- [Bermuda](#)
- [Canada/New England](#)
- [The Caribbean](#)
- [The Mediterranean](#)



Insider info...

[Expert Tips & Strategies for Cruising During Hurricane Season](#)



BUDGETING FOR *a Cruise*

HOW MUCH DOES A CRUISE COST, AND WHAT DETERMINES THE PRICE?

Cruise prices truly run the gamut. You can find sailings from less than \$20 per person, per day, or you can spend tens of thousands per person, per day. It all depends on the cruise line, ship, cabin type, voyage length and itinerary and dates you choose.

Some cruise lines include more in their fares; operate smaller, high-end vessels outfitted with luxury furnishings; and provide more elegant, attentive levels of service that warrant larger price tags. A ship's age also plays a role, with the newest hardware commanding the highest prices.

Then there's cabin type. As a general rule, the larger the cabin and the more natural light and fresh air, the more expensive it will be. (See the "How to Choose a Cruise Cabin" section below for more information on cabin types.)

It will also cost you more to sail on itineraries that are less common or that feature hard-to-reach destinations few people can visit without being on a ship. These include Alaska (especially on smaller ships that visit ports larger vessels can't get to) and most expedition cruise destinations, such as Antarctica and the Galapagos.

If you plan to sail during high season, school breaks or holidays, you can expect prices to be higher than during off season, shoulder season or hurricane season.

And, finally, length is the most obvious factor affecting how much you'll have to shell out. The longer the sailing, the more your overall total will be. Even a cruise that's an affordable daily rate could be too pricey if the sailing is long. Sure, \$100 per person, per night is a good deal, and it's doable for most people if they're only onboard for a week. But if it's a world cruise that lasts more than 100 nights, it will be out of many people's price range.

Although several variables determine what your specific cruise will cost, as a ballpark estimate you can expect to pay an average of anywhere from \$100 to \$200 per person, per night, for a [Carnival](#) or [Royal Caribbean](#) cruise and about \$300 per person, per night, for a [Disney](#) cruise.



WHAT'S INCLUDED ON A CRUISE?

There are certain [cruise inclusions](#) that are universal across just about every line that exists. Fares incorporate all meals and snacks at some of the onboard restaurants (usually a sit-down, waiter-served main dining room where you order off a menu; a self-serve buffet with several stations offering a variety of cuisines; and some sort of pizza or burgers, plus soft-serve ice cream and café bites), accommodations, most entertainment, youth programs and transportation between ports on the itinerary. Also covered are basic beverages like water, juice, lemonade, iced tea, hot tea and drip coffee.

For more specifics by cruise line, check out the links below:

- [Carnival inclusions](#)
- [Celebrity inclusions](#)
- [Disney inclusions](#)
- [Holland America inclusions](#)
- [MSC inclusions](#)
- [Norwegian inclusions](#)
- [Princess inclusions](#)
- [Royal Caribbean inclusions](#)
- [Virgin inclusions](#)



HIDDEN CRUISE COSTS AND ADD-ONS

The wildcards that come into play are Wi-Fi, crew gratuities (sometimes called crew appreciation or service charges), most drinks, alternative dining, shore excursions, port transfers, access to exclusive sundecks, casino play and spa treatments.

All of these items – except for port taxes and fees and daily gratuities, which are automatically charged to every person's onboard account – are optional, but they do enhance the cruise experience. Most mainstream lines don't include these hidden costs in their pricing, but some have started to offer more inclusive packages that bundle many of these added-fee options for one price.

Other for-fee items that are less essential but still worth noting are professional photo services, late-night kids club activities, souvenirs and certain activities with costs attached (thrill rides, escape rooms, arcade gaming, alcohol tastings).

Although all of these extras are available to you, it doesn't necessarily mean they're worth the price. Check out our list of [things expert cruisers refuse to spend money on](#) when they sail.



Insider info...

[15 Things Not Included in the Price of a Cruise](#)

DRINK PACKAGES

Because mainstream cruise lines only include basic beverages in their fares (with the exception of Disney, which does include soda), you'll have to pay extra for soda, specialty coffees, alcohol, bottled water, energy drinks, milkshakes and smoothies. Because the costs can quickly add up depending on how thirsty you are, cruise lines (with the exception of Disney and Virgin) sell drink packages that allow you to order nearly unlimited beverages for a flat one-time or per-day fee. (Alcohol packages may have a 15-drink limit per 24-hour period depending on the cruise line.)

There are several types of packages that range from bottled water packages and soda-only packages to specialty coffee ones and alcohol-free ones that include just about everything except adult beverages.

Then there are the alcohol packages. Some lines have just one that includes all but the most high-end, top-shelf spirits. Other lines have multiple tiers of packages, depending on your tastes. The more a package includes, the more expensive it will be.

Although these packages might sound like a good idea, you'll need to crunch some numbers to decide if they're a good value for you. Determine how many drinks you'd need to consume each day in order to at least break even on the cost. If you can't see yourself tossing back that many, a package won't be worth the price.

If you're sailing with someone who doesn't drink, be warned: If you buy an alcohol package, anyone 21 or older with whom you're sharing a cabin will also have to buy one. You also can't purchase them for just a day or two. You have to opt in for the entire cruise length. Purchasing a package

online before you sail can often save you money. Still, prices can be eye-wateringly expensive – nearly \$100 per person, per day with some lines.

Here are links to information about drink packages from several major cruise brands:

- [Carnival drink packages](#)
- [Celebrity drink packages](#)
- [Holland America drink packages](#)
- [MSC drink packages](#)
- [NCL drink packages](#)
- [Princess drink packages](#)
- [Royal Caribbean drink packages](#)

Additionally, if you're looking to save even more money, there are several ways you can snag free drinks. They include being loyal to your favorite cruise line since some higher-tiered loyalty program perks include drink coupons or invites to exclusive complimentary cocktail hours; checking out the captain's reception or art auction, where there's usually free Champagne or sparkling wine; gambling in the onboard casino, where high-rollers and frequent visitors earn gratis beverages; and cruising with a luxury line that includes alcohol in its fares.



Insider info...

[9 Ways to Get Free Drinks \(or Free Drink Packages\) on Cruises](#)

ALL-INCLUSIVE OPTIONS

More inclusive options do exist. They include luxury cruise lines that roll the cost of nearly everything into their fares, premium lines that include a couple more extras than the mainstream lines but still fewer than the luxury ones and, finally, mainstream lines that bundle extras into packages that can be tacked onto base fares for a set fee.

Luxury all-inclusive cruise lines:

- Crystal
- Regent Seven Seas Cruises
- Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours
- Seabourn Cruise Line
- Silversea Cruises

Premium semi-inclusive cruise lines:

- Azamara Cruises
- Oceania Cruises
- Viking Ocean Cruises
- Virgin Voyages
- Windstar Cruises

Mainstream lines that offer inclusive packages:

- Celebrity Cruises (All Included)
- [Holland America Line \(Have It All\)](#)
- [Norwegian Cruise Line \(More at Sea\)](#)
- [Princess Cruises \(Princess Plus and Princess Premier\)](#)

TIPS FOR SAVING MONEY

Cruises are one of the most economical vacations you can take, but there are ways to save even more money when you're strategic about shopping, planning and booking.

BOOK EARLY OR LATE

Carefully consider the timing of your booking. If you lock in your sailing a year or more in advance, you can usually save. Currently, cruises are selling so well that last-minute deals aren't as easy to come by as they once were, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. Waiting until a month or two out and hopping on a voyage on a whim can pay off.

FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH PRICING

Shopping around can also help you to know what's an actual deal and what isn't; it will also ensure you're paying the lowest price or receiving the most lucrative extras and inclusions like Wi-Fi, alcohol or [onboard credit](#), which can be used to pay for cruise-related purchases. [Consider booking through a travel advisor](#) who can make sure all available offers are applied and keep an eye out for potential price drops on your behalf. You can also set up your own price-drop alerts.

BE AWARE OF SPECIAL BOOKING PERIODS

Make sure you're in the know about the best times of year to keep an eye out for deals. These days, most cruise lines constantly have discounts and booking incentives splashed across their websites, but they often make them a bit more valuable during wave season, Black Friday and Cyber Monday, as well as Memorial Day weekend.

WEIGH SHIP, CABIN AND ITINERARY OPTIONS

Additionally, you'll want to choose your departure location, ship, sailing dates and cabin wisely. If you cruise from a port to which you can drive, you can cut out the cost of flights. Older ships almost always have less expensive fares than new ones, and inside cabins with no windows or guarantee cabins (where you choose the cabin category, rather than a specific cabin, and get whatever the cruise line assigns you) are the most affordable. As for sailing dates, cruises during low season, shoulder season and hurricane season can save you some cash.

Itinerary is important also – both destination and length. For example, a shorter cruise to the Bahamas will cost you far less than sailing to Alaska for a week or more.

EVALUATE ADD-ONS

As for extras like shore excursions, Wi-Fi and alcohol packages, either avoid them completely, or purchase them online ahead of time. Prebooking before embarkation day will almost always net you a less expensive price, and you can use gift cards – which are sometimes sold at a discount at big-box grocery stores – to pay.

If alcohol is important to you, you can also save some dough by bringing your own bottles of wine onboard – something most cruise lines allow in moderation. Usually the limit is one standard-size bottle per passenger 21 years of age or older, and it must be brought onto the ship in carry-on luggage. Note that the line might charge a small corkage fee if you drink the wine outside of your cabin.

LOOK TO CREDIT CARD AND LOYALTY PERKS

Other tips include cashing in credit card reward points or airline miles to pay for some or all of your voyage and taking advantage of cruise line loyalty program perks. If you always cruise with the same line, you'll move up the ranks of the program and receive discounts on everything from Wi-Fi packages and professional photo purchases to laundry services and branded merchandise.

TRACK YOUR ONBOARD SPENDING

Finally, be sure to check your onboard account frequently during your trip, especially if you're on a strict budget. Because your room key also serves as a charge card (cruise ships operate on a cashless system), it's shockingly easy to rack up a sizeable bill before you realize what's happened.



Insider info...

[How to Cruise for Cheap:
Top Tips and Advice](#)

CRUISE VACATION BUDGET WORKSHEET



Category	Item	Budget	Actual Cost	Notes
Cruise	Cruise fare			
	Drink package			
	Wi-fi package			
	Prepaid gratuities			
	Travel insurance			
Flights (if applicable)	Airfare			
	Seat upgrades			
	Baggage fees			
	Airport snacks			
	Transportation to hotel			
Pre-cruise hotel	Room rate			
	Resort fees and taxes			
	Cleaning tip			
	Transportation to ship			
Onboard/ in port	A la carte drinks (if no package)			
	Shore excursions			
	Specialty dining			
	Wellness: spa treatments / fitness classes			
	Souvenirs / onboard shops			
	Food / snacks ashore			
	Cash tips (porters, room service, bar, shore guides, stewards)			
Post-cruise	Transportation from port to airport (if applicable)			
	Cruise terminal parking (if applicable)			
	Airport snacks (if applicable)			
	Airport parking (if applicable)			
	Totals:			

Budget Total: _____
Actual Cost Total: _____
Difference: _____

Additional Notes:



CHOOSING THE *Right Cruise*

COMPARING CRUISE LINES

Each cruise line offers its own unique onboard vibe, but even different ships sailing for the same line can vary in ambiance. That's where cruise ship classes come into play. Generally, each cruise line has several classes of ships with a handful of vessels in each class. Ships that are part of the same class tend to be similar, if not identical, in size, layout and onboard offerings.

There are also lines that cater to certain audiences, including families, adults-only crowds, seniors, couples, [solo travelers](#), the LGBTQ+ community and other groups. To be sure you choose one that best suits your needs, check out a quick description of each of the major mainstream brands below, and use the links to find out more about the ships sailing for each of them.

Note: Passenger capacities listed are double occupancy (two people to a cabin). Although the newest and largest ships in each fleet tend to offer the most modern amenities, all ships, regardless of age, undergo regular maintenance to keep them in tip-top shape, both aesthetically and in terms of operational safety.

CARNIVAL CRUISE LINE

[Carnival Cruise Line](#) is one of the best values in cruising, offering fun for all ages at an extremely reasonable price point across a fleet of nearly 30 ships. Onboard offerings include excellent casual dining options, towel animals galore, the first-ever roller coasters at sea on its newest vessels and stellar kids clubs featuring The Cat In The Hat and other Dr. Seuss characters.

Looking at [Carnival cruise ships by size](#), the smallest ship (Carnival Paradise, which debuted in 1998) carries 2,124 passengers, while its largest (Carnival Celebration, 2022) has room for 5,374. Billing itself as "America's Cruise Line," Carnival's vibe is one of affordable, sometimes raucous fun mixed with excellent service, which is a brand hallmark.

The line offers a variety of cruise lengths across its eight classes of ships. Its itineraries are often a week or shorter and focus on the Bahamas, Caribbean and Mexico. The brand does also have a couple of ships based in Australia and schedules a cruise or two in Europe every so often.

The brand has several new ships on order, including Carnival Festivale and Carnival Tropicale, slated to debut in 2027 and 2028, respectively. The line also has three new ships coming in 2029, 2031 and 2033 as part of what the company is calling Project Ace.

CELEBRITY CRUISES

Celebrity is ideal for trendy working professionals who like to enjoy a drink and a classy party vibe but without as much noise or as many young children as you're likely to find on Royal Caribbean, Celebrity's sister cruise line. To cater to that group, Celebrity ships are synonymous with modern furnishings, upscale dining, acrobat-heavy nightly entertainment and charismatic captains.

Celebrity's ships come in [four classes](#). The smallest mainstream vessel in the fleet is Celebrity Constellation (debuted in 2002, carries 2,559 passengers), and its two largest are Celebrity Beyond (2022) and Celebrity Ascent (2023), tied at 3,849 passengers apiece. Celebrity Xcel and a sixth Edge-class ship will offer a few new features. Note that Celebrity also operates an expedition ship, Celebrity Flora, which sails the Galapagos and carries only 100 passengers.

With the exception of Celebrity Flora, the line's ships generally focus on sailing the Caribbean, Alaska and Europe during the summer months and the Caribbean during the winter. It also has ships on routes in the Asia-Pacific region, including Australia. Voyages range in duration from short three-night sailings to cruises that last nearly three weeks to even world cruises.

The line also is venturing into the river cruise realm, with a fleet of 10 river ships set to start rolling out in 2027.

DISNEY CRUISE LINE

Disney Cruise Line caters to Disney fans of all ages with the same magical service, jaw-dropping entertainment and character meet 'n' greets you'd expect from [the land-based parks](#). The ships, which fall into three classes, aren't just for kids, though. Adult areas abound; they range from an adults-only sun deck and pool to bars and lounges designated for grownups.

Each vessel offers a couple of extra-fee restaurant options, but standard dinners operate on a system called [rotational dining](#). You dine with the same people each night but in a different themed main dining room, and your waiter follows you. Disney's kids clubs are the absolute best afloat, featuring the likes of Marvel, Star Wars, Toy Story and Disney princesses; little ones will be so enthralled they won't want to leave. Cabins are also thoughtfully designed, featuring dividing curtains for sleeping and a split bathroom concept that allows separate toilet and shower access.

[DCL's fleet ranges in size](#) from 1,754 passengers on Disney Magic (1998) and Disney Wonder (1999) to about 3,000 passengers on Disney Adventure (2025). The line is planning two new Wish-class vessels to debut in 2027 and 2029, as well as three smaller cruise ships that will be ready by 2031.

The line offers itineraries that sail just a couple nights to more than two weeks in regions spanning the globe. Some of the most popular cruises head to the Bahamas and the Caribbean, but you'll also find voyages with The Mouse in Alaska, Europe, Hawaii, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific.



HOLLAND AMERICA LINE

This storied line was founded in 1873 to transport passengers between New York and the Netherlands. It now operates a four-class [fleet of leisure cruise ships](#) under the Carnival Corp. umbrella. Its smallest vessels (Volendam, 1999, and Zaandam, 2000) carry 1,432 people and its largest (Koningsdam, 2016; Nieuw Statendam, 2018; and Rotterdam, 2021) each accommodate 2,650.

Besides leaning heavily on its rich history, which involved serving in several wars, the line has managed in recent years to transform itself from a brand for a slightly older clientele to one that's suitable for multigenerational travel. You won't find endless parties, flashy kids clubs or tons of top-deck amusement park-style attractions, but you will experience well-appointed cabins, delicious food – don't miss the Grand Dutch Café – and a varied music scene, particularly on its newest vessels. It also offers [destination immersion](#) in ways that other mainstream lines don't.

Holland America offers some of the most lengthy, robust and varied itineraries in the industry. Like other lines, it runs a battery of standard Bahamas and Caribbean sailings, but where it truly shines is on its Alaska cruises and long voyages. Holland America has had a presence in Alaska longer than any other cruise line, and it operates land-based resort properties that allow it to offer pre- and post-cruise land tours to passengers as a continuation of the cruise experience. It also runs a series of annual Legendary Journeys world cruises that span every continent and Grand Voyages that usually feature circumnavigations of the Asia-Pacific region, Antarctica or Africa.

Holland America has no new ship orders on the books at this time, but the line's private island, which it shares with Carnival, was renamed from Half Moon Cay to Relax Away, Half Moon Cay in 2024. It's undergoing renovations – including the addition of a pier, as well as new bars and a beach club – that are expected to be completed by the end of 2026.

MSC CRUISES

This independent, privately owned cruise line is a pet project for the Aponte family of MSC shipping fame. What began as a Mediterranean cruise line that catered to passengers from a number of countries has morphed into a North American favorite with several East Coast-based vessels serving passengers from the U.S. and Canada. But be warned: Just because you're paying a low price doesn't mean you'll find a Carnival vibe; [MSC cruises](#) are more resort casual than "anything goes" casual. You'll also find a more well-rounded selection of itineraries with MSC, as the line's heaviest presence is in Europe with a growing number of Caribbean and Bahamas voyages added for North Americans.

Because the line has traditionally served cruisers who speak a variety of languages, its onboard entertainment focuses heavily on visual spectacles like magic and acrobatics. The ships themselves are stunning, too, embracing neutral palettes with jewel-toned pops of color, high-end art and atrium staircases dripping in Swarovski crystals.

As it nears the end of a multi-year shipbuilding binge, MSC is one of the world's largest cruise lines with a fleet that will soon include more than two dozen ships across six classes. Its [oldest and newest vessels](#) aren't necessarily its smallest and largest, though. The oldest, MSC Armonia, debuted in 2001 and carries 2,199 people, but two ships – MSC Sinfonia and MSC Lirica – which rolled out in 2002 and 2003, respectively, actually carry fewer passengers at 1,984 apiece. Both the largest and most recent is MSC World America (2025), which carries about 5,200 passengers. In 2026, the line will see the addition of World Asia, followed by World Atlantic in 2027. Two more ships in the same class are ordered for 2029 and 2030, respectively.



NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE

NCL is best known for pioneering the concept of "freestyle cruising," which eschews reservations and encourages cruisers to shape their own vacations, free from rigid schedules and formal wear. The line's [nine classes of ships](#) offer plenty of fun activities like virtual-reality arcades, ropes courses and go-kart tracks, but be prepared for nickel-and-diming, as a lot of it costs extra.

Norwegian's oldest ship is Norwegian Spirit (1998), while its smallest is Norwegian Sun (2001), which carries 1,936 guests. The line's newest and largest ship, Norwegian Aqua, began sailing in early 2025 and can accommodate 3,571 cruisers.

Norwegian Cruise Line will take delivery of Norwegian Luna in 2026 and a 5th Prima class vessel in 2027. In terms of additional hardware, Norwegian has planned for four new vessels to be built, with one delivered every two years starting in 2030. This new class will be the largest yet for the brand. With that, NCL will be retiring Norwegian Sky in 2026 and Norwegian Sun in 2027. The cruise line has big plans for Great Stirrup Cay in The Bahamas as well, including a new multi-ship pier and lagoon pool and a waterpark coming in 2026.

Like most other mainstream mega-ship lines, NCL's main presence is in the Bahamas, Caribbean, Alaska and Europe, with about half of the fleet heading across the pond for the summer and returning to spend winter in warmer climes. It also operates Bermuda voyages, keeps a couple of ships in the Asia-Pacific region and is the only large-ship cruise line to have a U.S.-flagged vessel, Pride of America, which sails exclusively around the Hawaiian islands all year.

PRINCESS CRUISES

Of the major cruise lines, Carnival Corp. brand Princess Cruises attempts to cater to the most diverse group of travelers with a more traditional cruising style. TV show “The Love Boat” was filmed on a Princess ship, and the line has, for decades, used the partnership to draw older passengers and bill itself as the most romantic cruise line. Yet, in recent years, it has implemented wearable technology that streamlines everything from entering your cabin to ordering food and drinks anywhere on the ship, which younger travelers and multi-generational groups appreciate.

Princess ships are [divided into four classes](#). The oldest vessel is Grand Princess, which began sailing in 1998, and the smallest is Coral Princess, which set sail in 2003 and has room for 2,000 passengers. Tied for the titles of both largest and newest Princess ship are sisters Sun Princess (2024) and Star Princess (2025), each carrying 4,310 people. Beyond 2025, the line does not yet have plans for more ships.

Aside from its MedallionClass technology, another way in which the cruise line stands out is with its plethora of itinerary options. In addition to standard warm-weather offerings in the Caribbean or Mexican Riviera, Princess excels in Alaska. Second only to Holland America in terms of longevity in the region, Princess also operates land-based lodges that allow its passengers to extend their stays in the 49th State and offers an impressive North to Alaska enrichment program. Other voyages – including longer two- and three-week sailings, as well as world cruises – collectively cover more than 100 countries across all seven continents.



ROYAL CARIBBEAN INTERNATIONAL

Royal Caribbean has been the industry's biggest envelope-pusher in terms of technology, wow-worthy onboard amenities and family fun on sailings that are affordable. Its fleet of nearly 30 ships spread across seven classes currently operates many of the world's largest cruise ships, including the Icon and Oasis Classes, which are divided into themed areas known as neighborhoods.

Passengers can expect parades and parties along the indoor promenade, Broadway- and West End-style musicals, high-diving acrobatic shows and tons of outdoor fun, including some of the largest cruise ship water parks, surfing and skydiving simulators, ziplines and more. While the main dining room and casual eats are average, if you're willing to shell out extra for alternative restaurants, you're likely to be impressed. The onboard kids clubs are fantastic and come in second only to Disney's youth offerings.

In terms of ship size and age, the smallest and oldest vessel in the fleet is Grandeur of the Seas, which completed its maiden voyage in 1996 and serves 1,992 guests. The largest cruise ships in the world currently are sister ships Icon of the Seas (2024) and Star of the Seas (2025), which each can hold a whopping 5,610 passengers at double occupancy or about 7,600 at maximum capacity. Royal Caribbean has found success in a series of both short weekend cruises and longer sailings to the Bahamas and Caribbean, often with calls on the line's massive private island, Perfect Day at CocoCay. It also has a significant presence in Europe, as well as a ship or two in Asia.

Several new ships are planned; Icon-class vessel Legend of the Seas is coming out in 2026, along with a fourth unnamed Icon-class ship (2027), a seventh unnamed Oasis-class ship (2028) and a brand-new group of smaller ships in a new series called the Discovery Class.

On land, Royal Caribbean is expanding its presence in the form of private destinations. They include the Royal Beach Club Paradise Island in the Bahamas (2025), Royal Beach Club Cozumel in Mexico (2026), and Perfect Day Mexico (an offshoot of the line's newly renovated private island Perfect Day at CocoCay in the Bahamas).



Insider info...

[Our 2025 Guide to Royal Caribbean Ships By Size](#)



VIRGIN VOYAGES

Compared to the other mass-market cruise lines, [Virgin Voyages](#), the brainchild of business mogul Richard Branson, is a relative newcomer. It officially set up shop with its first of four ships in 2019. Since then, it has done its best to shake up the industry – in a good way – by offering adults-only sailings, cutting edge (and sometimes risqué) entertainment, gourmet cuisine that rivals food you'd find at the best restaurants on land and a “come as you are” attitude that's casual but never sloppy.

Expect to find activities like board games, dodgeball tournaments, boy band dance classes and '80s-themed aerobics sessions that will take you straight back to childhood. Plus there's free pizza, candy and ice cream nearly 'round the clock. Stir in plenty of late-night rave-style theme parties, trivia hosted by a drag queen, dinner theater, an onboard tattoo parlor and heady production shows in partnership with big names, and it's a recipe for a travel experience you can't have anywhere else. Feeling like a rockstar? Book one of the line's massive Rockstar Suites, which will earn you chic digs with added space and a slew of perks.

The line sails four ships, the newest of which is Brilliant Lady. With the exception of a few differing restaurants and production shows, the [vessels are basically identical](#), each carrying up to 2,770 passengers. They sail the Caribbean, Bahamas, Mediterranean, Greek Isles and Alaska.

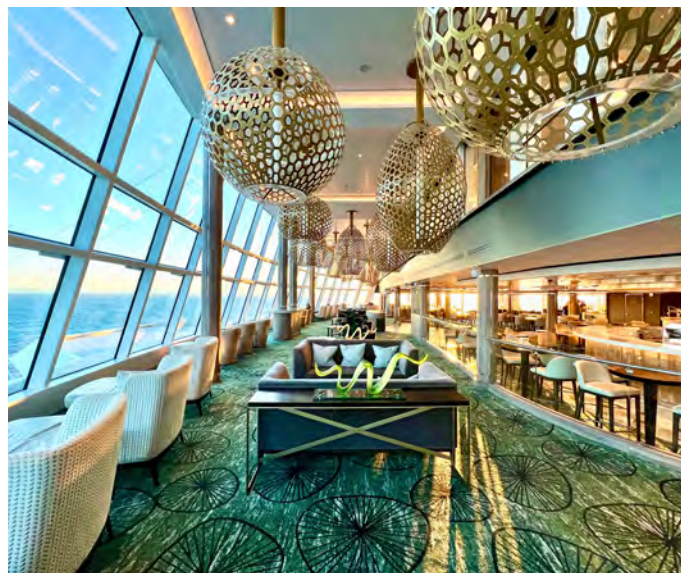
FAMILY-FRIENDLY VS. ADULTS-ONLY OPTIONS

One of the biggest considerations when you're booking a cruise is who your travel companions will be. If you're setting sail with kids in tow or as part of a larger family group, you'll want to consider ships that have a variety of activities for everyone, as well as kids clubs to keep the youngest cruisers busy and entertained. Excellent [options for family cruises](#) include Disney Cruise Line, Royal Caribbean and Carnival, as well as the newest ships from Norwegian and MSC.

On the flip side, if you're [cruising as a couple](#), by yourself or with a friend group and want to stay away from kids, you have several options. If you want to escape most children in a quieter, more relaxing atmosphere, check out Princess, which is low-key, Holland America's newest ships for their great music scene and Celebrity, which is ideal for slightly younger and less party-hearty adults in their mid-30s to early 50s.

If you want to sail with few interruptions from rugrats but you're still looking for a lively party vibe, go for Carnival, Royal Caribbean, Norwegian, or MSC and take advantage of their adults-only areas.

Whether you want party time or peace and quiet, you only have two easily bookable options for a truly [adults-only sailing](#), both with vastly different vibes. Virgin Voyages doesn't allow anyone younger than 18 onboard. Although it's generally a lively, often loud atmosphere, there are places where you can escape the noise. If you're not into sexual innuendo and crew dressed as merpeople, opt instead for [Viking Ocean Cruises](#), which is a more elegant choice and also doesn't allow kids. Note that both of these lines' fares are at a higher price point than many of the other brands listed.



SHIP SIZE

Ship size is another crucial element of cruise planning. Perhaps you're looking for an intimate experience on a vessel that can take you to more remote destinations. In that case, you're looking for a small ship, which could have anywhere from just a handful of travelers to 1,000 people or so. If you want the most amenity-laden cruise experience with all the "I can't believe this is on a ship" bells and whistles, a large vessel with several thousand passengers is for you.

When it comes to small versus large ships, there are pros and cons to each. While smaller ships are able to visit tinier ports, have more flexibility to tailor the itinerary to passenger whims and will allow you to get to know most of your fellow cruisers, they also usually come with a larger price tag and fewer onboard amenities. With mega-ships, you'll have access to tons of cabin, dining and entertainment choices, generally for less money, but you might also feel overwhelmed by the number of fellow passengers onboard or in port with you.

If you're looking for that small ship vibe without the hefty price tag of luxury lines, consider boutique brands like Windstar Cruises, Atlas Ocean Voyages, Oceania Cruises, or Azamara Cruises.

CRUISE LENGTH

Cruises exist in just about any length you can dream up, from quick two-day jaunts between Florida and the Bahamas to world cruises lasting six months or longer. You can also book back-to-back sailings on the same cruise ship to create longer itineraries from shorter ones if a single cruise doesn't quite meet your needs.

If you're new to cruising, you'll likely want to dip your toes into the water by booking something that's a week or shorter, just until you see if it's a type of vacation you like. If you discover it's not for you, the last thing you want is to be stuck on a lengthy voyage.

Just about all cruise lines run regular weeklong sailings from both the East and West Coasts, and many cruise lines – particularly Carnival, [Margaritaville at Sea](#) and Royal Caribbean – offer fun two- to four-day cruises that will let you have a taste of how well you'd tolerate a longer voyage. Many of the shorter sailings are super affordable and have departures that allow you to sail over a long weekend (leave on Friday, return on Monday) so you can get away without spending too many dollars or vacation days.

WHAT IS THE BEST CRUISE LINE?

Unfortunately, there's no simple black-and-white answer to this question. There's no such thing as the "[best cruise line](#)." Rather, there's only a "best cruise line for you," based on your interests, preferences, budget and travel group.

However, certain cruise lines do excel in different areas. For example, Disney, Royal Caribbean and Carnival are great for families. Norwegian, Virgin Voyages and Holland America are terrific for solo cruisers. If you're looking to save money, we recommend MSC Cruises, Carnival and Margaritaville at Sea.

On the other hand, couples and adults hoping to avoid kids are likely to enjoy the intimate balcony dining offered on Princess ships or the peace and quiet of Viking or Celebrity. Cruisers with budgets where the sky's the limit might want to go the luxury route with Regent, Seabourn or Silversea. Members of the LGBTQ+ community might be drawn to the inclusivity found onboard Celebrity's and Virgin's vessels. "Best" is definitely subjective here.

Ultimately, it's up to you to compare cruise lines and their pricing, amenities and itineraries to determine which is the best fit. If you need assistance, we strongly recommend contacting a travel advisor. The team at [MEI-Travel](#), our preferred travel partner, would be happy to help!



Insider info...

[Small Cruise Ships vs. Large Cruise Ships – Which is Right For Your Next Trip?](#)



HOW TO CHOOSE *a Cruise Cabin*

Before you can choose your home away from home for the duration of your cruise, you'll need a primer on the basic types of rooms available.

First, it's important to note that nearly all cabins, regardless of category, include basic amenities. You can count on a king-size bed that your room steward can convert into two twins (if you're not traveling with a significant other), a desk or vanity area with some sort of stool or chair and a mirror, a house phone, a TV and a safe for storing valuables.

There will also be a hairdryer; a closet and drawers for storing clothes and other belongings; electrical outlets; a private bathroom with a toilet, sink, shelving and a shower (usually without a tub), towels and in-shower dispensers of bodywash and shampoo; and plenty of space under the bed for storing empty luggage after you unpack. You can also expect a nightstand and reading lamp for each side of the bed, as well as a coffee table and either a chair or sofa in cabins with space to include them.



Insider info...

[Bet You Didn't Think
of These Cruise Cabin
Hacks and Space
Saving Tips](#)

Here's a bit about the six main [cabin categories](#) to make your stateroom selection a bit easier:

1 STUDIO

Because standard cruise cabins are designed for double occupancy (two people) and fares are charged per person, rather than per room, solo passengers who stay in standard staterooms must pay what's called a single supplement. It's often 100%, meaning that a single passenger would essentially have to pay for two people's cruise fares, even if nobody is sharing their accommodations.

Studio or solo cabins are built specifically for one person and allow them to avoid paying a second cruise fare for solo use of a double-occupancy room. On some ships, like several in the NCL fleet, these cabins come with access to dedicated solo lounges that offer daily snacks and opportunities to mingle with fellow passengers who are also traveling by themselves.

2 INSIDE

Besides studios, [inside cabins](#) (also called interiors) are often the smallest accommodations on a cruise ship. They offer no natural light or fresh air, as there are no windows or doors to the outside. Although a view of the ocean is nice to have, if you're on a budget, inside cabins are a great choice and make for terrific sleeping, thanks to how dark they are when the lights are out.





3 OCEANVIEW

[Oceanview cabins](#) (or outsides) offer at least one porthole or window to provide a view of the outside and natural light. They can be the same size as inside rooms but are sometimes slightly larger.

4 BALCONY

[Balcony staterooms](#) come with either a sliding-glass door or window that opens to let in natural light and fresh air. Unless it's a French balcony, you'll also have access to exterior square footage with a couple of chairs and a table for sitting and enjoying drinks as you glide past the open ocean or local scenery. These cabins are the most popular on any vessel, and they offer a bit more space than inside or oceanview accommodations, usually for a slightly higher cost.

5 JUNIOR SUITE

Usually the junior suite or mini-suite category involves a standard balcony cabin with a few extra perks like bathrobes, slippers, in-cabin snacks and upgraded bathroom toiletries. Occasionally they might also be a bit larger than a standard balcony room.

6 SUITE

Suites are considered the highest level of staterooms, but they vary widely in square footage and extra perks. They can range in size from a few hundred square feet with no balcony at all to multi-room, multi-deck balcony digs that are larger than some apartments on land.

Prices also differ quite a bit across lines and ships – and even between types of suites on the same ship. The most expensive luxury suites afloat can cost tens of thousands of dollars per person, per week.

The swankiest suites at sea include amenities like private pools and saunas, in-cabin baby grand pianos and wet bars, walk-in closets, second bathrooms or powder rooms, butler service, priority embarkation and disembarkation, reserved seating at nightly shows, free room service, alcohol packages and complimentary Wi-Fi.

Some suites are clustered in onboard gated communities that are private for those with special keycards. These dedicated enclaves often provide access to exclusive suite-only restaurants, bars, lounges, pools and sun decks in what are known as “ship within a ship” areas. You could spend every minute of your time onboard in these spaces and never have to leave in order to lie by the pool, grab a drink or have a meal – and it's all elevated quality.

Many cruise lines will also give you more credit toward status within their loyalty programs for booking a suite than for booking a lower-category stateroom.

Now that you're familiar with the wider cabin categories available on cruise ships, these are the sub-categories you should know:



OBSTRUCTED VIEW

Some cabins are marked as [obstructed view](#). They can come in either the oceanview or balcony category, and they're designated this way when part or most of the view is just that – obstructed. This often happens when part of the ship is in the way, due to structural elements or lifeboat placement.

These rooms are usually sold at a discount from what you'd pay for a room without the obstruction. Be careful of these types of cabins if your cruise line offers to [upgrade your room](#), as you could be trading in a room with a full window view for a cabin with a balcony where the sightlines are largely blocked.

GUARANTEE

Another type of stateroom that could score you a bit of savings is a [guarantee room](#). When booking, you choose the cabin category but not the specific cabin or its location on the ship. As your sailing date approaches, your cruise line will assign one of the remaining unbooked cabins to you, and it's guaranteed to be in the category you selected or higher.

ACCESSIBLE

All cruise ships house at least a handful of accessible cabins for passengers who use wheelchairs, walkers, scooters and other mobility assistive devices; they're generally available across a variety of room categories. These rooms offer larger square footage for maneuverability, as well as other accessible features like wider doorways, zero-entry thresholds (or ramps), easier-to-reach vanity/desk areas and closets, and bathrooms with roll-in showers, grab bars and accessible toilets and sinks. If you require an accessible room, alert your travel advisor, or contact your cruise line.

CONNECTING

Many cruise rooms can sleep three, four or even five people via sofa beds or bunks that pull down from the ceiling. These are ideal for families or friends traveling together. If you need even more space, you can book connecting cabins – two staterooms that have a door between them that locks from both sides. It's a nice way for both parents and kids to have some privacy or for a family or friend group to have additional space during their trip.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT CABIN LOCATIONS

When you choose a room for your sailing, it can help to look at deck plans to determine where on the ship you'd like to be. If you're [prone to motion sickness](#), you'll want a cabin that's lower on the ship and toward the middle instead of higher up or too far forward or aft.

Additionally, if you plan to work out daily or visit the spa frequently, you can figure out which staterooms are closest to the spa and fitness center. If you've got children, you might choose to be closer to the kids club or the buffet. If you have mobility issues, select accommodations that aren't too far away from elevators to make getting around easier.

However, you'll also want to keep in mind that noise can be a problem. If you're directly underneath the pool deck, gym or kids club; near a galley or crew access area; or directly across from an elevator bank, you could be dealing with unwelcome sounds when you're trying to relax or sleep. Rooms in those areas are cabins to avoid.

If scenic vistas are what you seek, choose a cabin with views off the bow at the front of the ship or the wake at the back.

As with finding the [best cruise](#) line, there's no such thing as worst or [best cruise ship deck](#), or worst or [best cabin](#) or cabin type. It all depends on your preferences and what's best for you and your travel party. If you're feeling overwhelmed with the choices, enlist the help of a vacation planner.



Insider info...

[Cruise Cabin Tips: Avoid These 12 Cruise Ship Cabins At All Costs](#)



PRE-CRUISE *Preparation*

WHAT TO DO BEFORE YOU SET SAIL

Congratulations! You've booked your cruise. Now it's time to think about next steps. (Don't worry; this is the fun part.)

First, determine what your pre- and post-cruise travel needs will be. If you're driving to your embarkation port, research parking options and costs. Sometimes prepaying or parking in a nearby lot and Ubering can save you money. If you're flying, we recommend booking a flight that will arrive a day or two ahead of time in case there are delays. If you're in town early, you'll also need to book a hotel stay and figure out logistics for making your way to the port for embarkation. You'll have more flexibility if you make these arrangements on your own or through your travel advisor, rather than through your cruise line.

If it's within your budget, you'll want to purchase travel insurance within two to three weeks of finalizing your travel plans. It might seem unnecessary, but if something goes sideways, you'll be glad you have it. A per-trip policy often isn't too expensive, and it's worth every cent for the peace of mind it will provide if your trip is delayed, you miss your flight or your luggage is lost. (Don't forget to insure every part of your trip – including flights and pre- and post-cruise hotels – not just the cruise itself.) If you want the ability to voluntarily cancel your trip for a refund, look into adding “cancel for any reason” coverage, which usually isn't part of basic policies. As with hotel and flight arrangements, we advise purchasing travel insurance through a third party, rather than your cruise line.

Next, sign up for your cruise line's loyalty program if you haven't already, and encourage your travel companions to do the same. If you're traveling with children, sign them up, too. That will ensure you all receive credit for the sailing you've booked.

When that's done, you can link everyone's reservations for easier planning and, eventually, online check-in. Be sure to download your cruise line's app to your mobile phone, too, which will streamline the process even further. Check-in for most lines doesn't open until about a month out from the

embarkation date, and it usually closes two days prior to the start of the sailing.

While you wait for check-in to open, consider whether you'd like to pre-purchase any add-ons that aren't already rolled into your cruise fare. These might include pre- and post-cruise airport transfers, Wi-Fi and drink packages, bookings for specialty restaurants, shore excursions and spa treatment appointments. Some cruise lines also require advanced reservations for entertainment.

When check-in opens, you'll have to check each person in by entering travel document details, taking a security photo and agreeing to the passenger contract of carriage. Read it carefully. It's tedious and boring, but it contains everything you need to know about your rights as a cruiser.

You'll also be asked to set up an onboard account, which means linking a credit card that will be used for all onboard purchases. Your credit card will be linked to your keycard, which then becomes your onboard charge card. Adults can either authorize children to or restrict them from charging on their own keycards. If you don't wish to link a credit card, you can put up a set amount of cash at the start of your sailing, and it will serve as an amount from which your onboard purchases will be debited.

Finally, you'll need to prepare for your departure by gathering important documents, packing, and making any arrangements for your home while you'll be away. This might include securing care for any kids or pets who aren't accompanying you, hiring a house-sitter, stopping the mail, prepaying any bills that will come due while you're gone, setting an out-of-office message, etc.



Insider info...

[Top 6 Reasons to Get Travel Insurance for a Cruise](#)

ESSENTIAL DOCUMENTS



PROPER IDENTIFICATION

For a successful, stress-free voyage, it's crucial to make sure you've got all [necessary boarding documents](#). The most important is proper identification. Although we highly recommend [cruising with a passport](#), you might be surprised to learn that you can [sail without one](#) to certain locations.

Closed-loop cruises are voyages that leave from and return to the same U.S. port. For these types of sailings, you don't need a passport and can, instead, use your original (not a copy) birth certificate and a government-issued photo ID, such as a [driver's license](#). As long as your cruise line allows it, this is permissible on closed-loop voyages to the Caribbean, Bahamas, Alaska (if departing from Seattle), Hawaii (if departing from a U.S. port, including one in Hawaii), Bermuda and Canada/New England (if departing from a U.S. port).

You can also cruise with a [passport card instead of a passport book](#) on cruises to Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean, but a passport card's uses are limited.

Although both of the above methods are allowed, it's best to have a full passport book, which will allow you to fly to embarkation ports outside of the U.S. and to disembark in a foreign port and fly back home to the U.S. if there's an emergency. You can't enter a foreign country or return to the U.S. from a foreign country by land or air without a passport book.

Besides proper ID, here's a list of other items that are must-haves for your cruise:

BOARDING PASS

Check in on your cruise line's mobile app, and your boarding pass will be available on your phone. If apps aren't your thing, you can also check in on the line's website. Regardless of the method you choose, be sure to print out a paper copy of your boarding pass to have on hand for boarding day.

HEALTH DOCUMENTS

Prior to boarding, in an effort to prevent ill people from spreading germs, many lines will require passengers to fill out a brief health questionnaire to ask if you've experienced coughing, a fever, nausea or diarrhea. Most lines include it on their apps as part of the mobile check-in process, but sometimes it will be a paper form you fill out at the port when you arrive.

DESTINATION-SPECIFIC DOCUMENTS

Depending on your cruise's itinerary, you might be required to carry a visa or other arrival forms. Usually, your cruise line will take care of these for you, but that's not always the case. Ultimately, it's your responsibility to know which documentation is required and to apply for it with enough time for it to be processed before you set sail.

LUGGAGE TAGS

You're allowed to carry small bags onto the ship with you, but you'll have to leave larger luggage with porters when you arrive at the terminal. They make sure everything is loaded onto the vessel, at which point crew will deliver it to your stateroom. That's why it's essential for you to properly mark any large pieces with your name and cabin number. After you check in, cruise lines provide digital luggage tags for you to download, print at home and attach to your bags. (If you're flying to your cruise port, wait until after you've landed to attach them so they aren't ripped off in transit.)

PERMISSION TO TRAVEL

Because prenatal care is not available at sea, pregnant women are required to disclose how far along they are and carry a note from their doctor verifying they're fit for travel. Anyone who will be more than 24 weeks along prior to the conclusion of the sailing will not be allowed to board. Some expedition cruises to remote destinations will also require passengers to obtain a doctor's note certifying their health is suitable for potentially strenuous travel in an area with no hospitals nearby. Additionally, if you're traveling with children who aren't yours or whose last names don't match yours, you should carry notarized documentation that states you're allowed to travel with them outside of the country.

OTHER IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

Although they aren't crucial, there are some additional items that will help you out in a pinch. They include information about your travel insurance policy, hotel and flight information, emergency contacts (someone at home, as well as addresses and phone numbers of local embassies and consulates) and photos or photocopies of your ID and credit cards (both front and back) in case the real ones are lost or stolen.



CRUISE PREPARATION CHECKLIST

Planning a cruise can be overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. By splitting all of the moving parts into a timeline, you can easily see what you'll need to do first and what can wait until later. Start with the basics, and before you know it, you'll be checking off your "day before departure" items with the satisfaction of someone who's setting sail tomorrow.

6-24 MONTHS BEFORE

- ☐ Choose cruise dates
- ☐ Determine budget
- ☐ Research and book your cruise
- ☐ Purchase travel insurance
- ☐ Research flights (if applicable)
- ☐ Research hotels (if applicable)
- ☐ Start saving for additional expenses

3-6 MONTHS BEFORE

- ☐ Book flights if traveling by air
- ☐ Arrange for transportation to and from the airport (if flying)
- ☐ Arrange for transportation to and from the cruise port
- ☐ Research and book cruise terminal parking (if driving to port)
- ☐ Book hotel (if arriving in port early or staying after your sailing)
- ☐ Start a rough list of must-do onboard attractions and experiences / shore excursions

2-3 MONTHS BEFORE

- ☐ Sign up for your cruise line loyalty program, and link your reservation
- ☐ Pre-purchase add-ons (Wi-Fi, alcohol packages, shore excursions, gratuities)
- ☐ Check passport expiration dates (or locate birth certificate)
- ☐ Apply for any necessary visas (check with cruise line)

1 MONTH BEFORE

- ☐ Download your cruise line's mobile app
- ☐ Check in for your cruise
- ☐ Print boarding pass and cruise luggage tags (attach after flight)
- ☐ Make packing list
- ☐ Arrange for childcare, pet sitting and house sitting (if applicable)
- ☐ Request "permission to travel" letters (pregnant women, adults traveling with kids who don't share their last name, etc.)

2 WEEKS BEFORE

- ☐ Begin packing
- ☐ Purchase any last-minute items
- ☐ Inform your bank and credit card companies about your travel plans

1 WEEK BEFORE

- ☐ Check the weather forecast, and adjust packing if necessary
- ☐ Finish packing
- ☐ Arrange for mail and newspaper hold if necessary
- ☐ Verify everyone in your travel party has checked in for the sailing
- ☐ Pre-pay bills due while you're gone, or set up auto-pay
- ☐ Gather important contact info (emergency contacts, embassies/consulates)
- ☐ Make photocopies of ID, credit cards and insurance info (front and back)

DAY BEFORE DEPARTURE

- ☐ Check in for flight (if applicable)
- ☐ Print flight boarding pass (if applicable), or download airline app
- ☐ Fill out electronic health form if your cruise line requires one
- ☐ Charge all electronic devices
- ☐ Double-check all reservations and confirmation numbers
- ☐ Confirm transportation arrangements
- ☐ Double-check you've packed crucial items (passport, wallet, phone, charger, keys)
- ☐ Set out-of-office e-mail (if applicable)

Happy Cruising!

CRUISE PACKING: WHAT YOU SHOULD & SHOULDN'T BRING

Cruise packing is an art form, and it could warrant a 40-page document all its own. But, in the interest of saving your sanity, we'll try to distill the basics here. For more detailed information and lists of specific items to pack, click on the linked text, and check out the example Alaska and Caribbean packing lists below.



Insider info...

[The 40 Items Experts
Always Pack for a Cruise](#)

WHAT TO PACK

What you should pack will largely be determined by where you're headed. For warmer-weather destinations like the [Caribbean and Bahamas](#) or Europe in the summer, look to breathable, loose-fitting clothing in polyester blend fabrics that wick moisture, dry quickly, are thin to pack and resist wrinkling when folded in a suitcase.

For colder weather locations like Europe in the winter or destinations with less predictable weather like [Alaska](#), layers are your best friend. Pack several base layers and a couple of mid and outer layers that can be worn more than once and added or removed as necessary to fit whatever the day throws at you.

Regardless of where you're traveling, comfortable footwear is a must. Be warned that shoes can take up a lot of space in your luggage, so try to choose options that will serve more than one purpose. This might include sandals that double as appropriate for both all-day tours and resort-casual dinners, sneakers that can transition from day to night and versatile casual shoes that can be worn on your flight, as water shoes at the beach and for activities like biking. Don't forget hiking boots if you'll be somewhere more adventurous, and toss in something that can be worn on formal occasions if dressing up is important to you.

As for toiletries, cruise lines typically provide basic shampoo and bodywash in each cabin on their ships, but if you have a preferred brand or can't go without conditioner, bring your own. Lotion and other items like sewing kits, shower caps and cotton pads and swabs aren't provided unless you're booked in a higher-end cabin. Ships do sell a limited supply of sundries, but prices are high. With that in mind, make sure you have what you need before you board. Don't

forget essentials – like feminine products, motion sickness medication, band aids, bug spray and sunscreen – that you might need but don't necessarily use every day at home.

There are several other items that are useful to bring but which new cruisers might not know about. Toss a lanyard into your bag to easily keep track of your cruise keycard, which opens your cabin door, identifies you when you board or exit the ship and serves as a charge card for all onboard purchases. Speaking of purchases, cruises operate on a cashless system, but you might still want to bring some cash with you to tip porters, shore excursion guides and crew who do an exceptional job.

Cruise ship cabin doors and walls are metal, so magnets are useful for organizing the mountain of paper – daily schedules, fliers announcing art auctions, shore excursion tickets – that will show up in your room daily. Magnetic hooks offer a place to hang wet bathing suits and workout clothes to dry or to store coats and bags. Plug adapters and power strips (only if they're *not* surge protected) offer a solution for what often amounts to an outlet shortage in cabins for travelers with lots of gadgets. That reminds us: You'll likely also want to remember a phone (and smart watch) charger, a book or tablet and headphones.

One other note: Many cruisers decide to decorate the outsides of their cabin doors. It's both festive and can help you to locate your room in a sea of doors that all look the same. If you want to join in the fun, pack some [door decorating](#) items to spruce up your entryway. To avoid causing damage to the doors, magnets are a good idea, along with painter's tape, which is easily removed and doesn't leave residue.

WHAT NOT TO PACK

Knowing what not to pack is just as important as what you're allowed to bring onto your ship with you. Cruise lines ban certain items to keep passengers safe and, in some cases, to increase onboard revenue.

With that in mind, let's start with alcohol. Most cruise lines – except for high-end luxury brands – won't let you [bring your own booze](#). That doesn't stop unscrupulous passengers from trying to sneak it onboard, but if they're caught, they risk having it confiscated or even being booted off of their sailing. Lines usually make exceptions for wine, allowing one standard-size 750 ml bottle per passenger 21 or older.

Along the same lines, cruisers are generally permitted to bring up to 12 cartons or cans of nonalcoholic drinks, including soda, water and sports or energy drinks. However, these drinks are not allowed if they're in bottles.

Other [banned items](#) include candles or anything with an open flame, drones, weapons, explosives, illegal drugs, pool toys, animals (except service animals), sports equipment, surge protectors and anything with a heating element (except most hairstyling tools) like irons, steamers and hot plates. (Many cruise ships have self-service laundry facilities with irons, or you can send items out to be pressed for a fee.)



HOW TO PACK

Now that you know what you can and can't bring, here are some quick tips for packing it all.

- Choose items in neutral colors that can be mixed, matched and worn more than once.
- Opt for shoes that serve several purposes.
- Use packing cubes, which will help to compress items so you can fit more in your bags.
- Pack liquids in plastic to avoid spills, and heed TSA liquid rules if you're flying.
- Keep important items (meds, ID, wallet, valuables) in your carry-on; never check them.
- Make sure your boarding documents are easily accessible.
- If you can, limit yourself to a carry-on suitcase and a personal item like a backpack or tote. This will save you time at the airport and at the cruise terminal and minimize the chances of your luggage being lost. As chronic over-packers, we don't blame you if you can't!
- If you check a bag, put a TSA-friendly lock on it, and attach a clearly labeled luggage tag. Using an Apple AirTag for tracking is a good idea too.
- Wait until after your flight lands to attach your cruise luggage tags.



Insider info...

[Essential Items to Always Pack in Your Cruise Carry-On Bag](#)



A decorative horizontal line consisting of multiple parallel, wavy blue lines.



- # ELECTRONICS

- ☐ Phones and Chargers
- ☐ Cameras and Chargers
- ☐ Laptops/Tablets
- ☐ Non-surge Power Strip
- ☐ Portable Power Banks
- ☐ Cord Organizer
- ☐ Headphones/AirPods
- ☐ Smart Watch Chargers
- ☐ Binoculars



- ☐ Daytime Outfits (casual)
*Think layers, moisture wicking
- ☐ Bathing Suit/Sandals
- ☐ Nighttime Outfits (business casual)
- ☐ Formal Night Outfit (if applicable)
- ☐ Pajamas
- ☐ Cardigan for around the ship
- ☐ Bras
- ☐ Underwear
- ☐ Socks
- ☐ Gym Clothes
- ☐ Sneakers
- ☐ Pair of Waterproof Boots/Shoes
- ☐ Evening Shoes
- ☐ Packable Raincoat
- ☐ Outerwear
*Think packable coat, vest, fleece
- ☐ Gloves and Hat



- ☐ Daytime Outfits (casual)
*Think layers, water-resistant
- ☐ Bathing Suit
- ☐ Nighttime Outfits (business casual)
- ☐ Formal Night Outfit (if applicable)
- ☐ Pajamas
- ☐ Belt
- ☐ T-Shirts
- ☐ Under Shorts
- ☐ Socks
- ☐ Gym Clothes
- ☐ Sneakers
- ☐ Pair of Waterproof Boots/Shoes
- ☐ Evening Shoes
- ☐ Packable Raincoat
- ☐ Outerwear
*Think packable coat, vest, fleece
- ☐ Gloves and Hat



- ☐ Travel Docs
- ☐ Passports
- ☐ Small Bills for Tipping
- ☐ Magnets
- ☐ Over-the-Door Organizer
- ☐ Luggage Tag Holders
- ☐ Ziploc Bags
- ☐ Laundry Bag
- ☐ Day Bag to Go Ashore
- ☐ Sunglasses
- ☐ Luggage Scale
- ☐ Lanyard or Phone Pocket
- ☐ Night Light
- ☐ Reusable Water Bottle
- ☐ Travel Game/Cards
- ☐ Packable Duffel Bag
- ☐ Umbrella

- [illegible]



Caribbean



- ☐ Medications
- ☐ Glasses/Contacts
- ☐ Cold Medicine
- ☐ Shampoo/Conditioner
- ☐ Body Wash/Soap
- ☐ Bath Sponge
- ☐ Face Wash
- ☐ Razor/Shave Gel
- ☐ Lotion
- ☐ Deodorant
- ☐ Hair Straightener/Curling Iron
- ☐ Hair products/brush
- ☐ Makeup
- ☐ Tylenol
- ☐ Band-aids
- ☐ Antacids
- ☐ Downy Wrinkle Release
- ☐ Toothpaste/Toothbrush
- ☐ Floss/Mouthwash
- ☐ Perfume/Cologne
- ☐ Suntan Lotion
- ☐ Bug Spray
- ☐ Air Freshener
- ☐ Hand Sanitizer/Wipes
- ☐ Feminine Products



- ☐ Phones and Chargers
- ☐ Cameras and Chargers
- ☐ Laptops/Tablets
- ☐ Non-surge Power Strip
- ☐ Portable Power Banks
- ☐ Cord Organizer
- ☐ Headphones/AirPods
- ☐ Smart Watch Chargers



- ☐ Daytime Outfits (casual)
*Think moisture wicking
- ☐ Bathing Suit/Cover up
- ☐ Nighttime Outfits (resort casual)
- ☐ Formal Night Outfit (if applicable)
- ☐ Pajamas
- ☐ Cardigan for around the ship
- ☐ Bras
- ☐ Underwear
- ☐ Socks
- ☐ Gym Clothes
- ☐ Sneakers
- ☐ Sandals
- ☐ Water Shoes
- ☐ Evening Shoes
- ☐ Packable Raincoat



- ☐ Daytime Outfits (casual)
*Think moisture wicking
- ☐ Bathing Suit
- ☐ Nighttime Outfits (resort casual)
- ☐ Formal Night Outfit (if applicable)
- ☐ Pajamas
- ☐ Belt
- ☐ T-Shirts
- ☐ Under Shorts
- ☐ Socks
- ☐ Gym Clothes
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- ☐ Travel Docs
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- ☐ Ziploc Bags
- ☐ Laundry Bag
- ☐ Day Bag to Go Ashore
- ☐ Sunglasses
- ☐ Luggage Scale
- ☐ Lanyard or Phone Pocket
- ☐ Night Light
- ☐ Reusable Water Bottle
- ☐ Towel Clips
- ☐ Packable Duffel Bag
- ☐ Umbrella

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EMBARKATION Day

HEADING TO PORT

As embarkation day approaches, make sure you've checked in for your cruise (between a month and two days prior to your sailing date) and for your flight (24 hours or less before departure). Print your boarding passes and cruise luggage tags, and gather your identification. Once you've corralled all of that, plus your luggage and travel companions, you're ready to hit the road.

When you checked in for your sailing, it's likely your cruise line asked you to select a boarding time. Be a conscientious cruiser, and adhere to it; it helps to keep passengers moving quickly through the terminal and avoid backlogs during check-in.

If you're driving directly to your cruise port, have any prepaid parking information ready to go. If you drove to your embarkation city and spent the night in a hotel, consider leaving your car there, and ask if the hotel offers a port shuttle. Even if you have to pay for it, it's likely cheaper than parking at the port itself.

If you're flying in the day of, the fastest way to head to the port is either via taxi or rideshare like Uber or Lyft. You can also pre-book transfers through your cruise line for a per-person fee, but you might have to wait around for a while until the buses fill up.

If you flew in early for your sailing and stayed at a hotel, you can either take a port shuttle (if your hotel offers one) or call an Uber, Lyft or taxi to get to your ship.

When you arrive at the terminal, you'll leave any large bags with a porter, who will ensure they make it safely onboard. (It's not mandatory, but it's nice to leave a small per-bag tip as a thank-you.)

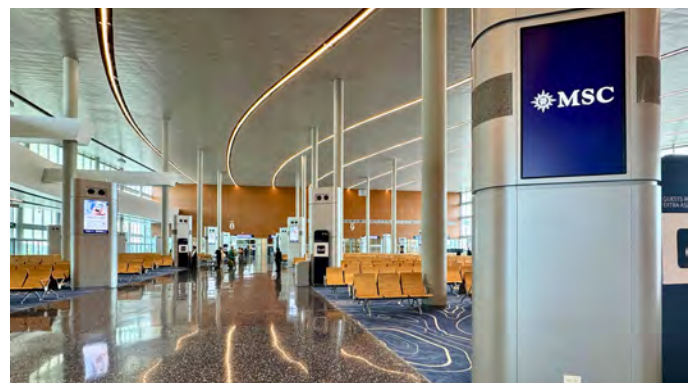
Once inside, port attendants will direct you to your check-in area. If you've checked in online or via the cruise line's app, the process will likely be a bit faster for you. Depending on the cruise line and terminal, you'll either do everything digitally by scanning your passport, mobile app and face, or someone will manually check your ID and boarding documents, take your photo and make sure you've set up an onboard account.

You'll also be required to pass through a security checkpoint. It's not as strict as airport security, so you won't have to remove your shoes or take laptops or liquids out of your bag. There also aren't any size restrictions on non-drinkable liquids.

There's often not a long wait, but you might be asked to take a seat in the terminal's waiting area. You should expect the terminal building to have restrooms, and there's also often free Wi-Fi to use while you wait. To avoid waits completely, some lines allow passengers to purchase expedited boarding, which will usually allow you to skip lines and breeze onboard immediately after you've checked in.

If you've booked a suite or have high loyalty status, you'll likely have your own dedicated lines, too, which will be significantly shorter. If there are waits, you might also be directed to a dedicated lounge with refreshments, where you can pass the time until your boarding group is called.

After you've been given the go-ahead, you'll be able to board the ship.



Insider info...

[31 Expert Cruise
Embarkation Day Tips](#)

EMBARKATION DAY TIPS

Boarding a ship can be chaotic and overwhelming, even for the most seasoned cruisers. Fortunately, we can share a few tips for a smoother embarkation.

- Check in online or via the cruise line's mobile app in advance of sailing day.
- Set up your onboard account with a credit card before embarkation day.
- Consider pre-paying for expedited boarding if you don't already have it.
- Know your port arrival time, and stick to it.
- Plan transportation to the port in advance.
- Attach cruise luggage tags to your large bags before arriving at the port.
- Bring a carry-on with essentials. You might not see your big bag for a few hours, so having sunscreen, a bathing suit and a phone charger in your carry-on is helpful too.
- Have all boarding documents easily accessible.
- Don't pack contraband. If it's found during your security scan, it'll slow you down.
- Don't head immediately to your cabin. It won't be ready until the afternoon.
- Avoid the buffet. It will be exceptionally crowded. Look for a pool grill or cafe for lunch instead.
- Complete the muster drill for your safety. It's a mandatory maritime requirement for you to sail.
- Make reservations for dining, spa treatments and shows on the first day (if you haven't already).
- Put your phone in airplane mode; you don't want exorbitant roaming charges.
- If you're traveling with children, sign them up for the kids club.
- Unpack, and store luggage under the bed. You'll feel more settled with extra space.
- Explore the ship. Familiarizing yourself will help you identify your favorite venues early.
- Remember to breathe. You're on vacation!



Insider info...
[What Is Cruise Ship Muster Drill?](#)

EMBARKATION DAY BAG CHECKLIST



If you're a light packer who travels with only a carry-on, you can skip this section. But, if you're like most cruisers and want to bring everything but the kitchen sink just because you can, you're going to want to pack a separate embarkation day bag or carry-on with essentials.

When you first arrive at the terminal, check any large bags with a porter. They'll be loaded onto the ship, and crew members will deliver them to your cabin. However, the bigger the ship, the longer your suitcases could take to reach you. That means you might not see your stuff until after dinner. With that in mind, make sure you've got the following items on you:

- Identification (passport or birth certificate and photo ID)
- Boarding documents
- Medications
- Valuables (wallets/cash/credit cards, jewelry, laptops, tablets, phones, etc.)
- A swimsuit, sunscreen and sunglasses
- At least one change of clothes
- Toiletries in case you'd like to freshen up
- A phone charger
- Carry-on drinks (if allowed by your line)





ONBOARD *Experience*

CRUISE SHIP LAYOUT AND NAVIGATION

When you board your ship, one of the first things you should do is familiarize yourself with the layout. Generally, there are two or three decks of public areas – theater, main dining rooms, bars, lounges and shopping, as well as guest services – sandwiched between several decks of cabins. On the uppermost decks, you'll find the buffet, pool and sun deck areas and active spaces like waterslides, miniature golf, sports courts and, perhaps, a panoramic lounge of some sort.

If you're lost, find the nearest elevator bank, and look for directional signage or a map posted on the wall. Several cruise lines, including Princess and Royal Caribbean, have digital wayfinder maps – essentially giant LED touchscreens that not only allow passengers to find out where they currently are but also map out a route from their location to wherever they're headed next. Other neat functionality might include checking the daily schedule, making dinner or show reservations, and even creating avatars that will pop up whenever you pass by another wayfinder.

Should you find yourself turned around in a cabin hallway, see if there might be a carpet clue or two to help you. On Disney ships, carpet designs always face forward, toward the front of the ship. If the design is upside down, you're headed to the back. Similarly, if you're on an NCL ship, you'll either find carpet with fish swimming toward the front of the vessel or, on newer ships, more subtle triangle shapes that act like arrows.

Virgin Voyages uses a system of letters and colors to help passengers find their way. Cabin numbers that start with the letter A are located on the port (left) side of the line's ships, while those beginning with a Z are on the starboard (right) side. To determine if you're in the front, back or middle of the ship, check out the color of the nearest stairwell or elevator interior. Purple means you're at the front, red means you're in the middle, and blue means you're aft.

You can also use your cruise line's app to pull up deck plans. (Put your phone in airplane mode, turn on Wi-Fi, and connect to the ship's intranet. You can access it even if you haven't purchased a Wi-Fi package.)

To better navigate from top to bottom and front to back, here are some common ship terms you should know:

- **Forward:** The front of a ship, directionally.
- **Aft:** The back of a ship, directionally.
- **Midship:** The middle of a ship, directionally.
- **Bow:** The physical front of a vessel.
- **Stern:** The physical back of a vessel.
- **Port:** The left side of a ship when facing forward. (Remember: "Left" and "port" both have four letters.)
- **Starboard:** The right side of a ship when facing forward.

For more help, check out our guide on [finding your way around a cruise ship](#).

For additional nautical lingo, take a peek at our [cruise glossary](#).

CRUISE DINING

So, how does cruise dining work? Unless you're on a luxury ship where all or nearly all restaurants are included in the price, you'll usually only have access to a handful of restaurants for free.

They include a casual self-serve buffet, which offers several counters with different types of cuisine, both hot and cold. You can expect items like eggs, bacon, pancakes and cereal for breakfast, along with fruit, yogurt and oatmeal. For lunch, you might find a salad bar, sandwiches, soup, stir-fry and a selection of hot meats with sides. You'll find similar at dinner, perhaps with some Indian options and a carving station, plus dessert. The buffet might also have a few between-meal or late-night snacks if you're feeling peckish.

If you're seeking something complimentary that's a little more fancy, head to the main dining room. Larger ships have more than one; check your cruise card to see where you're assigned. Depending on the cruise line, there are usually two options: anytime dining, which allows you to show up any time between set hours and sit at any available table with just your travel party (similar to land-based restaurants) or set seating, when you're assigned the same dining time each night with the same waiters at the same table, which you might or might not share with other travelers for the duration of your sailing. There are usually two times for set seating: early and late.

Dining rooms have dress codes, but they aren't strict. Just don't show up in swimwear, pajamas, shabby jeans or cutoff clothing. These venues are waiter-served, and you order from a menu. Offerings tend to change nightly with the exception of "always available" items (think chicken, salmon and Caesar salad) that are perfect for picky eaters. Cuisine might rotate based on theme nights (Italian, Mediterranean, Mexican, Caribbean). Usually there are three courses – starter, main and dessert – but you can order as much as you'd like. Some MDR menus will include upcharge items like steak or lobster; otherwise, everything is free. Some have begun charging for extra entrees as well.

At least one MDR is open daily for breakfast. Several lines offer brunch on sea days, as well as lunch. Dining rooms tend to be closed for lunch on port days; check your daily cruise schedule for specifics.

Poolside grub like burgers and burritos is also included in the price of your sailing, and most ships have free pizza onboard. If you're just looking for a light snack, cafés that serve specialty coffee will often dole out nibbles like finger sandwiches, pastries and cookies at no charge.

Specialty dining options abound on mainstream ships. Among them are steakhouses, sushi joints, French bistros, seafood-forward eateries and Italian restaurants, all of which will cost you extra. You'll pay either a flat fee to choose a set number of courses, or you'll shell out for a la carte items. Pro tip: Eating at a specialty restaurant for lunch if it's open will cost you less than eating there for dinner. Reservations are a good idea, and you'll want to make them early to snag the best times.

Room service is available on most ships, but if you're on one of the mainstream cruise lines, it's likely to come with charges – either a flat fee per delivery or a per-item charge. Although it's not required, it's customary to tip the person who delivers it a couple of dollars.

Cruise ships are great at catering to dietary requirements and taking restrictions and allergies into account. If you have special food needs, you should communicate them to your cruise line ahead of the sailing date so the galley can ensure it has the necessary ingredients to accommodate them. Most servers will ask about allergies before taking your order, but if they don't, be sure to tell them.



Insider info...

[Can You Get Room Service on a Cruise?](#)

CRUISE ENTERTAINMENT AND ACTIVITIES

Will you be [bored on a cruise](#)? If you are, you're doing it wrong.

As a general rule, the larger your ship, the more activities and entertainment options it will have. The nine big mainstream lines plan a schedule of daily diversions, both free and for a fee, that might include trivia, golf putting competitions, game shows, ice carving demonstrations, poolside movies and hairy chest or bellyflop competitions, alcohol tastings and more.

Some vessels also offer enrichment lectures and classes that range from fencing, painting and archery to dance, cupcake decorating, photography and trapeze.

Looking for thrills or more active pursuits? Not a problem. The biggest ships afloat are equipped with ziplines; water parks with slides and kids splash areas; miniature golf; sports courts for basketball, dodgeball, badminton, soccer and pickleball; Ping-Pong and foosball; go-karts and bumper cars; video and virtual-reality arcades; casinos; thrill rides like roller coasters and robotic arms that flip passengers upside down; surfing and skydiving simulators; carousels; rock climbing walls and tons of other amenities you won't believe are onboard.

But the fun doesn't stop when the sun goes down. Nighttime shenanigans include pub crawls, live music and dancing, parades, balloon drops, deck parties, comedy shows, stargazing and nightly production shows in the main theater.

However, if this all sounds like too much and you're just seeking a bit of relaxation, you can find that, too. Most ships have at least a couple of lounges, libraries or card rooms tucked away that will allow you a bit of peace and quiet. Or, schedule a spa treatment that will melt away your stress. Most ships have thermal suites, too, which provide access to aromatherapy and salt rooms, heated tile loungers and mineral pools for a fee.

Alternatively, you might choose to stay on the ship on a port day, which means you'll have the ship nearly all to yourself with less noise and fewer crowds.

For a list of everything from daily activities and nighttime shows to when your favorite bar or restaurant is open, check out your ship's daily program. It's also likely to list the date, name of the port you'll be visiting (if it's not a sea day), the weather forecast and other helpful information like phone numbers for dining and spa reservations and the day's dinner dress code. Room stewards on many ships will leave one in your cabin each night during turndown service.

If you don't receive one, ask your steward, or request one at the vessel's guest services desk.

Feeling overwhelmed by all of the options? Bring a highlighter to use for the items that grab your attention.

Additionally, schedules are often available via your line's mobile app, in-cabin TVs and digital wayfinders, which are more eco-friendly than paper versions.



Insider info...

[Here's Why We Stay on the Ship at a Port... And You Should Too!](#)



CRUISE SPA AND FITNESS FACILITIES

Cruise ships contract with outside providers to run their onboard spas. That means the masseuse, nail technician or hairdresser who handles your service knows what they're doing. Standard spa and salon menu items include massages, facials, manicures, pedicures, haircuts, shaves (for men), hair coloring and blowouts. Some ships offer less common treatments also, including seaweed wraps, acupuncture, Botox and teeth whitening. Note that prices are often a lot heftier than what you'll find on land. You can usually nab a discount if you book a treatment for a port day or book several treatments at the same time.

Mega-ships are outfitted with fitness centers that offer a variety of weightlifting and cardio machines, as well as free weights, exercise balls and yoga mats. Gym amenities include towels, men's and women's locker rooms and sometimes saunas or hot tubs. Passengers can use the gym for free or sign up for organized classes like spin, yoga or TRX for a fee. (Virgin Voyages is an exception and offers all of its fitness classes on a complimentary basis.)

Visit the spa and fitness center to view menus of treatments and fitness classes, as well as their prices. It's also the easiest way to sign up for either.

CHILD AND TEEN PROGRAMS

If you're traveling with children and want to keep them busy or enjoy some alone time with your significant other, sign the kids up for the free onboard youth program. Each ship has a kids club with a team of trained counselors who oversee scheduled daily activities in dedicated spaces.

Kids are divided up by age; although the exact breakdown for each group depends on the cruise line, it's roughly 3 to 5, 6 to 8 and 9 to 11. Age-appropriate activities might include games, arts and crafts, science experiments, story time, scavenger hunts, talent shows, outdoor sports and other group fun. Parents must come to the kids club to pick their children up and sign them out in order for them to leave.

Teens and 'tweens have their own spaces with less supervision and fewer structured activities. Basically, they're hangout spaces with magazines, video games and furniture for lounging where young adults can escape their parents for a few hours of chill time. Unlike the younger kids, they're allowed to come and go as they please.

Often, you'll find areas with toddler-friendly toys where parents can bring their kids for parent-supervised play. Only a couple of cruise lines – Disney and Royal Caribbean are examples – offer drop-off services for infants (for a fee).

Some cruise lines host late-night programming like dance parties or movie viewing sessions so parents can have a leisurely dinner, catch a show and go out dancing without having to worry about a babysitter. These supervised events usually carry a per-child fee as well.

If children's activities aren't listed on the main daily program or on your cruise line's app, visit the kids club for a printed version of each day's schedule.



ADULTS-ONLY SPACES

Whether you're an adult who wants to avoid kids or a parent who wants to find some child-free time onboard, there are several ways to accomplish this. Every one of the major cruise lines has an adults-only sun deck onboard each vessel.

Additionally, ships offer several adults-only activities, including alcohol tastings, late-night adult comedy shows and game shows that are designed for cruisers 18 and older, as they can become a bit raunchy.

Ashore, a handful of cruise line private islands have adults-only beach areas you can access for a fee.

Of the cruise lines that allow kids to sail, Disney does the best job of providing separate adults-only areas. Their ships all have exclusive pools, sun decks, bars and lounges for the adult set. Even Castaway Cay and Lookout Cay at Lighthouse Point have complimentary adult-only spaces to soak up the Bahamian sun in peace and quiet.

For a truly adults-only experience, though, you'll want to book a sailing with Virgin Voyages or Viking, which don't allow anyone younger than 18 to cruise.



SEA DAYS VS. PORT DAYS

Sea days, when your ship doesn't have any port calls scheduled, are filled with opportunities to explore everything your vessel has to offer.

Stay out late the night before, and then sleep in before heading to a leisurely brunch. Perhaps you'd like to schedule a spa treatment or order a room service lunch while watching a movie in bed. Alternatively, you can wake up early to watch the sun rise before staking out a spot near the pool if you plan to spend the day perfecting your tan. (Just don't be a chair hog. If you claim a seat, use it.)

You can expect more activities to be scheduled and more amenities to be open and available on days when the ship is sailing. Often on port days, certain attractions and restaurants will be closed because most passengers will be ashore. So, while you might find fewer crowds and a lack of lines, it doesn't necessarily mean you'll be able to try that cool new ride you saw on TikTok or the fancy restaurant you're curious about.

Want more suggestions for how to spend (or not to spend) a day at sea? Then you'll want to peruse these articles:

- [40 things to do on sea days](#)
 - [10 things to do when it rains on a cruise](#)
 - [10 sea day mistakes to avoid](#)
 - [15 overrated cruise experiences](#)
-



CLEANLINESS

Despite rumors you might have heard, cruise ships adhere to rigid cleanliness standards. Thanks to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control's Vessel Sanitation Program, which has been in place since the 1970s, cruise ships are subjected to random, unannounced inspections where VSP officers evaluate the cleanliness of galleys, food storage and preparation areas, restaurants and public spaces like restrooms, pools and hot tubs.

Officials use strict criteria to score ships based on the above, and anything below an 84% out of 100% is considered failing. The VSP then uses areas where ships lost points to make recommendations for improvement.

Additionally, ship staff includes entire teams dedicated to regular cleaning of public restrooms, lounges and high-touch areas like handrails and elevator buttons.

Large teams of hardworking room stewards take care of cleaning passenger cabins at least once a day (or more upon request). They can also assist with bringing you daily schedules, providing extra towels and clothes hangers, addressing maintenance issues in your room, clearing room service items and collecting laundry for send-out service.

HEALTH

All oceangoing vessels have a medical center staffed with doctors, nurses or a combination thereof, who can offer basic treatment for slips and falls, bumps and bruises, and minor illnesses or ailments like seasickness. These centers are designed to stabilize passengers with life-threatening conditions until they can be disembarked and taken to a hospital on land. Onboard medical centers are not equipped to deal with long-term care. Note that these services are not free, and they often aren't covered by the same medical insurance you use at home. Expect high fees if you don't have a travel insurance policy that will reimburse you for them.

In the event of a viral outbreak, such as norovirus, ships have protocols in place to isolate and quarantine passengers to stop the spread. One of the easiest ways to avoid both spreading your germs and picking up other people's is to wash your hands frequently, especially after using the restroom and before eating.

Seasickness is one of the most common at-sea maladies. If you're concerned, bring some [Bonine or Dramamine pills](#) with you, pick up a motion sickness wristband, or visit your doctor for a scopolamine patch that you can stick behind your ear just in case. You can also combat seasickness by

staring at the horizon, where water meets sky, or by eating green apples or ginger candy. However, if you're not prone to motion sickness elsewhere, you likely have little cause for concern. If you are prone, be sure to book a cabin on a lower deck and near the middle of the ship.

SAFETY

Cruise lines take [onboard safety](#) seriously. The first thing you should know is how to find your muster station. It's where you'll meet in the event of an emergency before boarding your designated lifeboat. (And, yes, by regulation, there are more than enough lifeboats and life jackets for everyone.) Each passenger's muster station is noted on their keycard.

Some vessels do virtual muster drills via videos on their apps or on cabin TVs. Others do completely in-person drills. Either way, pay attention to key elements like what the emergency signal sounds like and how to put on a life jacket. On embarkation day, you'll be required to locate and familiarize yourself with your muster station; it's mandatory. All bars and restaurants will close, and all activities will cease during that time. Crew members take attendance. If you don't check in for the drill according to the specific instructions for your ship, you won't be allowed to sail.

Because fire is the single biggest threat to any vessel, it's worth noting that, with a few exceptions, all [cruises are nonsmoking](#). Passengers are not allowed to smoke in most public areas, in their cabins or on their cabin balconies and will be fined or disembarked if they're caught doing so. (This applies to cigarettes, cigars, pipes and e-cigarettes or vapes. Joints and other illicit drugs are not allowed onboard at all. If you're caught with them, you could be thrown off the ship, fined, arrested or a combination thereof.)

Exceptions to nonsmoking rules include designated smoking areas, which are usually on one side of an outdoor deck near the top of the ship, as well as cigar lounges and most casinos.

Most—but not all—cruise ship pools are staffed with lifeguards. Additionally, cruise ships have their own security teams onboard, as well as a brig, where [passengers can be locked up](#) if they're caught doing something illegal or that poses a threat. Each cruise line also has its own list of letter-based codes that can be called over a vessel's public address system if there's a fire, a medical emergency, a man overboard situation or some other type of crisis that requires crew to take action.



ALL ABOUT *Shore Excursions*

WHAT ARE CRUISE SHORE EXCURSIONS?

Shore excursions are organized tours you can take or activities you can do in each port for an additional fee. In order to sign up, you'll have to book prior to the day you'll be in that port, either online pre-cruise or once you board your ship.

Excursions can range from just a couple hours to all-day events, and they cover a variety of subjects and activity types. Some are walking historical tours, some have passengers spending lots of time on a bus for sightseeing, and some involve history and culture in the way of museum visits, wine tastings, cooking classes or learning a local handicraft.

Still others are more relaxing and low-key, taking cruisers to spas, beach clubs or fish fries. Looking for a party vibe? Choose a booze cruise or a snorkeling outing on a catamaran with an open bar. For a spectacle, check out a lumberjack show in Alaska or fire dancers in Fiji. There are also active excursions involving water sports, horseback riding, ATV rides, ziplining, cave tubing and even strenuous mountain hikes.

Some – usually ones that last for longer periods of time – include meals, snacks or drinks. Be sure to pay attention to that and other details – such as how strenuous the tour is, how much it will cost and whether there are any age or mobility restrictions – when reading your cruise line's description of the excursion.

All shore excursions are led by guides. Consider tipping them for a job well done. Also plan on tipping the excursion's bus or shuttle driver if you have one. Local currency is always best when possible.

It's important to note that the prices of shore excursions can vary greatly depending on the activity, group size, and region. The most sought-after tours like helicopter rides to glaciers in Alaska can run you \$500+ per person, so budget accordingly.



SHIP SHORE EXCURSIONS VS. INDEPENDENT TOURS



 [Contains affiliate link](#)

As far as booking excursions, you can do it one of two ways: through your cruise line or independently. Independent tours, whether booked through a third party like [Shore Excursions Group](#) or through the tour provider directly, are often cheaper than those booked via your cruise line. But, besides price, there are some other important considerations you should mull over before making a decision.

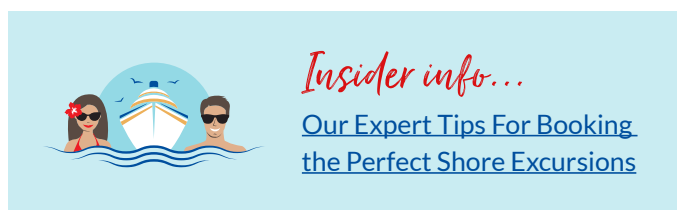
First, your cruise line has vetted the providers it uses for its tours. That means it has determined its providers are responsible and uphold appropriate safety standards.

Cruise line tours also offer protections independent tours might not. For example, if a cruise ship tour is late returning passengers to the ship, the ship will wait. If you book an excursion on your own and it runs behind, you could return to the pier to see your vessel sailing off into the distance without you. (Yes, your cruise ship can leave you behind and most likely will if you're late for all-aboard time.) Some vendors, like Shore Excursions Group, do offer return-to-ship guarantees as well.

And, finally, before you reserve an independent outing, ask the provider to clarify the company's cancellation policy. If, for some reason, your ship misses a call into the port where you booked the excursion, you want to make sure you can get your money back. On the other hand, if the vessel skips a port where you booked a [ship-sponsored excursion](#), the amount you paid will be returned in full automatically.

Aside from cheaper prices, tours from third party vendors or independent companies often provide smaller group sizes and more authentic experiences. Just be sure to do your research before booking.

Of course, you don't have to book a shore excursion in every port. Guests can simply walk off the ship in most ports of call for DIY exploration or can hire a taxi to the nearest beach. We suggest splurging on a few tours but offsetting those steep prices with inexpensive options in other ports.





CRUISE *Etiquette*

TIPPING GUIDE

On cruises that cater to U.S. passengers, [tipping culture](#) is alive and well. If you haven't prepaid your gratuities before you sail or booked a fare that rolls them into the price, a set gratuity amount – sometimes called crew appreciation or a service charge – will automatically post to each passenger's onboard account daily. The amount differs by cruise line and cabin type booked, with people in suites charged a higher amount.

You can remove [gratuity charges](#) if you choose, but we highly discourage it. The amount is split among the crew members who work hard to make your voyage great. The majority of the amount is divided among your room steward and dining room waiters. However, a portion of it also goes to people behind the scenes, including the folks who prepare your food, wash dishes and make sure your sheets and towels are clean.

It's also completely appropriate to tip extra in cash beyond the gratuity charges if you think service warrants it, but it isn't expected. Other people you might consider tipping in cash include luggage porters, shore excursion guides and drivers, bartenders, kids club staff and the people who deliver room service orders. However, it is never appropriate to tip an officer, including the captain.

DRESS CODE

For some cruisers, figuring out how to dress can be just as stressful as planning the sailing itself. But don't worry: Most cruises are on the casual side throughout the day. Think bathing suits and cover-ups; shorts or jeans and tank tops or nice T-shirts; and sandals, flip-flops or sneakers.

Dinnertime is when deciphering the dress code is likely to be the trickiest. Most nights are cruise casual. You can't go wrong with resort wear or business casual attire.

Cruise lines have largely scrapped mandatory [formal nights](#) in favor of optional elegant nights, which usually are held a couple of times per weeklong voyage. Most passengers choose something between casual and formal, often going

with sundresses or slacks with button-down or collared shirts. If you do decide to get glammed up, anything goes. Be as fancy as you'd like – tuxes, suits and ties, and glitzy ballgowns or cocktail dresses are all fair game.

If you feel like skipping the dress-up part, head to a more casual eatery instead of the main dining room on cruise formal nights.

HYGIENE

We're sad that we have to tell people this, but basic hygiene is important when you're around others, especially in close quarters like you'll find on a cruise.

Handwashing is crucial in protecting both yourself and others from germs. Wash frequently with hot water and soap for at least 20 seconds. Ships are also outfitted with plenty of hand sanitizer dispensers. Although it isn't a substitute for actual washing, it's better than nothing in a pinch.

Further, avoid grabbing anything from the buffet with your bare hands. Not only is it rude, but it's also gross. There are serving utensils for a reason. If you're worried about touching the same spoons and tongs as other passengers, wash your hands again when you're done filling your plate but before eating.

And, finally, cover your nose and mouth with the crook of your arm when sneezing or coughing to avoid contaminating your hands or the air or surfaces around you.

GENERAL CONDUCT

Want to make sure you don't commit a first-time cruise faux pas? Here are things you should never do when you sail:

- [20 things you should never do when you cruise](#)
- [12 things pro cruisers never do when they sail](#)
- [20 things not to do in a cruise cabin](#)
- [12 things not to do on your cruise balcony](#)
- [15 annoying types of cruisers to avoid](#)



CRUISE INTERNET AND WI-FI

Cruise ship internet has come a long way in the past 20 years. It's gone from ethernet that required physical cables for connectivity to Starlink Wi-Fi that's reliable and almost as fast as what you're used to on land.

However, you'll also pay a premium for it.

It's not uncommon for passengers to cough up hundreds of dollars for online access during a weeklong voyage. Most cruise lines have moved away from per-minute charges and have, instead, started offering unlimited access for a set number of devices for a daily fee.

There are also several tiers of packages that provide different capabilities, ranging from "I should check my e-mail" or "I want to post this photo to Instagram" to "I have to FaceTime my kids" or "I need to take a Teams call for work". The faster the speeds and the more devices you need to connect, the more money you'll pay.

Note that, although some [Wi-Fi plans](#) allow streaming, depending on where you're sailing, you might need a VPN to access shows you plan to watch on Netflix, Hulu and other services due to country-based restrictions. However, some cruise lines block VPN access, so you might want to download a few TV shows or movies to your device to watch offline.

CRUISE LINE MOBILE APPS

Just about every major cruise line now has its own mobile app with a slew of features that aim to make your cruise experience more streamlined and personalized. With the swipe of a finger, you can access deck plans, the daily schedule, restaurant and bar menus and even your onboard bill. Some apps are so advanced they turn your phone into a remote that can open your cabin door and control the lights and TV.

Be sure to download your [cruise line's app](#) to allow for fast and easy pre-cruise check-in and displaying of your boarding pass on embarkation day. It will also allow you to complete the e-muster drill if your ship has one and stay in touch with fellow passengers, including those in your travel party.

STAYING IN TOUCH

To stay in touch with people back home and avoid racking up huge roaming fees, you'll need to pay for Wi-Fi. If you leave your phone off of airplane mode, it will connect to the ship's onboard cell tower, and your mobile provider will slap you with exorbitant data charges – even if you have an international plan that works on land.

When you board, put your phone in airplane mode, and connect to the ship's Wi-Fi. Then buy a package that will allow you to check and send e-mail, send texts or iMessages, use WhatsApp and make Wi-Fi or FaceTime calls.

Even if you don't purchase a Wi-Fi package, you'll still be on the intranet if you follow the above steps. That will allow you to access the line's mobile app features, which often include a messaging function you can use to [text fellow passengers](#). Use that as a way to connect with your travel companions while you're sailing.

When you're in port, you can take your phone off of airplane mode if you have an international plan. Otherwise, keep it in airplane mode, and connect to Wi-Fi at the cruise terminal, or find a local restaurant or cafe that offers a connection.

OTHER TECHNOLOGY

It's not just faster internet and mobile apps that have improved the cruise experience. You'll encounter impressive technology just about everywhere in the cruise process, from booking and check-in to disembarkation.

When you arrive at some of the most popular homeport terminals, you can check in with just a retinal scan. Onboard, wearables have taken the place of keycards on some ships, complete with tracking technology that allows passengers to place food orders for delivery anywhere on the ship.

Combine all of this with digital wayfinders that keep you from getting lost, QR code menus at bars and restaurants, and cabin TVs that can do everything from showing your onboard bill to reporting an issue with your toilet, and the capabilities are pretty astounding.



Insider info...

[A Guide to Cruise Ship Internet and WiFi](#)



DISEMBARKATION

Information

LUGGAGE HANDLING

Now that you've made it nearly all the way through your cruise, we bet you're sad to leave. But, just like planning to set sail, you'll also need to do a bit of preparation to disembark.

A couple days before the end of your cruise, you'll receive disembarkation information in your cabin, along with luggage tags. Read the information thoroughly and decide whether you'd like to do self-assist disembarkation or have someone take your bags for you. (Self-assist saves time but note that you should only do it if you're able to maneuver all of your luggage, including large bags, off of the ship yourself.) If completing the self-assist departure, keep in mind that it might be difficult to secure an elevator for you and all your bags on disembarkation morning.

Should you choose to have someone help with your suitcases, you'll need to pack everything up and leave them outside your cabin door on the last night of the cruise, prior to the cutoff time listed on your disembarkation info sheet. Remove your embarkation luggage tags, and make sure your newly provided disembarkation luggage tags are attached.

Crew will come by during the night to take the bags and make sure they're offloaded to the terminal before you leave the ship the next morning. When you reach the terminal, look for your bag based on the color, number or other identifying category on the luggage tags you were given. This designation also coordinates with your disembarkation timeslot. Don't exit the ship before that time because your luggage might not be in the terminal just yet.

Make sure to keep medications, valuables and travel documents you'll need for the next day, along with an outfit to wear when you disembark. (Yes, we have seen people leaving the ship in their pajamas because they put their bags in the hall without remembering to retain a change of clothes.)

After you've claimed your bags, you'll clear customs and immigration. Follow signage and the directions of port personnel to figure out where you'll need to go next – to the parking garage, the rideshare area or the buses if you've booked a transfer to the airport through the cruise line.

FLYING HOME

Usually ships require all passengers to disembark between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. at the latest. If you're flying home from your cruise, we recommend booking a return flight that departs no earlier than noon. That will ensure you have plenty of time to disembark, claim your bags, secure a ride to the airport (don't forget there could be a wait) and make it to your gate.





MORE CRUISE VACATION *Planning Resources*

Remember, planning a cruise vacation is supposed to be fun! We know that there's a lot to keep track of, so let [Eat Sleep Cruise](#) be your one-stop shop for all things cruising. Whether it's picking the perfect ship for your family, researching your bucket list Alaska cruise, deciding on your ideal cruise cabin, or diving into expert cruise tips, tricks and hacks, we're here to help you "sea the world, one port at a time" like a pro.

If you're ready to book your next cruise, contact our friends at [MEI-Travel](#) who will help you through every step of the process. Happy Cruising!

PLANNING, TIPS AND ADVICE

- [First-Time Cruise Tips](#)
- [27 Cruise Mistakes Experts Never Make](#)
- [Are Cruises Worth It? The Pros and Cons](#)
- [A Beginner's Guide to Planning a Cruise](#)
- [Insider Tips: A Complete Guide to Booking a Cruise](#)
- [Tips and Tricks That Will Help You Cruise for Cheap](#)
- [How to Get Onboard Credit for Your Cruise](#)
- [Small Cruise Ships vs. Large Cruise Ships: Which Is Right for You?](#)
- [How to Make Sure Your First Cruise Is One of Your Best](#)
- [Embarkation Day Cruise Tips](#)
- [Top Things to Do on Cruise Sea Days](#)
- [10 Things to Do When It Rains on a Cruise](#)
- [7 Reasons to Stay on the Ship in the Next Port](#)
- [10 Sea Day Mistakes You're Still Making](#)
- [15 Overrated Cruise Experiences You Should Skip on Your Next Sailing](#)
- [Expert Tips for Booking the Best Shore Excursions Ever](#)
- [Should You Book Shore Excursions Through the Cruise Line?](#)
- [20 Things You Should Never Do on a Cruise](#)
- [12 Things Pro Cruisers Never Do Onboard](#)
- [Avoid These 15 Annoying Types of Cruisers on Your Next Trip](#)
- [A Complete Guide to Getting Free Cruise Ship Internet](#)

CRUISE TYPES

- [Here Are All the Different Types of Cruises You Can Take](#)
 - [An Expert Guide to World Cruises](#)
 - [All You Need to Know About Theme Cruises](#)
 - [A Complete Guide to Transatlantic Cruises](#)
 - [What Is a Repositioning Cruise?](#)
 - [A Complete Guide to Cruising Solo](#)
 - [These Are the Best Cruise Lines for Families](#)
 - [These Are the Top 10 Cruise Lines for Couples](#)
 - [Want a Cruise Without Kids? These Are the Best Adults-Only Sailings](#)
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EXPEDITION CRUISE RESOURCES

- [A Complete Guide to Expedition Cruising](#)
 - [The Truth About Antarctica Cruises](#)
 - [What We Wish We Knew Before Cruising to Antarctica](#)
 - [Tips for Taking Your First Arctic Expedition Cruise](#)
-

RIVER CRUISE RESOURCES

- [What We Wish We Knew Before Taking Our First AmaWaterways Cruise](#)
 - [What We Wish We Knew Before Taking Our First Viking River Cruise](#)
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BUDGETING FOR A CRUISE

- [What Is the Cheapest Cruise Line?](#)
 - [What's Included on a Cruise?](#)
 - [What's Not Included in the Price of a Cruise?](#)
 - [Things Expert Cruisers Refuse to Spend Money On](#)
 - [How to Score Free Drinks When You Cruise](#)
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BEST TIME TO CRUISE

- [Best Time of Year to Go on a Bermuda Cruise](#)
- [Best Time to Cruise to Canada and New England](#)
- [Best Time of Year to Cruise the Mediterranean](#)
- [What's It Like to Spend Christmas on a Cruise?](#)
- [The Best New Year's Cruises](#)
- [What Is Cruise Shoulder Season?](#)
- [All You Need to Know About Cruising During Hurricane Season](#)

CRUISE DESTINATION RESOURCES

- [These Are the Top Cruise Destinations in the World](#)
 - [Here's All You Need to Know About Cruise Line Private Islands](#)
 - [Carnival Celebration Key Ultimate Guide: Everything You Need to Know](#)
 - [Everything You Need to Know About Half Moon Cay Bahamas](#)
 - [Perfect Day at CocoCay Ultimate Guide: Here's Everything You Need to Know](#)
 - [Everything You Need to Know About Disney's Castaway Cay](#)
 - [Everything You Need to Know About Disney's Lookout Cay at Lighthouse Point](#)
 - [Here's What You Need to Know About Ocean Cay MSC Marine Reserve](#)
 - [Great Stirrup Cay Ultimate Guide: Here's Everything You Need to Know](#)
 - [Everything You Need to Know About Princess Cays](#)
 - [Ultimate Virgin Voyages Beach Club at Bimini Guide](#)
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ALASKA CRUISE RESOURCES

- [Best Alaska Cruises: Expert Picks](#)
 - [Hubbard Glacier vs. Glacier Bay: Which Itinerary Is Best?](#)
 - [Top Alaska Cruise Questions](#)
 - [Alaska Cruise Tips for First-Timers](#)
 - [Top 15 Alaska Cruise Tips](#)
 - [Alaska Cruise Mistakes You Can't Afford to Make](#)
 - [How Much Are Alaska Cruises?](#)
 - [Best Time of Year to Go on an Alaska Cruise](#)
 - [What to Pack for an Alaska Cruise](#)
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BAHAMAS CRUISE RESOURCES

- [Caribbean vs. Bahamas Cruises: Which Is Better?](#)
 - [What Does a Bahamas Cruise Cost?](#)
 - [Best Time of Year to Cruise to the Bahamas](#)
-

CARIBBEAN CRUISE RESOURCES

- [Caribbean vs. Bahamas Cruises: Which is Better?](#)
- [Best Caribbean Cruise Destinations](#)
- [Best Time of Year to Take a Caribbean Cruise](#)
- [Don't Forget These Items: A Complete Caribbean Cruise Packing List](#)

CARNIVAL CRUISE LINE RESOURCES

- [How Much Does a Carnival Cruise Cost?](#)
 - [What's Included on a Carnival Cruise?](#)
 - [A Complete Guide to Carnival Cruise Line's Drink Packages](#)
 - [The Pros and Cons of a Carnival Cruise: Is This Line Right for You?](#)
 - [A Complete List of Carnival Cruise Ships by Size](#)
-

CELEBRITY CRUISES RESOURCES

- [What's Included in the Price of a Celebrity Cruise?](#)
 - [Is Celebrity Cruises' Drink Package Worth It? Here's Our Review](#)
 - [Celebrity Cruise Ships by Class](#)
-

DISNEY CRUISE LINE RESOURCES

- [How Much Does a Disney Cruise Really Cost?](#)
 - [What Does a Disney Cruise Include in the Fares?](#)
 - [Disney Cruise Line's Rotational Dining, Explained](#)
 - [A Complete Guide to Disney Cruise Ships by Size](#)
-

HOLLAND AMERICA CRUISE RESOURCES

- [What's Included on a Holland America Cruise?](#)
 - [A Complete Guide to Holland America Drink Packages](#)
 - [Holland America's All-Inclusive 'Have It All' Package](#)
 - [Holland America Cruise Ships, Newest to Oldest](#)
 - [The Pros and Cons of a Cruise With Holland America Line](#)
-

MSC CRUISE RESOURCES

- [What's Included in the Cost of an MSC Cruise?](#)
 - [A Complete Guide to MSC Cruises' Drink Packages](#)
 - [The Pros and Cons of a Cruise With MSC](#)
 - [A List of MSC Cruise Ships, Newest to Oldest](#)
-

NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE RESOURCES

- [What's Included on a Norwegian Cruise Line Voyage?](#)
- [A Complete Guide to NCL Drink Packages](#)
- [What is Norwegian Cruise Line's More at Sea?](#)
- [A Guide to NCL Cruise Ship Classes](#)

PRINCESS CRUISES RESOURCES

- [What's Included on a Princess Cruise?](#)
 - [All You Need to Know About Princess Cruises Drink Packages](#)
 - [Is Princess Cruises' All-Inclusive Package Worth It?](#)
 - [Princess Cruise Ships by Age, From Newest to Oldest](#)
-

ROYAL CARIBBEAN CRUISE RESOURCES

- [How Much Does a Royal Caribbean Cruise Cost?](#)
 - [Is a Royal Caribbean Drink Package Worth it?](#)
 - [What's Included on a Royal Caribbean Cruise?](#)
 - [A Complete List of Royal Caribbean Ship Classes](#)
-

VIRGIN VOYAGES RESOURCES

- [What's Included on Virgin Voyages Cruises?](#)
 - [The Pros and Cons of a Virgin Voyages Cruise](#)
 - [A Complete Guide to Virgin Voyages Ships, From Newest to Oldest](#)
-

CRUISE SHIP CABIN RESOURCES

- [Hints for Saving Space in Your Cruise Cabin](#)
- [A Guide to Cruise Ship Cabin Categories](#)
- [Should You Book an Inside Cabin on Your Cruise? Here's What We Think](#)
- [Here Are All the Pros and Cons of Booking an Oceanview Cabin on a Cruise](#)
- [Here's Why You Should Book a Balcony Cabin for Your Next Cruise](#)
- [What Is an Obstructed View Cabin on a Cruise Ship?](#)
- [A Cruise Cabin Upgrade Primer: All You Need to Know](#)
- [Why You Should Consider a Guarantee Cabin on a Cruise](#)
- [Avoid These 12 Cruise Ship Cabins at All Costs](#)
- [What's the Best Cabin Deck on a Cruise Ship?](#)
- [What Are the Best Rooms to Book on a Cruise Ship?](#)
- [Pay Attention to These Rules When Decorating Your Cruise Cabin Door](#)
- [Never, Ever Do These 20 Things in Your Cruise Cabin](#)
- [Avoid Doing These 12 Things on Your Cruise Balcony](#)

CRUISE HEALTH AND SAFETY RESOURCES

- [7 Ways to Avoid Seasickness on Your Next Sailing](#)
 - [Top Reasons You Need Travel Insurance for Your Voyage](#)
 - [Bonine vs. Dramamine: Which Is Better for Cruise Motion Sickness?](#)
 - [Are Cruises Safe?](#)
 - [Can you Smoke on a Cruise Ship?](#)
 - [Do Cruise Ships Have Jails Onboard?](#)
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CRUISE DOCUMENTS RESOURCES

- [What Documents Do I Need to Bring for My Cruise?](#)
 - [Do You Need a Passport to Go on a Cruise?](#)
 - [Top Cruises You Can Do Without a Passport](#)
 - [Can I Use a Real ID for a Cruise?](#)
 - [Passport Book vs. Passport Card for a Cruise](#)
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CRUISE PACKING RESOURCES

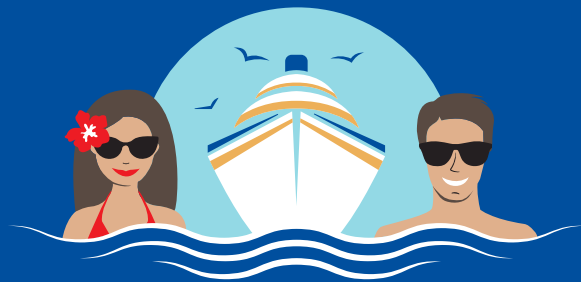
- [These Are the Items Cruise Experts Always Pack When They Sail](#)
 - [What to Know About Bringing Alcohol on a Cruise](#)
 - [There Are Certain Items You Can't Bring on a Cruise: See What They Are](#)
 - [What to Pack in Your Embarkation Day Cruise Carry-On](#)
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COMMON CRUISE QUESTIONS

- [What Is a Cruise Ship Muster Drill?](#)
 - [Common Cruise Terms to Help You Navigate Your Ship](#)
 - [Cruise Glossary: A List of Common Cruise Lingo You Should Know](#)
 - [Do Cruise Ships Have Room Service?](#)
 - [Are Cruises Boring?](#)
 - [What Should I Wear During Cruise Ship Formal Night?](#)
 - [Do Cruise Ships Have Wi-Fi?](#)
 - [Are Short Cruises Worth it? Here's Our Take](#)
 - [Should I Go on a Cruise?](#)
 - [Which Cruise Line Is the Best?](#)
 - [Which Is Better: A Cruise or an All-Inclusive Resort?](#)
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CRUISE GRATUITIES RESOURCES

- [A Complete Guide to Cruise Tipping](#)
- [Cruise Gratuities Explained](#)



Eat Sleep Cruise