

Introduction: Cruising to the Ports of Call

Though today's cruise ships are sailing to more and more places, the Caribbean is still number one, the reigning heavyweight champ among destinations. You're guaranteed nearly constant sunshine, white sand and palm trees, plenty of beaches, and relaxation, but you're also likely to find rich culture, Mayan ruins, European colonial architecture, lush rainforests, winding mountain roads, beautiful tropical flowers and marine life, and opportunities to be as active

or laid-back as you want to be. And it's all so easy: Between the major Florida home ports (Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, Cape Canaveral, Tampa, and Jacksonville) and the newer "alternative" home ports (New York; New Orleans; Charlotte, South Carolina; and Galveston, Texas), anyone in the eastern part of the U.S. could easily drive to their ship if they wanted to. And once there, of course, it's all smooth sailing.

1 Choosing the Itinerary & Shore Excursions That Are Best for You

If you count every rocky little outcropping and sandbar, there are hundreds of islands in the Caribbean, but of the 40 or 50 that make it onto the map, cruise ships regularly visit only about 25 of them. Most Caribbean cruises are 7 nights long and visit anywhere from three to six different ports, with the 2,000-passenger-plus megaships tending toward the lower number, spending the rest of their time on leisurely (and more profitable) days at sea. There are also 3- and 4-night cruises out of Florida visiting the Bahamas or Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula; 4- and 5-night cruises out of Tampa, Miami, New Orleans, and Galveston, Texas, doing western Caribbean itineraries; and 10- to 14-night Caribbean cruises that transit the Panama Canal, either sailing round-trip from Florida or one-way between Florida and Acapulco, visiting three to seven ports.

While they're all appealing in some way, the Caribbean islands were not all created equal. Some are better for shopping, others for beaches or scenic drives. Some are quite built up, while others are not developed at all. Some have piers that can accommodate large ships, and others require that ships anchor up to a mile offshore and shuttle passengers back and forth in small, motorized launches called "tenders." Big ships tend to visit the more commercialized, developed islands, while small ships are able to access the less-developed, off-the-beaten-path islands. Typically, the big lines divide Caribbean itineraries into eastern, western, and southern routings, but smaller ship lines rarely adhere to such rigid labels.

The Gulf of Mexico & the Caribbean



How Many Ports for You?

These days, many of the largest ships in the Carnival, Royal Caribbean, Princess, and Norwegian fleets are visiting only three ports during a typical weeklong cruise, and spending the rest of the days at sea. What's the story? Are the ports too crowded? Are the ships too big to dock at other ports? Do cruise lines want to keep passengers on board to spend more money in the shops, bars, and casinos? Do passengers just *want* to stay on board? All of the above, if you ask us. If what you're looking for is pure, unadulterated relaxation—sitting by the pool reading a good book, with a steward to bring you fresh drinks—a cruise including three ports may suit you perfectly. If you want to maximize the number of islands you visit, there are still plenty of ships that visit five ports on their 7-night itineraries, and the small-ship adventure and luxury lines really pack in the ports, visiting a different island nearly every single day and sometimes even making two stops, one in the morning and another after lunch. Check the cruise lines' websites or talk to your travel agent to find out the number of port days and the number of sea days for each ship.

MEGASHIP ITINERARIES

WESTERN CARIBBEAN Western Caribbean itineraries depart from Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Tampa, New Orleans, and Galveston, Texas, and usually visit Grand Cayman, Jamaica, and Cozumel or one of the other ports on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. This is a popular itinerary for many lines, so you'll see throngs of other cruise passengers in each port—often three or four (or more) ships will be visiting at a time. Belize City and the Bay Islands of Honduras are also popping up more frequently on western Caribbean itineraries.

EASTERN CARIBBEAN Eastern Caribbean itineraries typically sail out of Florida and from the alternative home ports up the Eastern seaboard, and may include visits to San Juan (Puerto Rico), the U.S. Virgin Islands (particularly St. Thomas), St. Martin, and Nassau or Freeport in the Bahamas—all very popular and busy ports of call, especially St. Thomas, Nassau, and San Juan.

SOUTHERN CARIBBEAN Southern itineraries typically sail round-trip out of San Juan or sometimes out of Aruba or Barbados. They often overlap with eastern Caribbean itineraries, and may visit St. Thomas, St. Martin, St. Lucia, Martinique, Antigua, and maybe Dominica, Guadeloupe, Aruba, and Grenada or one of the other islands in the Grenadines.

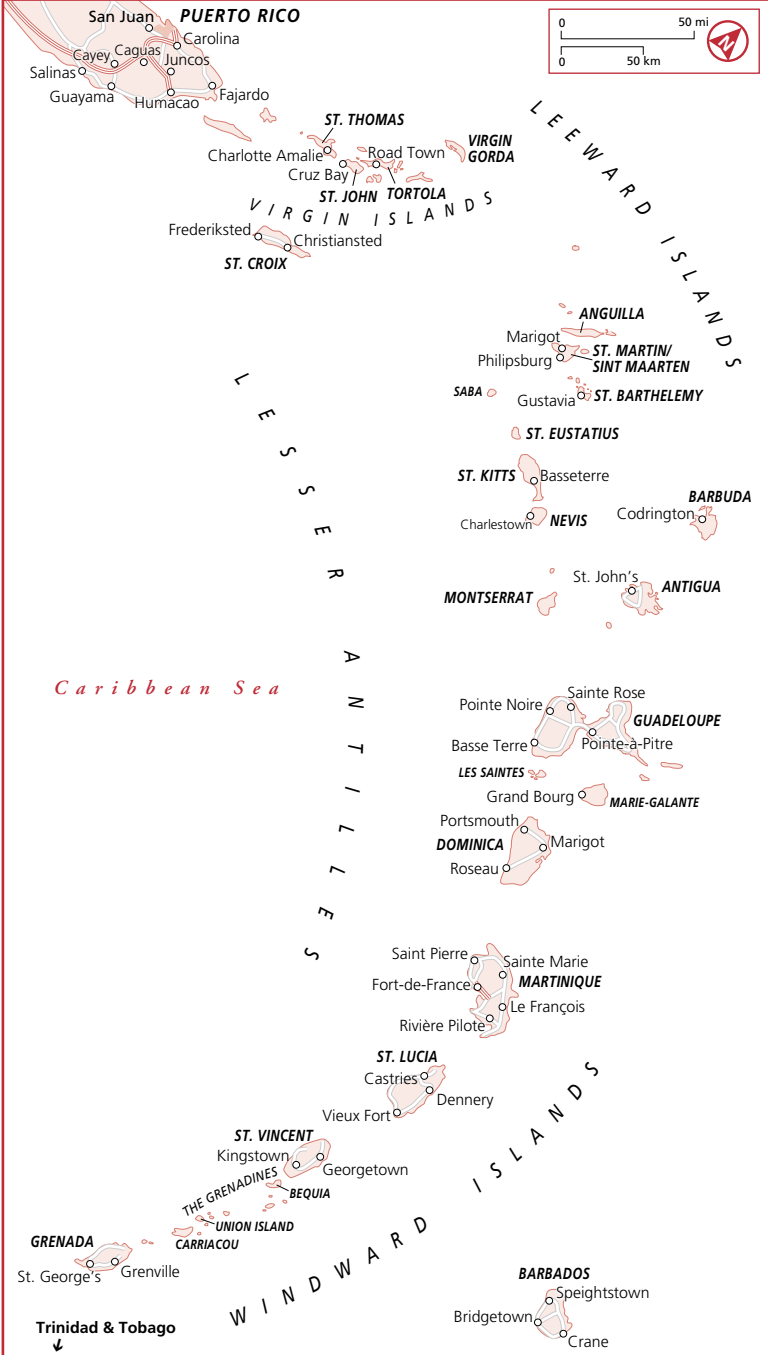
SMALL-SHIP ITINERARIES

Most small ships cruise in the eastern and southern Caribbean, where distances between islands are shorter. Instead of Florida, they may sail out of Barbados, Grenada, St. Kitts, or San Juan and visit more remote islands.

EASTERN CARIBBEAN These itineraries may include visits to St. Barts, the British Virgin Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (lush St. John as well as more touristy St. Thomas).

SOUTHERN CARIBBEAN Southern Caribbean cruises may visit Guadeloupe, Dominica, Les Saintes, St. Kitts, Nevis, Martinique, St. Lucia, St. Vincent,

The Eastern Caribbean



Grenada, and Bequia, and maybe the truly unspoiled and remote Palm, Canouan, Mayreau, and Carriacou islands.

SHORTER ITINERARIES

Today, there are more 3-, 4-, and 5-night cruise itineraries than ever before (plus a small handful of 2-nighters), as cruise lines continually look for new ways to fill all of their big ships. Short and affordable, **2- and 3-night cruises** offer a more action-packed, nonstop party ambience than longer 7-night Caribbean itineraries. It's obvious why: These are weekend cruises, departing Thursday or Friday afternoons, so people are ready to squeeze in as much fun, relaxation, drinking, gambling, dancing, and eating as possible before going back to work on Monday. Though you'll definitely find more 20- and 30-somethings on these shorties than on any other type of cruise, you'll still see a wide range of ages. Aside from the fun factor, short cruises are a great way for first-time cruisers to test the waters (so to speak) before committing to a full week. They're also a good idea if you're short on time or moola.

The ships that offer these minicruises tend to be the oldest in their fleets and are a bit beat-up compared to the newest megaships. We've also noticed that service tends to not be as good on the short party cruises, probably owing to crew exhaustion. Then again, most passengers don't notice the difference—they're too busy having fun.

Because they typically depart on Sunday or Monday afternoon and sail through the workweek, **4- and 5-night cruises** represent the opposite end of the liveliness spectrum, tending to attract an older and less party-oriented crowd.

Many cruise lines offer weeklong **land-sea packages** that pair a cruise with a land vacation either before or after your cruise. For instance, Disney, Carnival, and Royal Caribbean will combine a 3- or 4-night cruise out of Port Canaveral with a 3- or 4-night visit to one of central Florida's theme parks, like Walt Disney World, Universal Studios, SeaWorld, or Busch Gardens.

MATCHING YOUR HABITS TO YOUR ITINERARY

Some ports are better for certain things than others. Here's a short rundown; see p. 84 for a comparison chart that rates shore excursions, activities, beaches, shopping, and dining for all the Caribbean ports. The island reviews in chapter 5, "The Ports of Call," provide detailed information.

PORTS FOR SHOPPERS

Eastern Caribbean: St. Thomas, San Juan, Nassau, St. Martin. **Western Caribbean:** Grand Cayman, Cozumel. **Southern Caribbean:** Aruba, Barbados.

PORTS FOR BEACH LOVERS

Eastern Caribbean: Antigua, British Virgin Islands, St. John, St. Martin, St. Barts. **Western Caribbean:** Grand Cayman, Jamaica. **Southern Caribbean:** Aruba, Grenada, Bequia, Barbados, Nevis, Martinique.

PORTS FOR SCUBA DIVERS & SNORKELERS

Eastern Caribbean: St. Croix, St. John, St. Thomas, Dominica. **Western Caribbean:** Grand Cayman, Belize, Cozumel. **Southern Caribbean:** Bonaire, Curaçao.

PORTS FOR HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY ENTHUSIASTS

Eastern Caribbean: San Juan. **Western Caribbean:** Cozumel and the other Yucatan ports. **Southern Caribbean:** Barbados, Curaçao.

PORTS FOR NATURE BUFFS

Eastern Caribbean: St. John, San Juan. **Southern Caribbean:** Aruba, Dominica, St. Kitts, Grenada, Trinidad.

PORTS FOR FRANCOPHILES

Eastern Caribbean: Guadeloupe, Les Saintes, St. Martin, St. Barts, Martinique.

SHORE EXCURSIONS: THE WHAT, WHY & HOW

No matter what size ship you're on or what its itinerary is, you'll be able to choose from among three to several dozen shore excursions in any given port, from walking and bus tours to more active excursions like biking, hiking, snorkeling, scuba diving, horseback riding, golfing, kayaking, and river tubing. Prices range from about \$25 to \$200 per person, and most excursions are run by concessionaires on the islands rather than by the cruise lines themselves. You book the excursions through the cruise lines (either before you sail, via an online or phone reservation system, or once you're onboard) and payments are charged to your onboard account. Some ports are best explored through these tours (which depart directly from the pier), and some ports are best seen on your own. In chapter 5, "The Ports of Call," we discuss shore excursions in more depth, providing information on the best excursions and noting where you may want to skip the excursions entirely and set out on your own.

2 When to Go

With temperatures in the balmy 80s (upper 20s Celsius) almost year-round, dozens of ships stay in the Caribbean full-time, and a bunch more spend the winters there after summering in Alaska or Europe. The only trouble in paradise is **hurricane season**, which officially runs June 1 to November 30, but rarely causes cruisers any problems bigger than a few days of rain and a bit of rocking and rolling. We've taken many cruises in the Caribbean during this period and have only occasionally run into stormy weather; it's rare, but it's a risk you take. The chance of actually getting caught in the perfect storm is next to nil, as modern communications (and generally speedy vessels) allow captains to change course and pilot their ships out of danger as soon as they get word of a storm.

Defining seasons as "low" and "high" is hardly a science, since most lines seem to come up with their own unique pricing schemes, and some don't bother dividing rates by season at all. For those that do, it's generally accepted that **high season** in the Caribbean is mid-December through mid-April. During this time, weather will most likely be perfect, the islands and ships will be packed, and the prices will be higher. The **holiday weeks** of Christmas, New Year's, Presidents' Day, and Easter are the absolute busiest and most expensive periods, especially on the family-oriented megaships—these are often the few times in the year when the cruise lines' brochure rates are not discounted.

Despite it being hurricane season, the **summer months** of June, July, and August are the next busiest times; in fact, many lines consider these months high season along with December through April, because families traditionally vacation during the summer and because many ships migrate to Alaska and Europe for the season, leaving fewer vessels in the Caribbean. Temperatures may be a bit hotter in summer, but the islands' colorful flowering trees are at their most lush.

September, October, and early November are considered **low season** (often referred to as "value season") and are the times when you'll encounter the fewest crowds onshore and on board, and some of the lowest rates. Sometimes there

will be a lull during the first 2 weeks of January, just after the rush of the holidays, and sometimes in late April and May, so look for good prices then as well.

The **Panama Canal cruise season** generally parallels the Caribbean high season, with most cruises generally departing between about November and April. Some ships offer only two Panama Canal cruises annually, when repositioning between their summer season in Alaska and their fall/winter season in the Caribbean. These days, many cruise lines are including partial Canal crossings as part of extended western Caribbean itineraries from Florida, sailing through the Canal's locks westbound to Gatun Lake, docking for a day of excursions, and then sailing back out in the evening.