

Chapter 1

Choosing Cruising: The Best of the Best

In This Chapter

- ▶ Picking the top cruise lines
- ▶ Finding the best ships to fit your interests

In the decade-plus that we've been writing about cruises, we can't even count the number of times people have asked us, "So, what's the best cruise line?" And y'know what? We hate that question. We hate it because there's really no single answer. It's like asking, "What's the best food?" or "What's the best beer?" It all depends on your taste buds and the kind of experience you want to have. Spicy? Adventurous? Healthy? Indulgent? Or how about the cruise equivalent of a burger and a Bud?

That said, some cruise lines are clearly top-shelf, no matter what aisle in the supermarket you're browsing. And this is the chapter where you can find 'em.

You can find the "Best of the Best" icon signaling the contents of this chapter throughout the book.

The Best of the Mainstream Lines

Here's the pick of the litter among the big boys. Turn to Chapter 11 for more info.

- ✔ **Celebrity Cruises:** With their elegant, modern décor, incredible spas, great service, and over-the-top alternative restaurants, Celebrity's Millennium-class ships (*Millennium*, *Infinity*, *Summit*, and *Constellation*) are some of the best mainstream megaships out there — classy yet affordable. Celebrity's older Century-class ships (*Century*, *Galaxy*, and *Mercury*) aren't too far behind, either.
- ✔ **Princess Cruises:** Princess's huge but cozy *Diamond Princess* and *Sapphire Princess* are the line's most beautiful ships to date. They combine gorgeous exterior lines with wood-heavy, old-world lounges; an innovative dining plan; and a great covered promenade

that allows you to stand right in the bow. The smaller *Coral Princess* and *Island Princess* are big winners, too, with similar décor and a smaller size that lets them traverse the Panama Canal.

- ✓ **Royal Caribbean International:** Royal Caribbean's Radiance-class ships (*Radiance*, *Brilliance*, *Serenade*, and *Jewel of the Seas*) are its most elegant vessels to date, combining a sleek, seagoing exterior; a nautically themed interior; and acres of windows. The Voyager-class ships (*Voyager*, *Explorer*, *Adventure*, *Navigator*, and *Mariner of the Seas*) are the archetypal activities ships and may be the first vessels to satisfy the old "city at sea" cliché. The line's new gigantic *Freedom of the Seas* is an even bigger and more activity-packed ship than its Voyager-class cousins.

The Best Ships for Luxury

Got some bucks to spend? Wanna be treated like Charles and Camilla? Here are your ships. Turn to Chapter 12 for all the details.

- ✓ **Crystal Cruises:** Crystal's handsome ships offer the best of two worlds: pampering service and scrumptious cuisine on ships that are big enough to offer plenty of outdoor deck space, generous fitness facilities, four restaurants, and more than half a dozen bars and entertainment venues. Crystal's California ethic tends to keep the atmosphere more mingly and chatty than aboard the more sober ships, such as those from Seabourn and Silversea.
- ✓ **Cunard:** *Queen Mary 2 (QM2)* has her very own niche in the luxe market — and in the cruise market as a whole, for that matter. Although she's too enormous to offer the kind of intimate luxury you get with ships from Silversea, Seabourn, and SeaDream, she can give you a pretty close idea of what life aboard the great old ocean liners was like — a pretty luxe perk all in itself.
- ✓ **SeaDream Yacht Club:** Even smaller and more intimate than Seabourn, SeaDream's 110-passenger yachts are also pitched to a younger and more active demographic. Elegant but casual, they carry along jet skis, mountain bikes, and kayaks for jaunts around ports such as St. Barts and Monte Carlo.
- ✓ **Silversea Cruises:** This line offers the best overall highbrow small ships, with top-quality cuisine, roomy suites, and over-the-top service — including complimentary and free-flowing Philipponnat champagne.

The Best Ships for Families

The trick with family cruises is offering not just family-friendly activities and entertainment, but offering things for adults to do, too, whenever they can get away from the kids. These cruise lines do. See Chapter 9 for

info on family-oriented cruising activities and Chapters 11 and 12 for more about the ships.

- ✔ **Carnival Cruise Lines:** Carnival has made the move from party line to family line, with spacious kids and teen facilities on the Conquest-, Spirit- and Destiny-class vessels.
- ✔ **Cunard:** Strange but true, the classy *QM2* also has great facilities and programs for kids, starting at age 1. Aside from Disney, no other line offers such extensive care for children so young. There's even an outdoor play gym, wading pool, and spray fountain.
- ✔ **Disney Cruise Line:** Well, duh. If Disney can't do family right, who can? This is the best-developed children's program at sea. Kudos also to Disney's adult activities, even though their ships do without casinos in the interest of keeping kiddo on the straight and narrow.
- ✔ **Princess Cruises:** The *Coral Princess* and *Island Princess* and the Grand-class ships each have a spacious children's playroom, a sizable piece of fenced-in outside deck for toddlers, and a deck with a wading pool for older kids. Teen centers have computers, video games, and a sound system, and the ones on the Grand-class ships even have teen hot tubs and private sunbathing decks.
- ✔ **Royal Caribbean International:** For active families, you can't beat Royal Caribbean's *Freedom of the Seas*, with its cool water park and surfing simulator, plus a bunch of other great diversions the line's Voyager-class ships also offer — from rock-climbing walls to ice-skating rinks, in-line skating tracks, miniature golf, and full-size basketball courts. The onboard Johnny Rockets restaurant and main street-like entertainment promenades hold kids' interest pretty well, too.

The Best Romantic Cruises

Some cruise lines cater to the amorous more than others. Here are our top picks:

- ✔ **Cunard:** Like real royalty, *QM2* was born with certain duties attendant to its station, and one of the biggest of those duties is to embody the romance of transatlantic travel and bring it into the new century. Take a stroll around that Promenade Deck, dine in that fabulous dining room, and thrill to be out in the middle of the Atlantic on nearly a billion dollars' worth of Atlantic thoroughbred. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **SeaDream Yacht Club:** SeaDream's small *SeaDream I* and *II* are ultraluxe in a languidly romantic sort of way, with comfy Balinese daybeds lining the teak decks, free-flowing champagne, and a table for two anytime you want it. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Star Clippers:** With the wind in your hair and sails fluttering overhead, the top decks of the four- and five-masted *Royal Clipper* and

Star Clipper provide a most romantic setting. Below decks, the comfy cabins, lounge, and dining room make these ships the most comfortable adventures on the sea. See Chapter 13.

- ✓ **Windjammer Barefoot Cruises:** Well, what is romance, anyway? For some folks it's luxury and baubles. For others it's a trip cross-country on their Harley, stopping to catch the view at every scenic overlook and then finding a good bar at night. That sound like you? Windjammer's your cruise line. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Windstar Cruises:** Pure romance is a day with your loved one in a private cove or another secluded spot with one of Windstar's big sailing ships anchored offshore. Windstar offers a truly unique cruise experience, giving passengers the delicious illusion of adventure (by stopping at small coves and such), along with relatively sizable small vessels and high-quality cuisine and service. See Chapter 13.

The Best Party Cruises

Looking for a party at sea? Try one of these cruise lines:

- ✓ **Carnival Cruise Lines:** What, you thought Carnival's ships were called "The Fun Ships" because they could tell a good joke? Back in the day, this is where you went for a full-time party cruise. Things have toned down a lot since then, but the pool deck is still loud and crazy, and the discos and nightspots hop until the early morning hours — especially on the short 3- and 4-night weekend cruises. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Norwegian Cruise Line:** NCL's newest ships are designed to give the illusion of a night out in the big city, with ten restaurants, tons of bars, a clipboard full of activities, and some of the best entertainment at sea. An added plus: The ships all have casual dress codes and open-seating dining, creating more mingling opportunities. As on Carnival and Royal Caribbean, it's the short 3- and 4-night itineraries on their older ships that keep the party funk in' right. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Royal Caribbean International:** As with Carnival, lots of Royal Caribbean's customers are in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, with short cruises drawing the harder partiers. For an exciting Saturday-night-out-on-the-town barhopping kind of experience, the Freedom- and Voyager-class ships feature a multideck, boulevard-like promenade running down their centers, lined with shops, bars, cafes, and entertainment outlets. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Windjammer Barefoot Cruises:** Erotic tart-eating contest, anyone? Okay, so that's only on their singles cruises, but you get the idea. On regular cruises, the free rum punch, cheap beers, and visits to legendary Caribbean beach bars make sure you'll be reeling like the proverbial drunken sailor, if that's your thing. See Chapter 13.

The Best Small-Ship Cruises

If the big ships aren't your thing, slide on over to one of these small-ship operators, who put more of an emphasis on learning about the destination than on shopping, sightseeing, and Big Whoopin' Fun. See Chapter 13 for the scoop on each.

- ✓ **Cruise West and Clipper Cruise Line (Alaska/Russian Far East):** Want a real expedition? Cruise West's *Spirit of Oceanus* and Clipper's *Clipper Odyssey* offer 2-week cruises that sail from mainland Alaska across the Bering Sea to far-eastern Russia, also taking in remote, little-visited islands along Alaska's western coast. It's like sailing right off the map of civilization.
- ✓ **Cruise West, Lindblad, and American Safari Cruises (Baja/Sea of Cortez):** For cruise ships, Mexico's Baja Peninsula is like the bizarre Alaska. It's where the small ships (and the humpback whales) go for winter, substituting Baja's red dirt, cacti, and ruggedly beautiful coastal islands for Alaska's moss, rain forests, and glaciers.
- ✓ **Lindblad Expeditions (Antarctica, Galapagos, and other exotic destinations):** This preeminent small-ship line for a really adventurous, learning-oriented experience is all the better for its recently formed alliance with the National Geographic Society. The Society gets a permanent presence on the sea, and Lindblad gets a slew of scientists, photographers, and other lecturers to wow guests.
- ✓ **Maine Windjammer Association (Maine coast):** Owner-operated historic schooners sailing along one of the prettiest stretches of coast in the whole country — how do you top that? It's like summer camp for adults, with a rustic vibe and real, live wind in your hair.
- ✓ **Majestic America Line (Mississippi River):** Mark Twain fan? Head for *Delta Queen*, *Mississippi Queen*, and *American Queen*, three real Mississippi River stern-wheelers that look so in-place on the river that you'll think you've gone through a time warp. Bonuses? Cajun and Southern cooking, river storytelling, and a calliope to complement a music program full of Dixieland jazz and swing.

The Best Ships for Uncompromising Gourmands

Food and cruising go hand and hand. Find the best dining on these cruise lines:

- ✓ **Celebrity Cruises:** Among the mainstream lines, it doesn't get any better than the intimate, elegant, reservations-only alternative restaurants on Celebrity's Millennium-class ships, with their artifacts from classic Golden Age ocean liners, their doting waiters, their tableside cooking, and their musicians playing elegant period

pieces. The experience takes about three hours and costs \$30 a person, but it's well worth it. See Chapter 11.

- ✓ **Crystal Cruises:** Although all the food you get on Crystal's ships is first-class, their reservations-only Asian specialty restaurant on *Serenity* is the best at sea, with cuisine overseen by Master Chef Nobuyuki "Nobu" Matsuhisa. The accouterments help set the tone, too — chopsticks, sake served in tiny sake cups and decanters, and sushi served on thick blocky platters. An Asian-themed buffet lunch, offered at least once per cruise, gives passengers an awesome spread, from jumbo shrimp to chicken and beef satays to stir-fry dishes. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Oceania Cruises:** Oceania's dining experience is near the top in the mainstream category, with menus created by chef Jacques Pepin, and passengers able to dine at any of four different restaurants, all of them excellent. Service is doting and fine-tuned, even at the casual semi-buffet option, offered on an outdoor terrace that's elegant and totally romantic at sunset. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Regent Seven Seas Cruises:** The award-winning chefs aboard all the line's ships produce artful culinary presentations that compare favorably to those of New York's or San Francisco's top restaurants, and the waiters are some of the industry's best. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Seabourn Cruise Lines:** Nothing quite compares to dining on the outdoor deck of Seabourn's casual restaurant, called **2**, which offers a lovely tasting menu nightly. With the ships' wakes shushing just below, you have a rare opportunity to dine with the sea breezes and starry night sky surrounding you. Asian, Mediterranean, and steak-house-style menus are featured. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Silversea Cruises:** Depart at sunset from port, and savor the setting and the Italian cuisine in the windowed, candlelit **Terrazza**. Menus are created by chef Marco Betti, owner of the award-winning Antica Posta restaurant in Florence, Italy, and Atlanta, Georgia. A second alternative venue offers a new twist on cruise dining, offering menus developed in consultation with master Relais & Châteaux-Relais Gourmands sommeliers that pair food with wine — and not the other way 'round. Excellent wines and all spirits are included in the cruise rates. See Chapter 12.