

PLANNING YOUR CRUISE

UNDERSTANDING CRUISES

THE INCLUSIVE CRUISE VACATION

MOST CRUISES ARE INCLUSIVE, and when you buy a cruise, you generally are buying the basic components of a cruise vacation together rather than a la carte. Generally, a cruise—or what a travel agency or cruise line might describe as a “cruise-only” product—includes:

1. Shipboard accommodations.
2. Three full-service dining room meals daily (breakfast, lunch, and dinner), plus alternative breakfast, lunch, evening buffets, and late-night snacks. On most ships, room service meals do not cost extra. Many ships also offer options, such as early-bird breakfast, morning bouillon, and afternoon events, including tea, pizza snacks, ice cream parties, and poolside cookouts.
3. Most shipboard entertainment, including music, dancing, and shows in the lounges, discos, live bands, Las Vegas-style productions, nightclubs, karaoke, and movies.
4. Most shipboard sports and recreational facilities, including swimming pools, health club or exercise room, promenade or jogging track, whirlpool, sauna, library, game room, and child-care facilities. (Spa and beauty treatments, some specialized exercise classes such as Pilates, and sports equipment normally cost extra.)
5. Most shipboard activities, including casino entry, on-board games and contests, lectures, demonstrations, and most children’s programs (where applicable, baby-sitting services are extra).
6. Stops at ports of call on the itinerary.

The features listed above are almost universally a part of any cruise vacation, and an inclusive cruise vacation is often a very good value, particularly when compared to the cost of similar pieces booked on a

resort vacation. That said, other inclusions or lack of inclusion are line specific. Some cruise lines do include transfers—basically a bus or van ride from the airport to ship and ship to airport. Other lines charge for those transfers, unless you buy your air tickets through the line in what travel agents call an air/sea package.

Port charges (usually noted in the bottom fine print of any cruise advertising or brochure) are usually included in the cruise price. Still, it pays to check carefully or ask your travel agent, as port charges can range from \$120 to \$200 or even more on a seven-day Caribbean cruise, depending on the itinerary.

Taxes, optional shore excursions, alcoholic beverages and soft drinks, casino play, onboard shopping, some computer classes, use of Internet connection, and tips are not included in most cases. On a few very upscale lines, gratuities and wine and alcoholic beverages are included in the cruise price. On some, tips are pooled (you are asked to contribute a suggested amount per day to be divided among all staff except officers and senior staff) and now, more and more cruise lines are adding a service charge to your shipboard account in lieu of tipping. With most lines you have the option of paying it or having it removed and handling the tipping yourself. We include a section on tipping in Part Two.

CRUISING'S UNFORTUNATE STEREOTYPES

YOU HAVE PROBABLY HEARD that “cruising is not for everyone.” But that’s like saying travel is not for everyone. If you like to travel, you will almost certainly enjoy cruising. It’s that simple. Cruising, however, has accumulated unfortunate stereotypes, which continue to recycle.

MYTH NO. 1: I’LL BE BORED Many people, particularly men and younger, active folks, believe cruising is dull and sedentary. They picture bulk loaders crowding buffets while active folks sit bored and unstimulated. Sorry, not so.

Today, most cruises offer around-the-clock activities. Ships have workout rooms with high quality equipment, jogging tracks, pools, and daily exercise classes. Some larger ships have volleyball courts, basketball courts, and even rock climbing walls, golf simulators, and ice rinks. At ports of call, a variety of sports—from golf to cycling, snorkeling to kayaking—are offered. There are far more opportunities for sports and athletics than most of us have at home. Some lines now even offer extreme adventures like off-road vehicle trips or mountain biking. If you go on a cruise and sit on your butt, that’s your decision.

For the active but less athletic, most ships offer swimming, shuffleboard, table tennis, walking areas, and spa amenities, including hot tubs and saunas. Many ships offer yoga or stretching classes. At night, for the energetic, there’s dancing in many forms, from ballroom to reggae to line dancing to salsa.

A range of organized activities targets gregarious and fun-loving people. Versions of television game shows are popular, as are more traditional events, such as bridge tournaments, arts and crafts classes, and dancing lessons. Most cruise ships have casinos, and almost all have bingo.

If learning is your goal, dozens of cruises specialize in providing educational experiences and exploration of a region accompanied by experts. Like floating graduate schools, these cruises may focus on political and natural history, or may even offer lectures on topics unrelated to the ship's destinations.

Finally, there is no place better than a cruise ship to relax. The favorite cruise activity for many people is curling up in a comfortable deck chaise with a good book. Even a big ship with constant activity offers quiet spots for meditation, reading, or just enjoying the beauty of the sea.

MYTH NO. 2: CRUISING IS FOR RICH PEOPLE; I CAN'T AFFORD A CRUISE

If you take a vacation of three or more days during which you stay in hotels and eat in restaurants, you can afford a cruise. In fact, a cruise may be cheaper than a deluxe resort vacation.

Let's compare cruising to a modest vacation: Vic and Edna's one-week trip to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and the Smoky Mountains. Driving from their home near Cleveland, Ohio, Vic and Edna spent about \$400 on gas for the Chevy. They averaged \$75 a night plus tax for motels, or \$577 for the week. For breakfast and lunch, it was Shoney's- or Denny's-type restaurants. They'd go more upscale for dinner, and they liked beer or wine with their meal. Total for seven days' food: \$588. In the mountains, they mostly hiked and drove around. One day, however, they played golf; on another they visited a museum and a theme park. On the Friday before heading home, they rented horses for half a day. Golf, admissions, and horses came to approximately \$260. Recapping:

Vic and Edna's Splendid Vacation

Lodging	\$577
Gas	\$400
Meals	\$588
Admissions	\$260
Total	\$1,825

During the same period, a good middle-of-the-market cruise line (not super-budget or super-luxury), offered a seven-night Caribbean cruise for \$899 per person, including round-trip airfare. The cruise visited San Juan, St. Thomas, Martinique, Tortola, the British Virgin Islands, Antigua, and St. Maarten. Even better values could have been had with promotional fares, which were as low as \$579.

These were promotional rates, not the “rack” rates listed in the brochures. The point is, on the seven-night cruise, Vic and Edna could have enjoyed the amenities of a full resort, dined in grand style, danced to live music, visited six beautiful tropical islands, and soaked in a whirlpool under the Caribbean moon for about the same amount they spent on their road trip. We are not suggesting Vic and Edna should swap the Smokies for the Caribbean, only that they could afford to do so if they are inclined.

MYTH NO. 3: CRUISES ARE STUFFY, ELITIST, AND FORMAL Most cruises are none of the above, though the description might fit some passengers. Cruises cover a broad range of dress and social protocols. You can choose a cruise at whatever level of formality or casualness feels right for you. Overall, cruises have become very casual and informal. Even on “formal” nights—such as the captain’s welcome-aboard party and/or farewell party—only half of the men wear business suits, and women don cocktail or party dresses. Newer ships offering alternative (to the main dining room) dining options make it possible to avoid formal events entirely. Yet, on the most informal ships, like Carnival, people dress to the nines—and it’s often the men more so than the women. And they love it.

MYTH NO. 4: CRUISES ARE TOO REGIMENTED FOR ME Granted, it takes organization to get everyone on board a cruise ship. It takes similar regimentation to get everyone off at the end of the cruise. At ports, you need only get back on board before the ship sails.

Some folks lump cruises into the same category as whirlwind bus tours—eight countries in five days and that sort of thing. A cruise might visit eight countries in five days, but you will have to check in and unpack only once. That’s the beauty of cruising—you can hang out on the ship and just enjoy the ride, or you can get off at each port and pursue your own agenda.

Also, the trend toward more relaxed dining hours and alternative (to the main dining room) dining venues has resulted in notably less regimentation aboard ship.

MYTH NO. 5: I’M AFRAID I’LL GET SEASICK Well, you might, but the vast majority of people don’t, particularly on a Caribbean cruise. Even those who get queasy in a car can usually handle a cruise. Over-the-counter antinausea medications like **Bonine** (doesn’t make you drowsy) or **Dramamine** get most folks over the acclimatization period of the first few hours at sea. Bring some: You may never need it, but having it is comforting. Usually, Dramamine or Bonine is available from the purser’s desk or the ship’s medical unit.

Some guests swear by **Sea Bands**—a pair of elasticized wristbands (similar to tennis bands), each with a small plastic disk that applies pressure to the inside wrist, according to acupressure principles. They are particularly useful for people who have difficulty taking

medication. Sea Bands are sold in drug, toiletry, and health-care stores (sometimes onboard ships as well) and can be ordered from **On the Go Travel Accessories** (5603 NW 159th Street, Miami, FL 33014; ☎ 888-303-3039; www.onthegoaccessories.com). If you take precautions and become seasick anyway, the ship's doctor can administer more powerful medication.

In regard to seasickness, remember: Don't dwell on your fear, and if you become queasy, take medicine immediately. When you deal with symptoms quickly, relief is quick.

Minimize the probability of getting seasick by choosing an itinerary in calmer waters: Alaska's Inside Passage, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and the Gulf of Mexico. Less smooth are voyages on the Atlantic, Pacific, or Indian oceans or the South China Sea. And remember the time of year may also matter. The Caribbean can be less smooth during hurricane season. You are unlikely to be in the storm's way, but water conditions can kick up far from the trouble zone.

MYTH NO. 6: I'M APPREHENSIVE ABOUT WALKING ON A MOVING SHIP If you are not agile or fit on land, you might envision tortuous trips down narrow gangways or climbing ladders through tiny hatches while the ship rolls and pitches. But those images are really in the past. Generally, if you can handle a hotel, you can handle a cruise ship. Large vessels have wide, carpeted halls with hand railings, and slip-resistant outside decks. Elevators serve all passenger decks, so using the stairs may not even be necessary. Passengers use no tricky ladders or tiny hatches.

Modern cruise ships have state-of-the-art stabilizers, and even in bad weather and heavy seas they are amazingly stable. Small ships, depending on their draft and build, may be more subject to the motion of the ocean and are a little more challenging to get around. Being smaller, however, there's less territory to cover. Most ships launched in the last ten years were built with consideration for healthy passengers as well as those with ambulatory disabilities. Most new ships offer wheelchair-accessible cabins and ramps.

A TYPICAL DAY ON A CRUISE

LET'S SAY YOU'RE CRUISING the Caribbean. You can start your morning with an early-bird breakfast or a walk or jog around deck, or you can have breakfast from the menu in the dining room. Late sleepers can order breakfast from room service or catch the breakfast buffet, which stays open later than the dining room. It may be served on the "lido" deck—a casual indoor/outdoor dining facility on the same deck as the swimming pool or sports facilities. The lido buffet has longer and more flexible hours, enabling you to come and go at will.

Days at sea are the most relaxing of the cruise itinerary. The casino, shopping arcade, spa, exercise room, and shore-excursion desk are open. Programs and activities are virtually nonstop on large ships; many folks, however, hang out by the pool or on deck to enjoy

the beauty of the sea and the relaxing movement of being underway. The captain may update passengers over the public-address system on the ship's progress toward the next port. The captain or cruise director may also point out interesting sights.

Lunch works much like breakfast: You can eat in the dining room and order from the menu, or you can stay in your swimsuit and eat burgers or pizza by the pool, where there is likely to be a music combo playing upbeat rhythms. You can join the pool games—always a good way to meet people—or just watch or ignore them. You then might work out, read, nap, play bridge, learn the latest dance steps, or attend orientation lectures about the next port. Recently released movies are shown in the ship's movie theater or on cabin television in the afternoon. On some ships, afternoon tea is a big deal—white gloves and all. At cocktail hour, there is usually live music by the pool, often with special drinks or appetizers, or happy hour in one of the bars.

As dinner approaches, it's time to dress for the evening. The dress code generally is specified on the daily agenda slipped under your door every evening. It is also spelled out in the cruise line's brochure, so you can pack accordingly. (More information on dress codes is available under "Preparing for Your Cruise.")

Some passengers stroll the deck before dinner, particularly at sunset, a beautiful time at sea. Others have a drink in one of the lounges. Dinner in the dining room is a social culmination of the day's activity. Spirits are always high.

After lingering over several well-prepared courses, it's off to the showroom, where live entertainment, ranging from Las Vegas-style variety shows to Broadway musicals, is offered nightly. After the show, early risers and those who had a long day of touring retire to their cabins. The more active or party-minded guests head for the casino, disco, or a lounge with entertainment. Midnight buffets are about "gone" these days. On select nights there may be a special late-night buffet or light snack fare. Now, too, on many ships, you have another option—a 24- (or almost 24-) hour alternative restaurant, often dressed up for the evening with table service and music. Before turning in, stretch out in a chaise lounge on deck with a glass of wine. Breathe in the balmy salt-sea air and be caressed by the warm breeze. Lose yourself among the million stars of the Caribbean night.

Usually, cruise ships sail through the night and arrive at the next port early in the morning. If you have risen in time to enjoy the early morning—the most beautiful time at sea—you can watch your ship dock. It's interesting and fun. After breakfast, the captain announces that the ship has been cleared by local officials and that passengers may disembark. Those signed up for shore excursions are given last-minute instructions about when and where to meet and are normally first to go ashore.

Although port calls range from two hours to two days (with an overnight at dock), most are four to ten hours—enough time to get a taste of an island or city. As you disembark, crew members remind you of the sailing time and make sure you are carrying your cruise identification, which you must present to reboard. Once ashore, some people explore on foot on their own, take walking tours, shop, and perhaps try a shoreside restaurant. Others hire a cab for a driving tour, and most take shore excursions purchased aboard ship.

Shore excursions take many forms. Some are passive (bus tour), but others are active (snorkeling, sailing, hiking, biking, or fishing). Surprisingly, many folks, particularly repeat cruisers, stay aboard ship. It's quiet—almost empty of passengers—but it's in full operation, except for casinos and shops. Lunch is served on schedule in the dining room.

About an hour before sailing, you reboard the ship. Don't be late. The ship will not wait for you! Just before castoff, go topside to watch the crew prepare for departure. Leaving port is always interesting, and a ship's higher decks offer a great viewing platform. Once at sea, the ship settles into its normal nighttime routine, and so do you.

SO MANY CRUISES TO CHOOSE FROM

TO THE FIRST-TIME CRUISER and even many veterans, the number of cruise lines, ships, and itineraries is staggering. Travel agencies that sell only cruises ease their customers into the array of choices by comparing cruise lines with well-known hotel chains, and such comparisons are useful. They might see Carnival, for example, as the Holiday Inn of cruises. Holland America and Celebrity Cruise Line are up a notch, perhaps at the Hyatt level.

Ritz-Carlton-type cruises might appeal to the most discriminating cruisers and are at the upper end of price, service, and amenities. Large and medium ships in this class include those of Crystal Cruises and Radisson Seven Seas Cruises (which also has a small ship in Tahiti). Boutique cruises overlap the luxury category and include the smaller, all-suite ships of Silversea, Seabourn, as well as the cruise/sail ships of Windstar.

Be aware that none of the hotel chains mentioned (except Radisson and Hyatt) have anything to do with cruising, and these are only a handful of the lines available. Though the foregoing comparison may help you see where you fit into the general scheme, you must dig much deeper to find your perfect cruise.

GETTING YOUR ACT TOGETHER

CRUISES VARY WIDELY. To pinpoint your requirements and preferences in a cruise, you need to ask yourself dozens of questions. Once you settle on what you want, it's easier to match your demands and budget with the appropriate line and ship.

What Is My Vacation Budget?

Unless price is no object, one place to start planning is your general budget. How much can you afford, and what are you willing to spend for your cruise? Consider what you must or may add to the cruise price: port charges and taxes, shore excursions, shopping, drinks and dinner wine (on most ships), gambling in the casino, spa services, laundry, and tips for crew members. Once you figure a range within your uppermost limit for all costs, you can begin to explore what kind of cruise you can buy. A good travel agent may tell you about a special promotion that provides value or added perks on a cruise you may think is beyond your price range. In the end, it may cost less, and if it does cost more, you may decide it is the best choice due to “extras” you receive. In other words, use your budget as a starting point.

unofficial TIP
Have flexibility and an open mind.

Although we will revisit this issue in “How to Get the Best Deal on a Cruise,” let’s say three-day cruises start at about \$295 a person, assuming two people to a cabin. Seven-day cruises begin at about \$650, and ten-day cruises are about \$920 and up. These prices are deeply discounted and represent the least you would expect to pay, usually for a cabin without windows.

How Many Days Do I Want to Cruise?

Your available vacation time and budget are among the factors in your ultimate cruise selection. Generally, the larger your budget, the more cruise days you can buy. That is, the longer the cruise, the more it will cost. If your budget isn’t up to the number of days you have your heart set on, you still have options. First, trade luxury for cruise days; consider a cruise on a less-luxurious ship. The fee for a week on an upscale ship will easily buy two weeks on a midrange vessel. Second, cruise during the off-season, when prices are lowest. Third, consider the least expensive cabin. Once aboard, all passengers have the same privileges, eat the same meals, and enjoy the same entertainment. Unless you plan to spend an extraordinary amount of time in your cabin, you might select less-expensive accommodations. We’re not talking about special suites, just the difference between the highest deck outside cabin (with a window or veranda) and the lowest deck inside cabin (no window). For example, on a seven-day Celebrity Cruise Line itinerary to Bermuda, the upper-deck outside cabin costs more than twice as much as the lower-deck inside cabin.

unofficial TIP
Don’t veer too far from your lifestyle or expectations, or you will be disappointed with your cruise.

In the Caribbean and Mexico, a seven-day cruise is about right for your first trip, but a three- or four-night cruise will give you a good enough overview of ship life that you can determine whether cruising is something you’ll enjoy again in the future.

Where Do I Want to Go?

You can cruise just about anywhere there is enough water to float a ship. This includes all of the world's oceans and seas and many rivers. Where you want to cruise depends primarily on your own "wild goose." It also hinges on your preferred style of cruising and whether you enjoy the destinations or the ship more.

Some destinations, including Alaska and Europe, are seasonal. Others, including the Caribbean and Mexico, are year-round. Almost all cruises worldwide are tailored to the market and the weather. Many to the Caribbean and Mexico, for example, are festive and high-spirited, emphasizing activity and fun. Mild temperatures allow time outdoors, and passengers tend to be younger. By contrast, Alaskan, Canadian, North Atlantic, Scandinavian, and Baltic Sea cruises are more passive, focusing on the beauty of the forests, islands, fjords, and glaciers. Still, Alaska cruises can have very active shore trips. For these northerly venues, longer cruises and colder temperatures contribute to a more sedate experience and attract families or older passengers. Mediterranean itineraries generally revolve around antiquities and port cities of southern Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East. Most ships visit a port each day, and sightseeing is the backbone of the vacation. On ships where English is spoken and the majority aboard are Americans, the passengers are likely to be 50 years of age or older, and affluent. On cruise ships where Europeans predominate, passengers are often younger, and sun and fun are emphasized, like in the Caribbean.

Hawaiian cruises occupy the middle, emphasizing both festivity and scenery, though passengers are, at times, older on average than those in the Caribbean. For other North Pacific, South Pacific, Indian Ocean, and South China Sea settings, the distance of the cruise areas and home ports from the United States ensures an older, wealthier market. Like Mediterranean cruises, sightseeing and cultural attractions are the focus.

Though a great way to see exotic places without shuffling among hotels, cruises allow only a cursory glimpse of the countries visited. Ten hours in Venice on a cruise is no substitute for visiting Italy. Even in the Caribbean, short stopovers on small islands leave much undiscovered. Yet, many guests will enjoy seeing something new, and probably would never travel to all these destinations on their own.

If you are interested in further exploring a destination, consider the add-ons most lines offer at the beginning and end of cruises. Two- or three-night packages include a hotel and some sightseeing. They are usually well priced and can be booked at the time you buy your cruise. Also consider picking an itinerary that offers "overnights"

unofficial TIP
Some travelers use cruising to sample cities and countries to determine whether they might want to return later for a more prolonged visit.

in certain high-profile ports such as St. Petersburg, Russia, or Venice. These cruises offer more intense destination time ashore.

DEFINING THE CARIBBEAN On a map with the arm of the compass pointing north, the islands closest to the United States are the Greater Antilles; they include Cuba, the Caymans, Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. All but Cuba are visited by ships from U.S. ports and have daily, direct air service from major U.S. cities.

The Bahamas and the British colony of the Turks and Caicos lie north of the Greater Antilles and southeast of Florida. They are entirely in the Atlantic Ocean, but because their tropical environment is similar to that of the Caribbean, they are viewed as part of the region. The Bahamas, and occasionally the Turks and Caicos, are cruise stops; both have air service from the United States mainland.

In the eastern Caribbean are the Lesser Antilles, starting with the Virgin Islands in the north and curving south to Grenada. The northern of these many small islands are called the Leewards and comprise the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, St. Maarten, St. Barts, Saba, St. Eustatius, St. Kitts, Nevis, Antigua, Barbuda, Montserrat, and Guadeloupe. The south islands, called the Windwards, include Dominica, Martinique, St. Lucia, Barbados, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Grenada.

The Virgin Islands, St. Marten, Antigua, Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, and Barbados are frequent cruise stops and have direct air service from the United States mainland or via Puerto Rico. The others are reached through local airlines, and most are stops for small ships, particularly during winter cruise season. In the south are Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, and Trinidad and Tobago, which lie off Venezuela. Aruba and Curaçao are major ports on southern Caribbean and Panama Canal cruises. In the western Caribbean are Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, and off the Yucatán Peninsula are the Mexican islands of Cancún and Cozumel. All are major cruise destinations.

Along the 2,000-mile Caribbean chain, nature has been extravagant with its color, variety, and beauty. Verdant mountains rise from sun-bleached shores. Between towering peaks and the sea, rivers and streams cascade over rocks and hillsides and disappear into mangrove swamps and deserts. Fields of flowers, trees with brilliant blossoms, and a multitude of birds and butterflies fill the landscape. The air, refreshed by tropical showers, is scented with spices and fruit.

Yet what makes the Caribbean islands unique is their combination of exotic scenery and the kaleidoscope of diverse cultures. The cultures have evolved from traditions, music, dance, art, architecture, and religions from around the world.

To be fair, we should warn you that the exponential growth of cruising in the Caribbean has had a tremendous, and many would say negative, impact on some islands. Cruise ships disgorging thousands

alaska

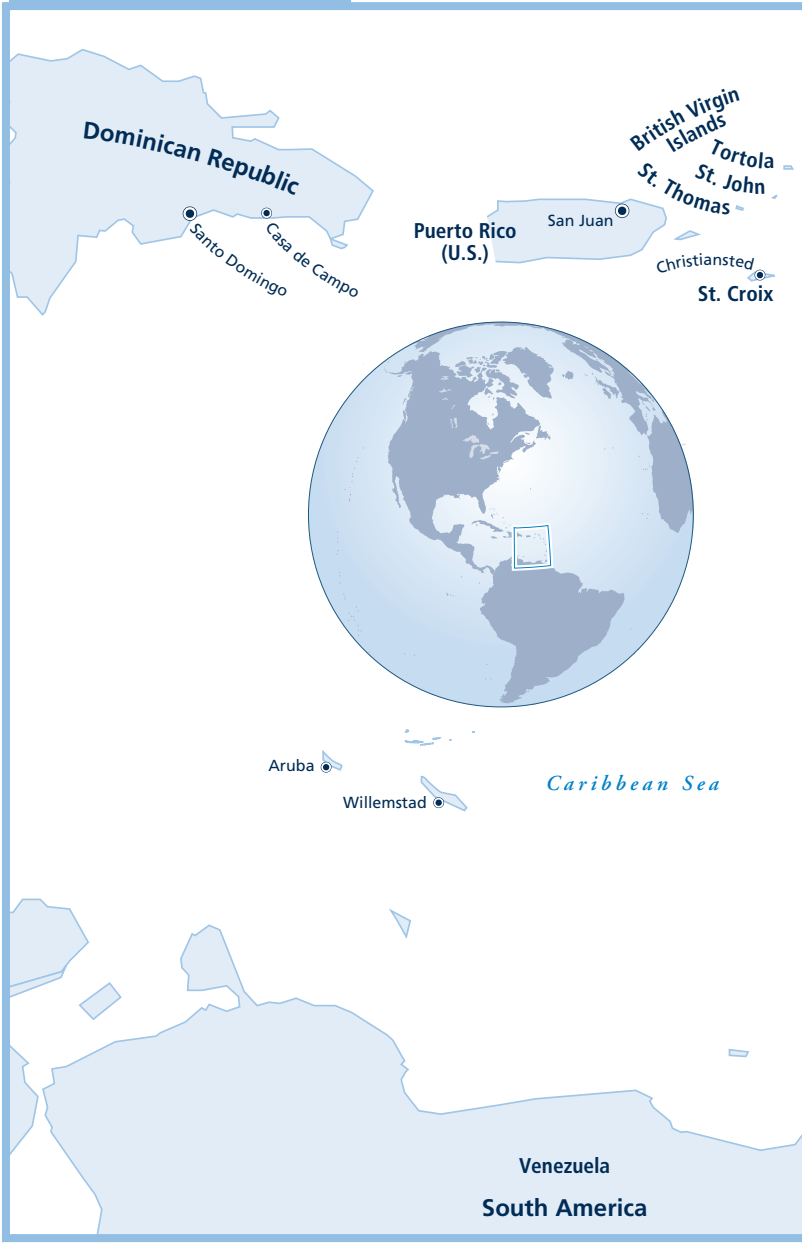


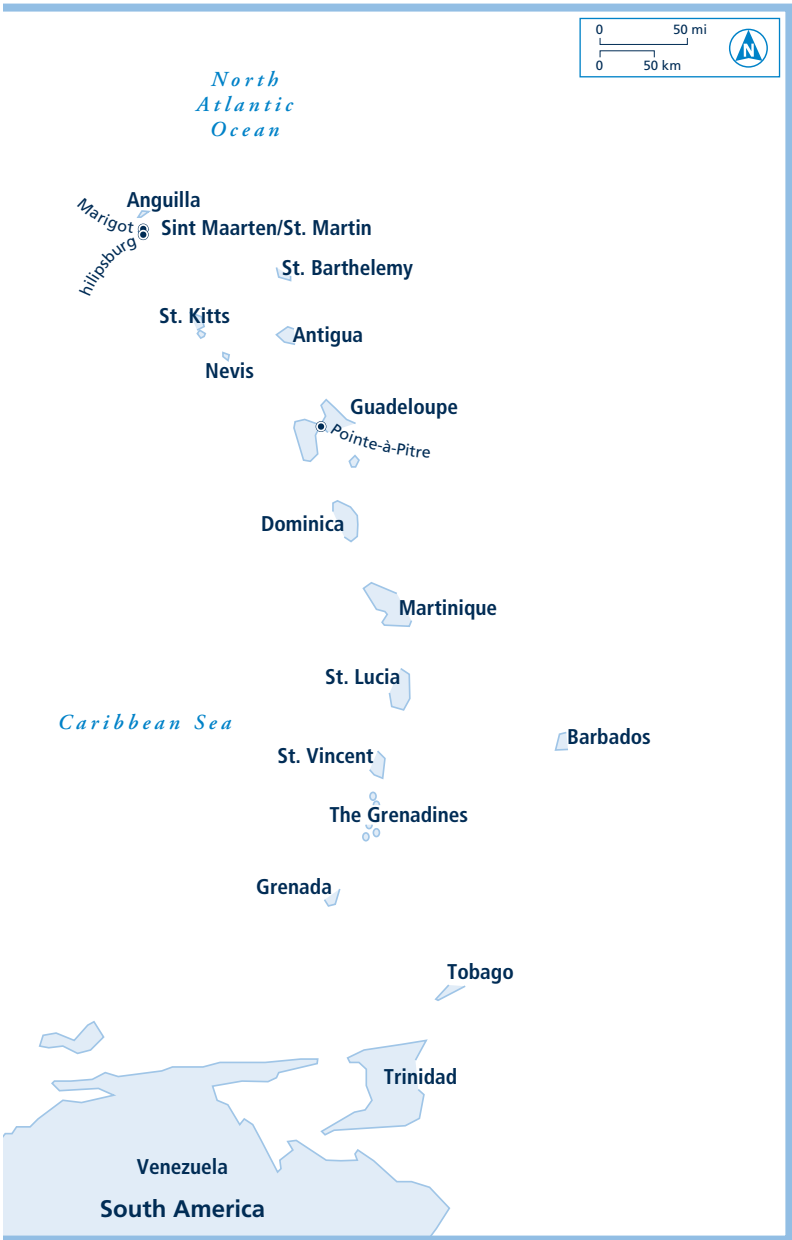
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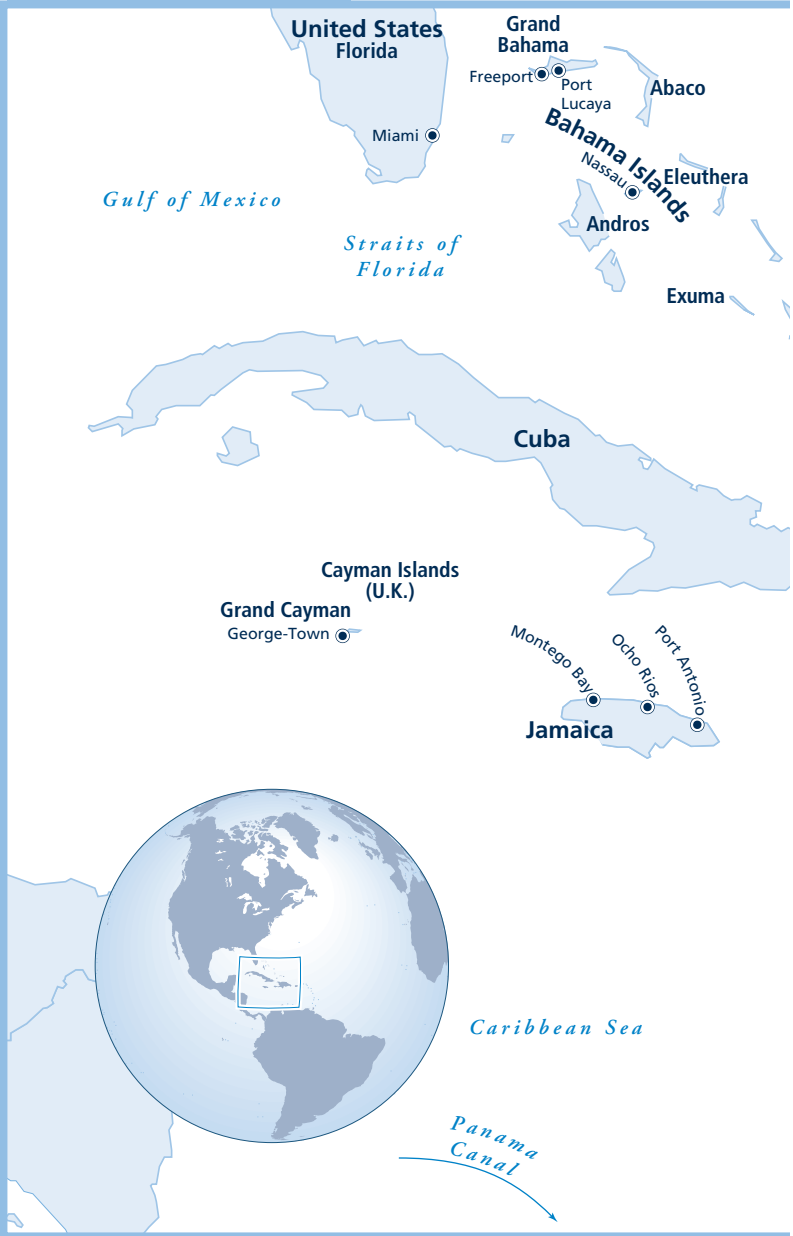


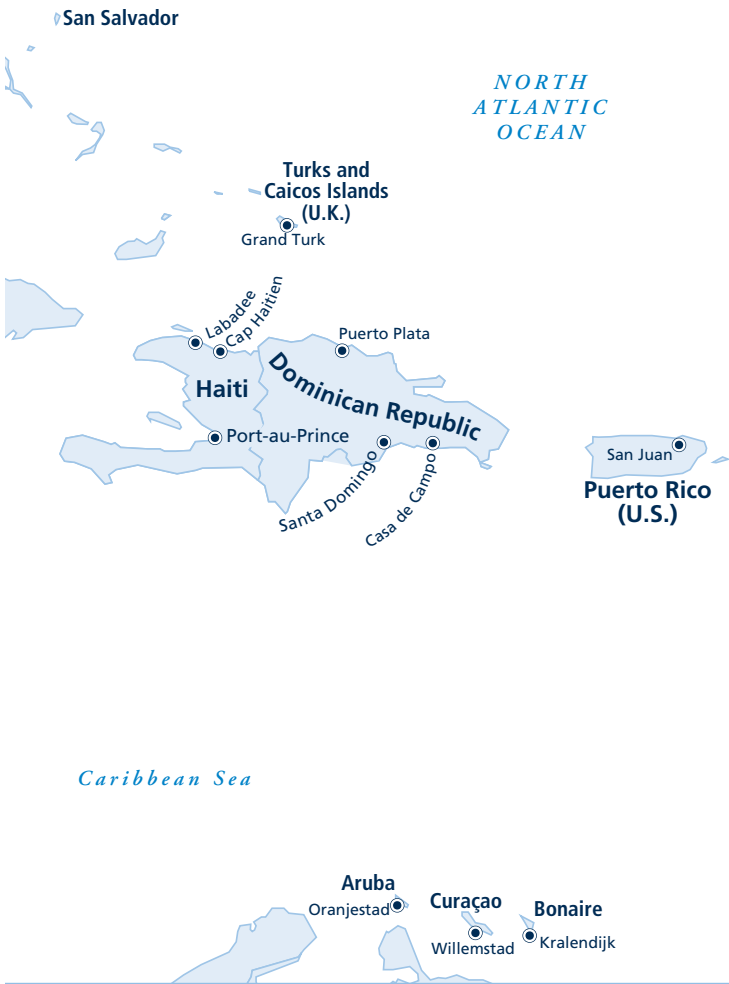
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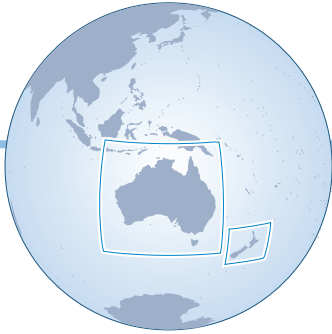




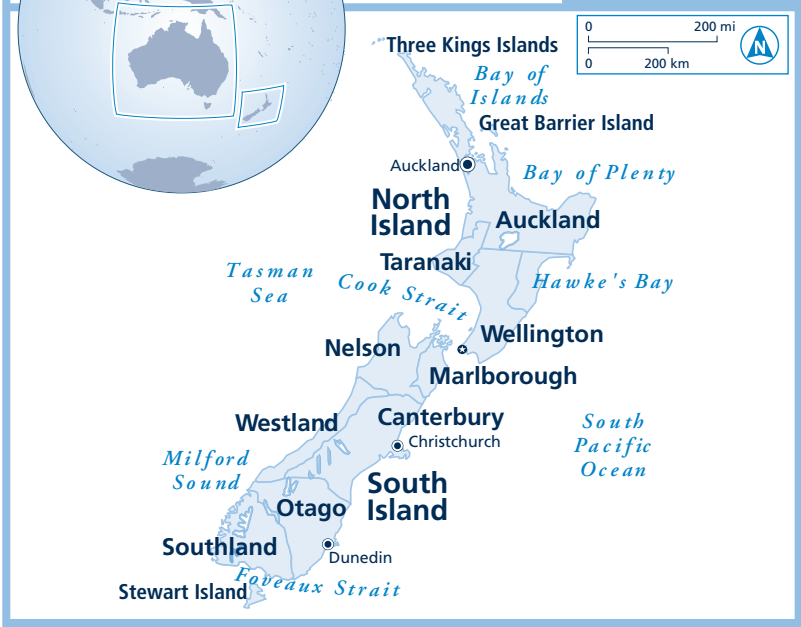
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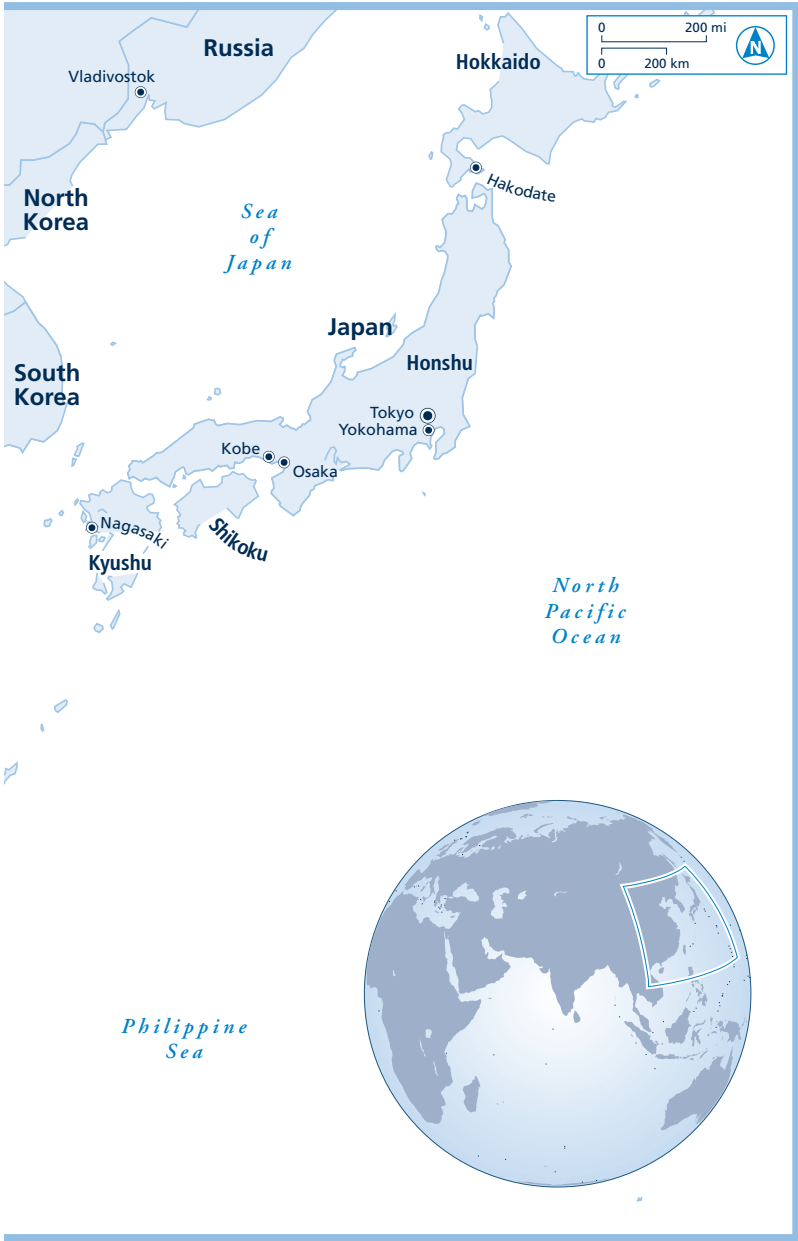


new zealand



the orient





indian ocean





southeast asia





eastern mediterranean





western mediterranean





scandinavia and northern europe



of passengers a day on a tiny island disrupt the normal rhythms, changing a quaint, sleepy, laid-back port into a frenetic, artificial tourist attraction. Sprawling malls have sprung up like ragweed around the docks, and whole local populations have abandoned their lifelong vocations to cater to tourists. Some Caribbean islands have become the equivalent of private islands owned by several cruise lines: plastic, idealized versions more familiar to fans of *Gilligan's Island* than to veteran Caribbean travelers.

When Do I Want to Go?

Cruises follow the sun, visiting destinations during their best weather. Hence, for some exotic destinations and such seasonal cruise areas as Alaska, the British Isles, Canada, and Antarctica, you have only a two- to five-month window of opportunity. For the Caribbean, Mexico, Hawaii, and Asia, among others, cruises are available all year.

Following is a sampling of popular destinations and cruising seasons.

Africa	Year-round, but mostly May–October for north Africa; November–April for eastern and southern Africa
Alaska	May–September
Asia and the Orient	Mainly October–March
Baltic	May–October
Bermuda	May–October
Black Sea	April–October
Canada	May–October
Caribbean	Year-round
Hawaii	Year-round
India and Southeast Asia	Year-round, but mostly November–April
Mediterranean	Year-round, but mostly March–November
Mexico	Year-round
New England	May–October
Panama Canal	Year-round, but mostly September–May
South America	North coast, year-round; other areas, September–April
South Pacific	Year-round, but mainly November–April

For every area, periods of peak demand are called high season; moderate demand, shoulder season; and low demand, low season or value season. Usually high season occurs when good weather in the cruise area coincides with times when people want to take vacations. In the Caribbean, that's between Christmas and the middle of April, and from June 15 to August 15. But in the Caribbean, for example, immediately

after the Christmas–New Year holiday, demand drops and the first two weeks in January offer value-season rates. If you can be flexible, shifting cruise dates a week or two may offer big savings. Ask your travel agent

unofficial TIP

Within high season, there are often valleys when prices are likely to be their lowest for the year, offering you an opportunity to save a bundle.

to compare pricing on a week-to-week basis before you book. Always check the period immediately before or after your selected dates to find out your options.

The January to April market targets seniors and Northerners seeking a respite from the winter. Although weather in summer is not generally as good as between January and April, families create high demand during midsummer. When demand tapers off, shoulder season follows, giving way to low season as cruise demand continues to decline.

During high season, ships generally are full and cruises are more expensive (because demand is high). If your plans are flexible, it is usually possible to identify several times in the year when your destination's weather is predictably good but cruise demand is moderate or low. Cruising during these periods provides lower prices, less-crowded ships, and good weather. Caribbean cruises in November and early December, before Christmas, are good examples. Hurricane season is over, prices are lower, and ships are significantly less crowded. Early May for Alaska is another excellent time.

If your travel schedule is not flexible, shoulder seasons (early June or late August) may be your best bet. Still, in 2005, one trend surfacing was that nearly all ships were sailing full, so discounting was far less than in 2004, 2003, or 2002.

What Sort of Lifestyle or Activity Level Am I Seeking?

As baby boomers enter middle age and relative affluence, and as younger couples and families discover the economy of cruise vacations, cruising's demographics are changing. On most midmarket cruises of two weeks or less, passengers are amazingly diverse. Responding to a widening range of energy and interests among these passengers, lines have developed activities that offer something for almost everyone.

Even so, lines continue to fine-tune their product for their primary markets. Thus, although Celebrity Cruises might develop programs and activities for younger clients, these cruisers continue to be a secondary market. The line's real focus is the 45 to 65 age group. That means a younger person will have a good time on Celebrity, but an over-40 person will probably have a better time because the cruise is built around the latter's preferences.

How cruise lines serve their primary, secondary, and even tertiary markets makes relevant the question, "What sort of lifestyle or activity level am I seeking?"

In each of our cruise-line and ship profiles, we pinpoint the style, tenor, and activity level of the cruises offered. Look for an activity

and social mix that seems right for you, but don't get bogged down in demographics. Many older people are active, athletic, and like to party, and many young people appreciate a sedate cruise and may spend their days doing nothing more than reading in a lounge chair.

The choice to participate in activities or party all night is entirely yours. Do, however, pay attention to the ship's size. A small ship carrying 250 or fewer passengers may have only one or two lounges and limited deck space. If you don't care for a full day or evening of shipboard activity, you'll enjoy its low-key ambience. Large ships have the resources to offer considerable variety. Carnival Cruise Lines, for example, pretty much wrote the book on party cruising, but even on a Carnival ship it is possible to relax. Ships carrying 1,000 or more passengers have plenty of places to escape the festivities.

Most ships offer a variety of dance music. Many even have separate nightclubs offering different types of music, dancing, and entertainment. Some even offer teen night spots.

Cruise lines design their promotional brochures to appeal to their target markets. If you identify with the people and activities depicted in the brochure, you probably will feel at home on one of that line's ships. Lines that do not cater to families, for instance, do not feature them in their literature. Study the brochures from your travel agent. Are the passengers pictured your age or of varied ages? Is the emphasis on shipboard activities or ports and scenery? Does shipboard life look like a 24-hour party, or do photos show a more laid-back experience? On-board facilities need no interpretation. They're spelled out.

What Level of Formality Do I Prefer?

Most cruises give passengers an opportunity to play dress-up. On certain evenings in the main dining room, men may be requested to wear jackets, tuxedos, or dark suits, and women to wear cocktail dresses or gowns. Most ships have a dress protocol that passengers are expected to observe, and it varies widely by line. (See "Dress Codes" under "Preparing for Your Cruise.")

Formality (or lack thereof) is a way cruise lines set themselves apart. A luxury line targeting highly affluent passengers may be more formal than a midmarket line. Family and budget lines can be less formal, but even the "fun ships" of Carnival have some formal nights, and adventure cruises are usually the most informal.

The bottom line is how much formality you want. The great majority of cruises vary attire from night to night and won't punish someone who breaks the dress code. If, for example, a man wears a dark suit instead of a tuxedo for the captain's party, it's likely no one will turn him away. Check the ship's dress code before you book.

 **unofficial TIP**
Even an informal ship might ask passengers not to wear shorts and tank tops in the dining room and be strict about it.

What Standards Do I Require for Dining and Food Quality?

Food—its quality and the overall dining experience—is cited by most passengers as a critical element of their cruise. The fare on cruise ships is generally very good—impressive considering that shipboard meals represent the ultimate extension of catered banquet dining.

Feeding 300 to 1,400 persons at a sitting is challenging under any circumstances. Doing it at sea with attention to detail, quality ingredients and preparation, multiple courses, and beautiful presentation is one of cruising's miracles. Ships have made an art of serving palatable food to crowds of diners. Hotel food and beverage managers could learn a lot from cruise ship chefs.

However, you can't expect the same excellence from a galley serving hundreds of dinners as you can from an upscale restaurant cooking to order for a small number of guests. A few small ships have cuisine rivaling better land-based restaurants, and small alternative or specialty restaurants on newer large ships can hold their own with the best of them.

The quality of meals and sophistication of the dining experience vary considerably among ships. Although luxury ships serving fewer passengers in single seatings have the greatest potential for serving memorable meals, midmarket lines like Celebrity, Holland America, and Princess have shown they can approach similar standards of excellence serving larger numbers.

If you have a refined palate and eat exclusively in the finest restaurants, you may meet your dining requirements only in the high-end group of cruise ships. If, however, you dine regularly in restaurants of varying quality, are acquainted with the world's major cuisines, and understand the limitations of cruise food service, you will find numerous ships capable of meeting or exceeding your expectations.

For those not hung up on gourmet food, there are many suitable, and even better, affordable cruises. You can use your cruise dining experience to broaden your culinary horizons, or you can save bucks aboard a ship specializing in good but less-expensive American fare.

Many people pay for food much fancier than their taste requires. Meat-and-potatoes people get a better deal putting their dollars into a cabin upgrade on a midmarket line rather than paying for fancy food on a luxury line.

Cruise lines have tended to offer good dining-room meals or good buffets, but seldom both. Almost all lines have eliminated the mid-night buffet, except for one special late-night extravaganza on some ships when chefs go all out to show off their culinary skills.

Under Norwegian Cruise Line's "Freestyle Cruising" program, you can eat in one of two main dining rooms, at whatever time you choose during normal hours of operation, or you can make reservations at any of six alternative restaurants. On the *Norwegian Sun*, for example, Le Bistro serves French cuisine; East Meets West offers Pacific

Rim and Asian fusion fare; Las Ramblas offers tapas bar fare; Il Adagio offers Italian cuisine; Pacific Heights specializes in healthy, light California cuisine; and Ginza offers sushi, sashimi, and teppanyaki dining. If none of that works for you, the Garden Café operates a buffet around the clock, or alternatively there's 24-hour room service. The reservations-only alternative restaurants impose a surcharge of \$10 to \$25 per person, but it's worth it. The restaurants are elegant, quiet, and intimate, and the food rivals that of good onshore restaurants—or perhaps more relevant, the fare served on ships in the luxury market. Boomers love the flexibility these multiple restaurants provide. Aside from the surcharge, the main downside is that you don't have the opportunity to meet people and form friendships as you would in a conventional dining arrangement, where you eat in the same place, at the same assigned table, and with the same people, every night—a feature important to more “traditional cruisers.”

Among other cruise-dining innovators, Princess's Personal Choice Dining program offers multiple restaurants and no assigned seating; or alternatively, passengers can opt for the traditional dining arrangement. The Disney Cruise Line also features several dining venues, but on the Disney ships, passengers rotate among three different themed restaurants according to a prearranged schedule. And, in a concession to those passengers who develop a fondness for their wait staff, their waiter and assistant rotate right along with them. Carnival, with yet another approach, offers “total choice” dining, where passengers can choose from four seating times in the main dining room, instead of the usual two; some other lines are also doing this. The four seatings stagger the arrival of diners, preventing the galley from being inundated, and allowing both chefs and wait staff to concentrate on a smaller number of diners at a given time.

Weather and lifestyle have clearly affected cruise dining. Because most ships spend all or part of the year in the Caribbean and Mexico, where passengers remain in their bathing suits most of the day, the lines found that it makes sense and saves money to expand the lido breakfast and lunch. Lido dining also gives passengers relief from the regimentation of dining-room hours.

A recent trend in onboard dining is the availability of stand-alone specialty restaurants in addition to the main dining room and buffet. Found mostly on ships carrying 1,000 or more passengers, and operating like a restaurant on shore, these specialized eateries offer an intimacy and ambience impossible to match in the ship's grand dining room. Like most upscale restaurants, the sea-going versions accept reservations; or alternatively, you can just show up during operating hours and hope to get a table. Cuisines and specialties available run the gamut from steak to sushi, Cantonese to California nouvelle cuisine. Almost all charge a fee ranging from \$10 to \$30, and most are worth every penny. Especially notable are QM2's Todd

English, Princess's Sabatini, and Carnival's ship-top steak and seafood restaurants.

How Gregarious Am I (Are We)?

Generally, it's easier to meet folks on a small ship if that is one of your prime goals onboard. There are fewer passengers, and you see the same people more often. Conversely, on a large ship, the only folks you see regularly may be your dinner-table companions (hope you like them!). On larger ships, if you meet somebody you would like to see again, get their name and cabin number. We once met a nice woman checking in on the 2,300-passenger *Monarch of the Seas*. In a week aboard, we never again saw her. Then again, many people who are frazzled in their everyday work life come aboard for escapism and personal pampering. Some don't need or want this socializing.

Large ships offer many social settings. It's possible to meet people in bars, lounges, and nightclubs; on shore excursions; in the health club; around the pool; and in the casino. But the easiest time to meet them is at planned activities. Whether it's aerobics and line dancing or bridge and wine tasting, such activities help people with similar interests come together.

The style of a cruise is important. If you are gregarious, you might prefer a ship that promotes a party atmosphere. If you are more solitary or are taking a romantic cruise with your significant other, you may prefer a less-frenetic social agenda.

Most cruisers solve the problem of companionship by taking significant others, friends, relatives, or all of the above with them. As on Noah's ark, the majority of passengers arrive already paired up. This is attributable in part to the double-occupancy norm for cabins. On most ships, solo passengers pay a hefty "singles supplement" for the privilege of having a cabin to themselves. Ships schedule gatherings where singles can meet, and some try to seat singles at the same dining tables, but singles generally have to scout around to find other people who are sailing solo.

The Other Passengers: What Kind of People Am I Most Comfortable With?

The less expensive the cruise, the more varied the passengers. Aboard a recent, affordable four-day cruise were retired seniors, middle-aged professionals, 20-something newlyweds, a bowling team from Pennsylvania, families with young children, a group of pipe fitters, and college students on spring break.

On upscale cruises of two weeks or longer, the cost ensures that passengers are somewhat more affluent and perhaps less diverse. On a seven-day Caribbean or Mexico cruise with midmarket lines, such as Princess, Celebrity, and Holland America, you will find more seniors, more professionals, fewer tradespeople, fewer families with

children (except during summer), and fewer people younger than age 25. Passengers are even less varied on the same lines' seven-day or longer cruises to the more expensive destinations of Alaska and the Mediterranean.


On the most upscale lines, including Seabourn, Radisson Seven Seas, and Silversea, the average passenger is older than age 50 and affluent. Passengers younger than age 20 are likely traveling with parents or grandparents. Some lines don't take children or discourage their presence because they do not have the facilities or atmosphere for them. Couples account for 80% of those on board. Singles are likely to be widows, widowers, or mature singles able to afford the lifestyle. Many lines get a fair number of mother-daughter pairings.

For our profiles of cruise lines and ships, we carefully scrutinized their passengers so you'll know what to expect. We believe the inclusion of this information is one element that makes this book different from other guidebooks on cruises. If you have strong feelings about whom your fellow passengers will be, pay close attention to these descriptions.

Warning: Children Aboard

One person's darling can be another person's pain in the neck. We have received a surprising number of complaints from readers about children on their cruises. However, most referred to cruises during holidays, spring break, and summer, when there can be 400 or more children aboard a ship. On Disney Cruise Line, the number could be much greater. In such cases, even people who adore children might find their patience wearing thin if the children are rowdy and ill-behaved, or if the cruise lines fail to supervise them adequately. As cruise popularity and family travel increase, the two converge with greater frequency.

If you do not want to cruise with children, avoid holiday periods, particularly on mass-market lines that promote family travel and cruise to the most popular Caribbean, Mexican, and Alaskan destinations. If, however, these are the only times you can travel (if you are a teacher, for example), search for ships that sail off the beaten track or focus on enrichment rather than entertainment. Finally, an experienced travel agent should be able to help you find the right ship—or the ones to avoid.

 **unofficial TIP**
The simple fact is that
cruising can be a wonder-
ful family vacation.

What Kind of Itinerary Do I Prefer?

Among itineraries, there's a world to choose from. You can have mostly days at sea, mostly days in port, or a balance of the two. Your cruise can be educational or just fun. There are theme cruises where entertainment or education is the focus, such as a jazz festival, and cruises where specific activities are emphasized, such as scuba diving, golf, sailing, or viewing wildlife.

Start by deciding how much time at sea versus time in port you prefer. If you are more interested in visiting ports, seek an itinerary with many of them. (Be aware that when a ship visits more than five ports on a seven-day cruise, some stops will be half-day.) Port-intensive itineraries are most plentiful on Mediterranean and eastern Caribbean cruises. Compare itineraries for different lines listing the same ports. When figuring your time in each port, remember that your ship must clear customs on arrival before passengers are allowed to disembark. A ship making port at 8 a.m. may not put passengers ashore before 9 or 9:30 a.m. Most ships require passengers to be aboard 30 minutes or more before leaving port. Thus your time in port could be trimmed by an hour or more coming and going.

Another important consideration, if you want to maximize your time in port, is whether your ship ties up at the dock or anchors offshore. Having to use a tender (a small commuting boat) to reach shore can take a big bite out of your port time. The larger the ship, the more likely the need to use a tender. The published itinerary or your travel agent will provide information on tendering.

Many passengers, particularly older, experienced cruisers who have “been there, done that” relish the serenity of being at sea. In recent years, they have been very vocal in opposing cruise lines’ cramming ports into their itineraries to attract first-time cruisers who commonly perceive value in the number of ports visited. Increasingly though, as boomers and even younger travelers—both renowned as “collectors” of destinations—come onboard in greater numbers, the port or land focus has become more important to cruise lines. As a result it’s more difficult to find itineraries featuring days spent at sea than to uncover itineraries with daily port calls. Some itineraries actually tout “overnights” in highly desirable ports like St. Petersburg or Venice. Most three-, four-, and seven-day cruises spend more daylight hours in port than at sea. Longer cruises typically feature more time at sea. Itineraries list days spent under way as “cruising” or “at sea.”

A map highlighting ports of call in the world’s cruise areas shows the hundreds of ports ships can add to their itineraries. With the possible exception of the Atlantic coast of Africa, most ports are close enough to one another to allow a port visit every day. Fortunately, most itineraries of seven or more days strike a balance. A typical seven-day itinerary includes two days at sea. Three or four days of cruising is typical of ten-day itineraries; 4 to 5 days on 12- to 14-day itineraries.

Repositioning cruises occur at the end of the season in a cruise area

unofficial **TIP**

Repositioning cruises are the best buys for those who crave more days at sea. They are also the best bargains.

when lines reposition their ship(s) by dispatching them to other areas where new seasons are beginning. Thus, Princess, Holland America, and many other lines reposition some of their Caribbean fleet in late April (the end of Caribbean high season) to the Pacific Northwest for

summer cruises to Alaska. At the same time, Costa, Celebrity, Holland America, MSC Cruises, Princess, and others might dispatch ships from the Caribbean to Europe or the Mediterranean. Repositioning cruises stop at some ports, but there usually is a high ratio of sea days to days in port. Because such voyages occur only twice a year, they are difficult for lines to promote, and passage usually is discounted significantly.

Specialized Itineraries and Specialized Ships

Passengers aboard most large ships determine for themselves how they will use their time. Specialty cruises, by contrast, focus on a specific activity or pursuit. Some may specialize in whale-watching, others in exploring ancient ruins. Sometimes the vessel sets the focus. Smaller (20- to 150-passenger) ships can dock in small ports and anchor in secluded coves. This facilitates fishing, swimming, snorkeling, scuba diving, and water skiing (participants sometimes carry their own sports equipment) and makes a difference in the way passengers use their time.

Traditional ships sometimes offer theme cruises. For example, professional football players may be aboard and reruns of famous games are shown. Passengers should inquire about themes and book the cruise only if they're interested. A cruise ship can be the medium for countless activities and themes. For additional information on specialty cruises, see Part Three, Cruising Alternatives.

Big Ships versus Small Ships

Hardly a week passes that some cruise line doesn't announce plans for another ship—bigger and, of course, better than the last. But bigger isn't necessarily better for a cruise.

New words have crept into the cruise lexicon. Not everyone agrees on their definitions, but for the purpose of comparison, these are the parameters we will use:

ULTRALINER A cruise ship over 140,000 tons and with a basic capacity (i.e., 2 people per cabin) of over 2,500 passengers.

MEGALINER A cruise ship with a basic capacity of more than 2,000 passengers.

SUPERLINER A cruise ship with a basic capacity of about 1,000 to 2,000 passengers.

MIDSIZE A cruise ship with a basic capacity of 400 to 900 passengers.

SMALL SHIP A cruise ship with a basic capacity of under 400 passengers.

BOUTIQUE SHIP A luxury cruise or expedition ship with a basic capacity of under 300 passengers.

OCEANLINER Generally, any oceangoing passenger vessel, but tends to be used for ships that provided transatlantic and worldwide service and have since been converted into cruise ships. Although the new *QM2* could be called an oceanliner, she's also an ultraliner since she holds 2,800 passengers and offers transatlantic service on a regular basis.

Until you sail on small ships, you may not realize their special pleasures. Small ships are fewer but more diverse in style than larger ones. They range from traditional sailing ships, such as Star Clipper's tall ships, to computer-driven ones like Windstar Cruises' ships, and in the degree of comfort and service from the modest vessels of American Canadian Caribbean Lines to Silversea's ultraluxurious quartet. Prices likewise vary from the moderate Windjammer Barefoot Cruises to *très cher* Seabourn Cruises.

unofficial TIP

Small ships are people-sized. It's easy to learn the layout on the first day. Life aboard is casual, even on the most luxurious ships. Informality and friendliness go hand in hand. Passengers are fewer, and making friends is easy—an advantage for singles.

It's difficult to generalize, but all small ships are cozy, imparting warmth never felt on a superliner. The smallest ones, such as American Safari's 12- to 21-passenger ships, are like private yachts—yet surprisingly affordable. The congenial atmosphere also enhances interaction between passengers and crew, who are likely to call you by name from the first day. If you covet privacy and personal space, though, this type of cruise may not be your best bet.

Small ships with their shallow drafts, turn-on-a-dime maneuverability, and fewer passengers can gain access and acceptability in places where large ships simply cannot go.

Their size makes them welcome at private islands and exclusive resorts and allows them to nudge into shallow bays and hidden coves. Their ports tend to be offbeat and uncommercialized.

Some small cruisers have bow or stern ramps, enabling them to disembark passengers directly onto beaches or into remote villages. Others carry Zodiacs and/or sea kayaks to transport passengers into wilderness. Some have retractable marinas, enabling passengers to water ski or swim from the ship.

A small ship offers exclusivity, even if it is unintended. Seating is unassigned at single seatings for meals. (On luxury ships, dining may be at the time of your choosing.) There are no crowds, no long lines, almost no regimentation. Best of all, on shore, you don't feel like part of a herd, unless you book a bus tour.

Today's superliners, megaliners, and ultraliners are self-contained floating resorts with facilities that operate almost around the clock. The bigger the vessel, the more the ship becomes the focus, although itineraries and ports are still important.

For small ships, destinations are key, and sightseeing is the main activity. These ships offer more varied and unusual itineraries than larger ships can, and often carry experts to discuss destinations and accompany passengers on shore excursions.

Small ships draw experienced, discriminating, and independent travelers who enjoy low-key ambience and often appreciate what is *not* available as much as what is. Many neither want nor need nonstop ac-

tivities. Still, check with your agent, as some small ships, like *Celebrity Xpedition*, are also great for active pursuits like diving, hiking, or hefty nature activities. A few small vessels have tiny casinos and small-scale entertainment, but most substitute conversation and companionship, or lectures by various experts, for chorus lines and cabarets.

The smaller size attracts all age groups. Sailing ships, particularly schooners, draw the young and adventuresome, attracted by the lower price and the opportunity to work alongside the crew. Deluxe ships and those with longer itineraries attract older travelers, many of whom are young in spirit and intellectually curious. They appreciate an island's culture and are eager to interact with the locals.

Sound appealing? Then consider one of the three basic types of small ships: Ultraluxurious liners offer privacy and pampering, exclusivity and elegance, tastefully opulent suites, gourmet dining, and often formal evenings. In sharp contrast are adventure-oriented ships, whose destinations are chosen for their natural beauty, wildlife, or cultural interest. Activities include hiking, kayaking, and birding. Cabins usually are modest, service minimal, and cooking down-home. They appeal to many people who spurn luxurious pampering but are keenly interested in participatory travel. A third type strikes a middle ground, offering comfortable (but not lavish) accommodations, good food, and attentive service. There is some adventure, some history and wildlife, and some time for sports. Evening entertainment includes games, movies, local talent, and guest speakers.

Even with these choices, small-ship cruising is not for everyone. Some would find it boring or confining. But if you abhor lines or regimentation, can operate on your own juices, yearn for a more intimate environment, or want to try trimming the sails or floating in luxury, small ships might be right for you.

Old Ships versus New Ships

Poets praise the beauty of sailing ships. But observers of classic cruise ships like the *QE2* have been equally captivated by noble grace that is both massive and subtle. Unfortunately, *Norway* is gone—out of the U.S. fleet and possibly headed for the scrap yard. Alas, such ships will never be built again.

Are old or new vessels better? The debate rages. Classic ships still in service, as opposed to those merely old, offer ambience that no newer ship can duplicate. But the newest cruise vessels have advantages only dreamed of in 1960. Because there are well-maintained and up-to-date older ships in service, you have a choice between the old and the new afloat. Find your preference by surveying what each type of ship has to offer.

Notice first the appearance of any vessel, old or new. The newest ships are designed from the inside out to provide more and better public rooms and the most amount of usable deck space. These vessels

spend most of their days in calm seas. None but *Queen Mary 2* will cut through the North Atlantic at full speed to maintain a schedule, so the fine lines and razor-sharp bow of the *QE2* aren't needed. Instead, new ships have squared sterns and chunky superstructures that provide many benefits internally but none externally.

As with some prima donnas, most new ships have one or two good angles. Publicity materials show profile shots and aerials of raked stems and funnels and broad decks for recreation.

Once inside your cabin, however, you may forget your ship's outward appearance. The space available to modern designers has generally made possible standard, usually larger, cabins for everyone. Some older ships offer comfortable space in every cabin, but they can't match the improved bathrooms and lighting of newer ships.

Luxury versus Midprice and Economy Cruises

Some of the most extraordinary spas, gyms, pools, lounges, and showrooms are found on the megaships of affordable midmarket lines such as Carnival and Princess. Likewise, dropping big bucks will not ensure that your ship is newer, nicer, or more competently and courteously staffed. (Check the ratio of passengers to crew. The lower the ratio, the more service you should get.) Booking a luxury cruise may get you a larger cabin (suites aboard Silversea or Seabourn Cruise Line) and almost certainly buys a roomier bath with tub and shower.

Regarding food, luxury lines have the edge. Usually they feed fewer passengers at a single seating spanning a couple of hours. Passengers arrive at the dining room a few at a time, like at a restaurant ashore. The staggered arrivals allow the galley the flexibility to provide more choice and cook dishes to order.

Most midmarket and economy cruises have two seatings for each meal. When their seating is called, passengers stampede into the dining room like marines hitting the beach. Surprisingly, however, the quality of meals on some luxury ships is only marginally better than that of better midmarket lines. A number of mid-market cruise lines such as Princess, Norwegian, and Disney offer exclusive, stand-alone specialty restaurants in addition to their main dining rooms. These restaurants require reservations and passengers must pay a surcharge (usually between \$10 and \$20), but some serve fare that rivals the cuisine served in dining rooms aboard luxury vessels.

SPECIAL PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

SOME PASSENGERS REQUIRE special services or accommodations. If you are a honeymooner, single, disabled, require a special diet, or plan to travel with young children or teens, read on.

unofficial TIP
 Spending more on a cruise does not necessarily get you more or better facilities.

Singles

Safety and security, comfort, convenience, companionship, fun, and freedom—all are reasons that cruises are among the fastest-growing options available to travelers who want to go it alone.

A cruise ship is about the safest, most secure environment you can find. A woman might hesitate to talk with someone in a hotel bar, dine alone in a fancy restaurant, or walk alone into a nightclub, but such barriers don't exist on a ship. As always, though, for female travelers, common sense remains a good attribute.

Furthermore, the fun is at your fingertips. The nightclub, disco, casino, and theater are walking distance from your cabin. Relieved of the need for an escort and with ready-made companions for dinner or activities, single people—men and women—vacation on their own terms.

Cruise prices are based on two people sharing a cabin. For one person to occupy a cabin alone, cruise lines impose an extra charge over the per-person double-occupancy rate. This “single supplement” varies from 10% to 100% (expressed as 110–200%), depending on the line, ship, itinerary, season, and cabin category. The most frequent charge is 150% except for suites, which usually go for 200%. Brochures always publish the rate. Your choices are to pay it, bring a friend, or take one of these options:

GUARANTEED SINGLE RATE You pay a set price published in the brochure, which is comparable to the low end of a per-person double-occupancy rate. The line assigns your cabin at embarkation. You don't have a choice, but you do have a guarantee of price and privacy.

You are likely to be assigned an inside cabin. If you select low season (October in the Caribbean), the start of a new season (May in Alaska), or a repositioning cruise when the ship is unlikely to be full, you might get a nice outside cabin. Currently, however, ships are sailing at full occupancy, making even these upgrades less likely than in past years. Royal Caribbean International and Norwegian Cruise Line offer a guaranteed single fare. Some lines do not show a guaranteed single rate in their brochure but will accept a reservation when bookings are light. Be sure to ask.

LOW SINGLE SUPPLEMENT Some lines have single supplements of 115% or less. Seabourn offers 110% on some cruises; Silversea has a few at 110%, though most are at 150%. In all cases, you pay slightly more than the per-person double rate, but you get privacy, and in the case of Seabourn and Silversea, all accommodations are deluxe suites.

FLAT RATE Clipper Cruise Line, Star Clipper, and some other lines charge a flat rate for single occupancy. You pay more but are ensured privacy and choice.

GUARANTEED SHARE The line plays travel matchmaker. You pay the per-person double-occupancy price, and the line matches you with a cabin mate (same gender and smoking preference). If the line does not find a suitable mate, you get the cabin to yourself at no extra charge. The savings—and drawbacks—are obvious. It's a bit of Russian roulette. You stand a better chance of having a cabin to yourself during low season or on a repositioning cruise. Some lines don't publicize a guaranteed share program but will accept a reservation. Be sure to ask.

CRUISING FOR SINGLES

S = Single cabins available

GSP = Guaranteed share program available

Single Supplement = Percentage of fare based on per-person double-occupancy rate

CRUISE LINE	S	GSP	SINGLE SUPPLEMENT
American Canadian Caribbean	Yes	Yes	175%
American West Steamboat	No	Yes	150–200%
Carnival Cruise Lines	Yes	No	150–200%
Celebrity Cruises	Yes	No	200%
Clipper Cruise Line	No	Yes	Varied
Costa Cruise Lines	Yes	No	150–200%
Cruise West	Yes	Yes	150%
Crystal Cruises	No	No	125–150%
Cunard Line	Yes	No	175–200%
Delta Queen	Yes	Yes	150–200%
Disney Cruise Line	No	No	150–200%
Glacier Bay Cruiseline	No	No	175%
Holland America Line	Yes	Yes	150–190%
Norwegian Cruise Line	No	No	150–200%
Oceania Cruises	No	No	200%
Orient Lines	No	Yes	105–200%
Princess Cruises	No	Yes	125–200%
Radisson Seven Seas Cruises	No	No	125–200%
Royal Caribbean International	No	No	200%
Seabourn Cruise Line	Yes	No	110–175%
Silversea Cruises	No	No	110–175%
Star Clippers	No	No	150%
Windstar Cruises	No	No	175%

SINGLE CABIN Some older ships have single cabins. The price is set but not necessarily comparable to a per-person double rate. More likely, a surcharge has been built into the price.

Also, some lines charge singles minimal or no surcharge for less desirable cabins, such as inside rooms, particularly when bookings are slow.

Helpful Hands

Golden Age Travellers (Pier 27, The Embarcadero, San Francisco, CA 94111; ☎ 800-258-8880 or 415-296-0151; www.gatclub.com), offers about 300 cruises a year and provides a cabin-mate matching service and lower supplements based on bargaining clout. Limited to those age 50 and up. Annual fee is \$10 per person; \$15 per couple.

Travel Companion Exchange (P.O. Box 833, Amityville, NY 11701; ☎ 800-392-1256 or 631-454-0880; www.travelcompanions.com), offers membership, a matching service, and bimonthly issues of a 20-page newsletter for \$159 (first-time enrollment; regular annual rate is \$298).

Finally, watch for specials and find a knowledgeable travel agent to help you. A smart, experienced agent knows which, when, and how cruise lines make special deals for singles, and they can often unearth ways that advance purchase and special promotional fares, even though based on double occupancy, can be applied to single travelers.

OTHER TIPS FOR SAILING SOLO The cruise industry has a long way to go in handling the singles market. The probability of finding love at sea varies according to age group. Twenty-somethings should look to the Caribbean on cruise lines that target a younger market, though the average passenger age remains above age 35.

Singles wanting to meet people should participate in activities, shore excursions, and sports. On a small ship, the chances of meeting many singles are slim. Big ships are considered better for meeting a wide range of people and also often have a get-acquainted session or other event for singles. Among small ships, adventure and educational cruises are singles' best choices; camaraderie quickly develops among passengers. Also, the number of unattached men is likely to be higher than on traditional cruises.

If you're 40-something or an older single woman who loves to dance, book a ship that employs gentlemen hosts—single males, age 50 or older, who dine and dance with all unattached women—no favoritism or hanky panky allowed. Crystal, Cunard, Delta Queen, and Holland America have them.

On singles cruises offered several times annually, Windjammer Barefoot Cruises all but guarantees a 50–50 ratio of males and females. Ages vary widely. You get no break on price—the single supplement is 150%—unless you are willing to share.

A common complaint we hear from singles concerns table assignment for dining. Some singles are unhappy because they're seated with married folks. Others are annoyed because they're seated with other singles and resent the cruise line playing matchmaker. Response varies, but your best bet is to submit a written request in advance outlining your preference in dining companionship. Aboard, if you are disenchanted with your table mates, ask the maître d'hôtel to move you; you may, in fact, even talk with the maître d' before the first night at a table, to state your preferences.

Honeymooners

If there is a better honeymoon option than a cruise, we can't think of it. There is nothing more romantic than balmy nights and sunny days under a Caribbean or Mediterranean sky. Your cabin is your honeymoon suite; room service usually is complimentary, so you never have to leave unless you want to. Forget the car, unpack only once, and still visit exotic places. Many lines (with advance notice) will provide a cozy table for two in the dining room. Regardless, tell the cruise line you are newlyweds. You will probably get preferential treatment, a bottle of champagne, flowers in the room, a souvenir photo, or even a cabin upgrade.

If you are contemplating a cruise honeymoon, consider: If you marry on Saturday, then Sunday or Monday departures are most convenient. Check on the availability of bathtubs versus showers if that is important to you. Ask whether room service is available at all three meals and whether you can choose from the regular menu (room service menus are often limited).

Nonambulatory Disabled Passengers

Many people who use a wheelchair or other mobility aids have discovered the pleasures of cruising firsthand. However, you need to be very direct and specific when exploring your options. Dining rooms, showrooms, or public rest rooms are not wheelchair-accessible on many older or smaller ships. A few small ships have no elevators; on others, particularly older ships, elevators do not serve every deck. Most ships require that you bring your own wheelchair, often one that is collapsible or narrow-gauge. Do not count on a lot of wheelchair-accessible facilities or cabins. On the most wheelchair-accessible ships, no more than two dozen cabins will have wheelchair-accessible bathrooms, and there usually is no way to get a wheelchair into a regular cabin's bathroom. If you need an accessible cabin, book well in advance. We list the number of wheelchair-accessible cabins available under each line's Standard Features and each ship's Cabin Specifications. Look for a ship with a lot of elevators relative to its complement of passengers. Divide the number of passengers by the number of elevators. Generally, the lower the calculated number, the less time you will spend waiting for elevators.

It is important that you book your cruise through an agency specializing or experienced in travel for physically challenged guests.

If you power your own wheelchair, unaided by a companion, bring something to extend your reach. A rubber-tipped teacher's pointer is good, a collapsible one is ideal. You need the pointer to reach elevator buttons, some light switches, and the closet rod and higher storage space in your cabin, even in some wheelchair-accessible rooms.

Make sure that dining rooms, restrooms, showrooms, lounges, promenade decks, and the pool areas are wheelchair accessible. Determine whether gangways are accessible at ports. If tenders are used, will you be able to board in a wheelchair? In the dining room, will your table accommodate your wheelchair, or must you shift to a regular chair? If you cannot shift yourself, will you need a companion to help or are crew members allowed to assist? Can crew members help in your cabin and elsewhere aboard ship? Must you sign a medical waiver or produce documentation from your physician to obtain a wheelchair-accessible cabin? No matter how dependable your travel agent is, call the cruise line and double-check all important arrangements yourself.

Partially Ambulatory Disabled

If you use a wheelchair sometimes but can walk a little way, you will do fine on most ships large enough to have elevators. You will be able to get around your cabin and into the bathroom on foot. A collapsible wheelchair will enable you to cover longer distances. Crutches are iffy on ships, walkers better, but the safest way for the partially ambulatory to get around is in a wheelchair.

Larger ships have wide passageways, spacious public areas, and, most likely, an adequate number of elevators. Smaller ships may have tight passageways, steep stairs, and no elevators. Older vessels may have bulkhead doors with raised thresholds, blocked passageways with steps to the next level, and no elevator access to some decks.

Choose a cabin near the elevators. Book one with a shower (with metal chair or stool); many ships' bathtubs are higher and/or deeper than yours at home. Ask whether the cabin's bath has sturdy hand grips.

Consider booking an itinerary on calmer water, such as Alaska's Inside Passage or the Mississippi River. If you cruise on the open sea, choose a cabin on a lower deck in the vessel's center; this area is least susceptible to motion.

Passengers with Sight and/or Hearing Impairments

Many people with sight or hearing impairments travel with a nondisabled companion. Regardless, be sure to inform your cabin steward of your disability. In the event of an emergency, he should know to check your cabin immediately to make sure your companion is with you and to assist you if not. If you are hearing-impaired, your steward should

be given permission to enter your cabin in an emergency if there is no response to a knock.

Passengers with Diet Restrictions

Diet restrictions usually pose no problem on cruise ships. The galley will prepare meals to your specification and serve them at regular seatings in the dining room. Orthodox religious practitioners who must verify that a meal is prepared in a certain way should ask whether such verification will be possible. All lines request advance notice—either at the time of booking for some lines, or no less than 30 days prior to departure for others—for specific needs. We provide this information under cruise lines' Standard Features. Also, cruise line brochures detail procedures for diet requests.

Families with Younger Children

Although some lines are equipped to handle younger children, we do not recommend cruising for kids younger than age 5 on most lines, and age 3 and up on lines like Royal Caribbean that have a special program for toddlers and their families. Lines that really want family business advertise that fact. If you have young children and want them to enjoy the cruise, but do not necessarily want to tend to them 24 hours a day yourself, book with a line specializing in family cruises. Its ships will have play areas, supervised activities, and sometimes a separate swimming pool for children. Best of all, the chaperoned children's program provides a respite from constant parenting. If, however, your rich Aunt Hattie wants to treat you and your little nippers to a luxury cruise, don't decline because the ship's brochure doesn't picture kids. Little ones on essentially adult cruises fare reasonably well. Although planned activities may be few or none, globally astute kids who relish history, culture, new sights, and meeting new people will get along fine. Kids who need constant entertainment and attention should not be brought along.

Usually, the children's center will be a sort of seagoing day-care facility. Group baby-sitting in the children's center is available on most ships in the evening. A few ships offer in-cabin baby-sitting. If the latter and all-meal room service are available, you've got it made. Sign up for second seating in the dining room, or go late if there is only one. Let the kids enjoy room service in the cabin, or take them to the buffet or informal dining area. Then turn the fed-and-scrubbed munchkins over to the sitter and head for the dining room. Of course, you can take your children to the dining room, but if they are age 6 or younger, once may be enough. If you prefer to dine with your children in the dining room, you should sign up for the early seating.

If your ship has a supervised children's program, your kids will be on the go all the time. However, we've seen children who scarcely countenance their parents at home refuse to leave them and go to the children's center aboard ship. To avoid this issue, before you leave

home, explain how things work and negotiate what time you will spend together and apart. If your children are too young to negotiate such deals, save the family cruise for another year or put the kids into the children's center and deal with any fallout.

Consider accommodations: Cabins are much more confining than children's homes or bedrooms. Your kids will size up your cabin in about ten seconds and figure there is not much to do there. From that point, they will be obsessed with running loose around the ship. Anticipate this response. Set limits in advance about bedtime, naps, meals, and parental private time, and plan for each day. Television, when available, is usually limited to a news channel, movies, and information about the ship and shore excursions. While family-focused lines may offer a cartoon channel or Nickelodeon, it's still good to bring games, books, and toys to keep the children reasonably content in the cabin.

If you can afford it, putting the children in an adjoining cabin is best, if the line's policy permits. If you buy kids their own cabin, the cruise line will sometimes include airfare in the deal. If you bunk the young ones in your cabin, you have to buy their airfare as an add-on. A few cruise lines offer a discount on a connecting cabin, where available, especially during low seasons.

Families with Teens

Teens do pretty well on cruises. They are old enough not to need constant supervision, will definitely eat their money's worth of food, and collect new experiences they can talk about back home. Teens are allowed to enjoy everything aboard except the casino and some lounges. On some ships, teens accompanied by parents are allowed in the disco and other adult areas. Family and midmarket ships often have clubs where teens can dance, and arcades with Ping-Pong, pool, or electronic games.

A cruise is a totally new environment for children—some embrace it with gusto, eager to learn, to find every nook and cranny, but others are intimidated and need help. For the right kids, it's a fabulous, fun, learning experience. With teens, as with younger kids, negotiate and set your limits before you leave home. Because teens can be messy and monopolize the bathroom, we stress our recommendation that you get them an adjoining cabin, again, if the line's policy permits. Finally, though we believe teens on their own are safe aboard ship, we suggest you keep them under tight rein ashore. If this is your first cruise and you have qualms about taking children, go without them and size up the situation. All of you might enjoy it more if you know the territory.

Additional Information

In both the cruise lines' Standard Features and the cruise ship profiles, we include a section on children's facilities. These references are a start.

Cruising for Children

This chart includes only those cruise lines with facilities for children; for details, see the line's profile in Part Two. Many lines not included on this chart accept children and offer cruises appropriate for them, but have no special facilities for children. Also, note that age limits vary from "no age restriction" to "no children younger than age 18 permitted." Always check with the cruise line before making plans.

KEY

A = All ships

S = Some ships and/or destinations

T = No 4-berth cabins available, but some triples

H = Only seasonal, usually Christmas, Easter, or summer holiday periods. Whenever children are aboard, most ships strive to accommodate them and their needs; the more children are aboard, the greater the variety of special activities."

CARNIVAL CRUISE LINES		CELEBRITY CRUISES		COSTA CRUISES	
REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	A	REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	A	REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	S
AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A	AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	—	AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A
BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	A	BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	AH	BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	A
CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	A	CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	A	CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	A
QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	A	QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	A	QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	A
ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	S	ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—	ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—
MENUS	A	MENUS	A	MENUS	A
MOVIES	A	MOVIES	A	MOVIES	A
PARTIES	A	PARTIES	A	PARTIES	A
POOL (just for kids)	A	POOL (just for kids)	S	POOL (just for kids)	S
TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	S	TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	S	TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	S
TEEN COUNSELOR	A	TEEN COUNSELOR	A	TEEN COUNSELOR	S
VIDEO GAMES	A	VIDEO GAMES	A	VIDEO GAMES	A
YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	A	YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	A	YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	A
YOUTH COUNSELOR	A	YOUTH COUNSELOR	A	YOUTH COUNSELOR	A
CRYSTAL CRUISES		CUNARD LINES		DISNEY CRUISE LINE	
REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	A	REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	A	REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	A
AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A	AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A	AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A
BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	A	BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	A	BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	A
CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	A	CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	A	CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	A
QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	T	QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	A	QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	A
ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—	ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—	ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	A
MENUS	AH	MENUS	A	MENUS	A
MOVIES	A	MOVIES	A	MOVIES	A
PARTIES	AH	PARTIES	—	PARTIES	A
POOL (just for kids)	AH	POOL (just for kids)	S	POOL (just for kids)	A
TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	S	TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	S	TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	A
TEEN COUNSELOR	AH	TEEN COUNSELOR	—	TEEN COUNSELOR	A
VIDEO GAMES	AH	VIDEO GAMES	—	VIDEO GAMES	A
YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	A	YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	—	YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	A
YOUTH COUNSELOR	AH	YOUTH COUNSELOR	—	YOUTH COUNSELOR	A

HOLLAND AMERICA LINE		NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE		ORIENT LINES	
REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	A	REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	A	REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	A
AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A	AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A	AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A
BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	A	BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	A	BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	—
CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	A	CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	A	CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	—
QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	A	QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	A	QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	A
ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	S	ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	S	ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—
MENUS	A	MENUS	S	MENUS	—
MOVIES	A	MOVIES	S	MOVIES	—
PARTIES	A	PARTIES	S	PARTIES	H
POOL (just for kids)	S	POOL (just for kids)	S	POOL (just for kids)	—
TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	A	TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	SH	TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	H
TEEN COUNSELOR	A	TEEN COUNSELOR	AH	TEEN COUNSELOR	—
VIDEO GAMES	A	VIDEO GAMES	A	VIDEO GAMES	—
YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	A	YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	S	YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	—
YOUTH COUNSELOR	A	YOUTH COUNSELOR	AH	YOUTH COUNSELOR	H
PRINCESS CRUISES		RADISSON SEVEN SEAS CRUISES ⁴		ROYAL CARIBBEAN INTERNATIONAL	
REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	—	REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	—	REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	—
AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A	AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	—	AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	—
BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	S	BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	—	BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	H
CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	S	CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	—	CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	A
QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	S	QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	—	QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	A
ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—	ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—	ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—
MENUS	A	MENUS	—	MENUS	A
MOVIES	A	MOVIES	S	MOVIES	A
PARTIES	A	PARTIES	S	PARTIES	A
POOL (just for kids)	S	POOL (just for kids)	—	POOL (just for kids)	S
TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	S	TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	—	TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	S
TEEN COUNSELOR	S	TEEN COUNSELOR	—	TEEN COUNSELOR	A
VIDEO GAMES	S	VIDEO GAMES	—	VIDEO GAMES	S
YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	S	YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	—	YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	A
YOUTH COUNSELOR	S	YOUTH COUNSELOR	S	YOUTH COUNSELOR	A
SEABOURN CRUISES ⁴		SILVERSEA CRUISES		NOTES	
REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	—	REDUCED CRUISE RATE (with 2 full-fare adults) ¹	—	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On most cruises, infants travel free. Where applicable, maximum age is 1 to 3 years. 2. Where available, baby-sitting is arranged on board and not guaranteed. 3. Where available, cribs arranged for at time of booking. 4. Children under age of 12 not encouraged. <p><i>Source: Cruise Line International Association (CLIA)</i></p>	
AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	—	AIR/SEA RATE (same or less than full-fare passengers)	A		
BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	S	BABY-SITTING AVAILABLE ²	—		
CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	—	CRIBS AVAILABLE ³	—		
QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	—	QUAD/FAMILY CABINS AVAILABLE	T		
ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—	ESCORTED SHORE TOURS	—		
MENUS	—	MENUS	—		
MOVIES	—	MOVIES	—		
PARTIES	—	PARTIES	—		
POOL (just for kids)	—	POOL (just for kids)	—		
TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	—	TEEN CENTER OR DISCO	—		
TEEN COUNSELOR	—	TEEN COUNSELOR	—		
VIDEO GAMES	—	VIDEO GAMES	—		
YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	—	YOUTH CENTER/PLAYROOM	—		
YOUTH COUNSELOR	H	YOUTH COUNSELOR	—		

Also consult **Family Travel Times** (40 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011; ☎ 212-477-5524; www.familytraveltimes.com), an online publication of TWYCH (Travel With Your Children) that frequently reports on family cruises, down to the last playpen and high chair. Annual subscriptions are \$39, which buys you access to six online issues.

SHOPPING FOR *and* BOOKING YOUR CRUISE

GATHERING INFORMATION

NOW THAT YOU HAVE OUTLINED your requirements and preferences, compare them against the profiles of the cruise lines and ships described in this book. After you, or you and your travel agent, identify several lines that seem to meet your needs, obtain promotional brochures either through the agent or by contacting the lines directly, using phone numbers and addresses in the profiles.

A travel agent specializing in cruises or selling them routinely can be a tremendous source of information. Many agents who have sailed repeatedly can provide firsthand information about ships and lines. Also, many will put you in touch with clients willing to share thoughts and opinions. However, always understand from a self-interest perspective that cruise lines pay the agent a commission on every cruise the agent sells.

In addition to obtaining promotional materials, buy several Sunday newspapers: (1) one in a primary geographic market for the cruise industry, including New York, Chicago, Dallas, or Los Angeles; and (2) the paper of the largest city within 200 miles of your home. The travel sections in these papers indicate where the itineraries and deals are. If you live in a medium-sized city like Charleston, South Carolina, for example, you may uncover cruise deals in the Atlanta paper that beat anything in your local paper.

Finally, here are some helpful magazines, periodicals, and Internet sites: www.cruisecritic.com and www.cruisemates.com, written and hosted by Anne Campbell, former author of *Fielding's Guide to Worldwide Cruises*, and a veteran cruise writer. Their candid ship reviews are based on firsthand experience. They also have cruise-line information, news updates, information on promotions, and best deals. Another Web site, at www.cruiseopinion.com, offers lots of detailed ship evaluations written by passengers who submit monthly reviews. We also recommend www.cruiseweb.com and www.cruisediva.com.

A fourth Web site worth checking out is found at www.icruise.com, which has a “beat your best price” feature. The sites listed sell cruises in addition to providing comparative information. Also

check www.cruise.com. All provide reviews, deck plans, tips for singles, and, of course, hot deals.

Cruise Reports (25 Lindsley Drive, Suite 101, Morristown, NJ 07960; ☎ 973-605-2442; fax 973-605-2722; cruises@cruise-reports.com; www.cruise-reports.com) offers evaluations and firsthand comments by travel agents. Annual-subscription price to be determined, as publication is being revamped.

Cruise Travel magazine (P.O. Box 342, Mt. Morris, IL 61054; ☎ 800-877-5893; www.cruisetravelmag.com) is unabashedly rah-rah cruising and contains no critical content, but it's a good source of information. Its six issues a year contain ads from dozens of cruise discounters, consolidators, and cruise-specialty travel agents. Subscriptions run about \$20 a year in the United States, \$40 in Canada.

Cruise Week (Lehman Publishing, 503 Crooked Creek Road, Wilmington, NC 28409; ☎ 800-593-8252; fax 910-790-3983; cruise-week@aol.com; www.cruise-week.com), a two-page weekly industry newsletter available by fax or e-mail, is produced by an editor who has reported on the industry for many years. It's directed to the travel industry, but consumers interested in tracking news about cruising will find it a timely resource. Subscriptions are \$125 annually.

Ocean & Cruise News (P.O. Box 4850, Stamford, CT 06907; ☎ 203-329-2787; www.oceancruise.com) reports on the industry and reviews a different ship in each issue. A much-publicized annual evaluation of lines and ships in the February issue is based on subscribers' votes, which tend to reflect seasoned cruisers' preferences for established lines. Subscriptions are \$30 annually for 12 issues for U.S. readers (\$36 elsewhere).

Porthole (P.O. Box 469066, Escondido, CA 92046-9066; ☎ 800-776-PORT; www.porthole.com) is by far the most attractive and lively magazine on cruises. It offers a range of interesting articles by knowledgeable writers, although criticism is rare. Subscriptions are \$20 annually.

TravLtips magazine (P.O. Box 580188, Flushing, NY 11358-0218; ☎ 800-872-8584; info@travltips.com; www.travltips.com) is a good bet if you are interested in freighter cruising, expedition cruising, or bargain around-the-world cruising on conventional cruise ships; it's published bimonthly. Subscriptions are \$20 annually.

HOW TO READ A CRUISE LINE BROCHURE

CRUISE BROCHURES ARE VERY ELABORATE. Because they contain so much information, we offer a systematic approach to evaluating and understanding their contents.

Look at the Pictures

All photos in the brochures have been carefully chosen to excite the people for whom the cruise line tailors its product. If you identify

with the activities depicted, this may be a good cruise line for you. Pay attention to ages of the people shown. Do you see yourself in the activities?

Sizing up the Ships

Look at the ships. Are they too big, too small, about right, or you don't care as long as they float? Talk to a travel agent about your vacation style. A good agent can help you make the right fit with a line and ship. Most brochures also contain a deck-by-deck schematic of the ship. Concentrate first on the ship's layout, looking for features important to you. If you work out, look at the relative size of the exercise room and try to find a photo of it so you can check the equipment. Ask about exercise classes, the spa, and such features as a jogging track or lap pool. If you have mobility problems, look for elevators. Because upper decks offer the best views at sea, note inside and outdoor public areas, particularly on the top two and promenade decks.

Itineraries

Read the itineraries, making preliminary selections on where and how long you want to cruise. On what days and at what times does the cruise begin and end? Do these work for you? Focus on a couple of cruises. Read the itineraries, observing how much time the ship spends at sea and in port, how much cruising is during waking hours, and whether the number of ports and the time allowed to see them suits you.

For practice, let's look at a 10-day itinerary from Copenhagen to London/Tilbury.

DAY	DATE	PORT	ARRIVE	DEPART
Sunday	June 4	Copenhagen		6 p.m.
Monday	June 5	Cruising		
Tuesday	June 6	Helsinki	8 a.m.	6 p.m.
Wednesday	June 7	St. Petersburg	8 a.m.	
Thursday	June 8	St. Petersburg		6 p.m.
Friday	June 9	Stockholm	4 p.m.	
Saturday	June 10	Stockholm		3 p.m.
Sunday	June 11	Cruising		
Monday	June 12	Oslo	8 a.m.	5 p.m.
Tuesday	June 13	Cruising		
Wednesday	June 14	London/Tilbury	7 a.m.	


The cruise sails at 6 p.m. Sunday, allowing several options. Because most flights from the United States to Europe depart in the late afternoon and evening, a person living in the eastern United

States could work most or all of Friday and catch an evening flight to Copenhagen, arriving Saturday morning. They would have until about 3:30 p.m. Sunday to rest and see Copenhagen. Alternately, they could fly out Saturday evening and arrive in Copenhagen on Sunday morning with four or five hours at their disposal before boarding, although we do not recommend this. Remember flights do cancel or have serious delays at times. Come in the day before. Why take a chance of missing your ship? A third possibility, of course, would be to arrive before Saturday and enjoy a leisurely weekend. The first day (Monday) at sea is a wonderful start, providing a chance to catch up on jet lag and explore the ship.

This cruise calls on four ports, not counting ports of origination and termination. This is fewer than average for a ten-day cruise, but all are major cities. The itinerary gives lots of time in each port. In St. Petersburg and Stockholm, the ship anchors overnight. If you're interested in St. Petersburg and Stockholm and a lot of sightseeing, this works well. If not, it's a long time in port. Full days (8 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m.) are planned in Helsinki and Oslo. In total, the cruise is 229 hours, of which 153 hours (67%) are at sea and 76 hours (33%) are in port. However, only 71 hours of the 153 hours at sea are during waking hours (7 a.m. to 10 p.m.).

Rates

Flip to the rate charts to determine whether the cruises you like fall roughly within your budget. We do mean roughly: You should anticipate paying 10% to 50% less depending on the line, ship, itinerary, season, and market condition. We describe available discounts in "How to Get the Best Deal on a Cruise." Note however that cruise industry experts expect much less discounting in 2005 through 2007 than in 2001 through 2004.

 **unofficial TIP**
Almost nobody pays the brochure rates. Brochure rates are helpful only in providing a base for calculating discounts.

Most lines present their fares in a chart like the one on the next page for Princess Cruise Line's *Grand Princess* on a seven-day western Caribbean itinerary in November. The fares are per-person at the brochure rate, based on two persons sharing a cabin (double occupancy). If the per-person fare for a cabin on the Lido Deck, category BA, with private balcony and two lower beds is \$1,569; you and your traveling companion would pay \$3,138 ($\$1,569 \times 2$) for the cabin. For singles supplement, see "Singles" in this chapter for a rate explanation.

As many as four persons may share a cabin, depending on its configuration. Rates for the third, fourth, and fifth persons are deeply discounted, sometimes as much as 66% off the double-occupancy fare. Let's say Tom, Ed, John, and Earl are willing to share a Dolphin Deck, Category AC cabin that goes for \$1,749 per person double

occupancy. The line charges the double-occupancy price (\$1,749) for two of the four men, and the third/fourth person rate of \$399 for the remaining two. Thus, the tab for all four:

PERSON 1	\$1,749	Cruise Only
PERSON 2	\$1,749	Cruise Only
PERSON 3	\$399	Cruise Only
PERSON 4	\$399	Cruise Only
TOTAL	\$4,296	

Usually, for cruise lines that bundle airfare to the port into the total price of the cruise (as part of an air/sea package), the airfare is normally included only for the two persons paying the double-occupancy rate. The cruise line will arrange airfare, often at a discounted rate, for the third and fourth persons.

If Tom, Ed, John, and Earl want to split the cost of their Princess cruise equally, here's the way the finances average out:

Cruise fare for all four guys	\$4,296
Final cost per person	\$1,074

Because standard cabins on almost all cruise ships are small with tiny bathrooms and little storage, we do not recommend cruising with more than two persons in a cabin unless, for budgetary reasons, there's no other choice. If you do elect to cruise with extra people in your cabin, select your roommates with care. Make sure everyone is compatible regarding smoking, snoring, and sleeping hours. Most of all, be tolerant and bring your sense of humor. Start with a cruise in a warm climate, when you can spend more time on deck than in your cabin. In the Caribbean, you might find yourself doing little more than sleeping and changing clothes there.

Most newer cruise ships are distinguished by the number of cabins with private balconies. These cabins become more affordable year by year and are highly recommended for those who want a quiet private space to relax.

Sailing Dates

Check the sailing dates of cruises that interest you, looking for those compatible with your schedule. Check dates around these to see if a slight shift puts you into a lower-priced season.

Cabin Category and Ship Deck Plans

Now look at the types of cabins available. Many brochures include floor plans for several types of cabins showing their size, configuration, and placement of furniture and fixtures. Some brochures include color photographs of cabins.

Grand Princess rate chart

Single-occupancy fares for categories GS–AD, BA–BD, and CC is 200% of the double-occupancy fare. For categories C–G and K: 150% of the double-occupancy fare.

STATEROOM CATEGORIES		LIST PRICE PER PERSON	EARLY BOOKING PRICES STARTING FROM
Balcony Staterooms/Suites			
Lido Deck	GS	\$2,949	\$2,949
Baja Deck	OS	\$2,449	\$2,449
Caribe Deck	PH	\$2,149	\$2,149
Baja & Caribe Decks	PS	\$2,099	\$2,099
Dolphin & Emerald Decks	VS	\$2,049	\$2,049
Dolphin Deck	XS	\$1,999	\$1,999
Dolphin Deck	AA	\$1,949	\$1,349
Dolphin Deck	AB	\$1,849	\$1,249
Dolphin Deck	AC	\$1,749	\$1,149
Emerald Deck	AD	\$1,649	\$1,049
Lido & Caribe Decks	BA	\$3,599	\$1,749
Aloha, Caribe, & Dolphin	BB	\$1,569	\$969
Aloha & Baja Decks	BC	\$1,529	\$929
Baja Deck	BD	\$1,449	\$849
Oceanview Staterooms (no balcony)			
Lido Deck	CC	\$1,429	\$829
Aloha Deck	C	\$1,419	\$819
Emerald Deck	DD	\$1,399	\$799
Plaza Deck	D	\$1,370	\$799
Plaza Deck	EE	\$1,359	\$759
Oceanview Staterooms (partially obstructed view)			
Emerald Deck	E	\$1,339	\$739
Emerald Deck	FF	\$1,319	\$719
Emerald Deck	F	\$1,309	\$709
Emerald Deck	GG	\$1,299	\$699
Interior Staterooms			
Lido & Aloha Decks	II	\$1,139	\$639
Aloha & Baja Decks	I	\$1,129	\$629
Baja & Caribe Decks	JJ	\$1,119	\$619

Grand Princess rate chart (continued)

STATEROOM CATEGORIES		LIST PRICE PER PERSON	EARLY BOOKING PRICES STARTING FROM
Interior Staterooms (continued)			
Caribe, Emerald, Dolphin	J	\$1,109	\$609
Plaza Deck	K	\$1,099	\$599
3rd/4th Guests			
Suite/Minisuite		\$499	\$499
Balcony		\$399	\$399
Oceanview		\$299	\$299
Interior		\$199	\$199

Rates include port charges. Air transportation and certain taxes and fees are additional. All rates quoted in U.S. dollars, per person, double occupancy.

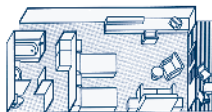
Although some upscale lines offer only suites, most ships provide a choice of cabins. The top of the line—usually on the top decks—are the palatial owner's suite or royal suite, comparable to the presidential suite in a good hotel. Next are a small number of one- or two-bedroom suites, followed by a larger number of minisuites. After these deluxe accommodations come standard cabins, which account for about 85% of accommodations on most ships. Now, on more of the new, large ships, many standard cabins have verandas. In fact, on some ships 60% to 80% of all accommodations feature these balconies, which are becoming a "must have" feature for many guests. Outside standard cabins with a window are generally preferred to inside standard cabins without windows, but they are more expensive. Usually, the higher the deck, the higher the cabin's price. For outside standard cabins with windows, many cruise lines offer different categories and rates for windows with an unencumbered view, versus windows that are mostly or partially blocked, by a lifeboat for example.

Standard cabins on ships built since 1988 generally are the same throughout the ship. Windows may decrease in size as you descend from deck to deck. If the window view is obstructed, this information should be indicated on the rate charts. If not, ask.

Cabins toward the middle of the ship are considered more desirable than cabins on either end, because center cabins are closer to stairs and elevators and are less affected by the ship's back-and-forward motion (pitching). The side-to-side motion (rolling) is more pronounced the higher you go and is felt least on lower decks. But the fact is, on large cruise ships, you will feel very little motion of the sea, except perhaps on the highest decks.



MINISUITE WITH PRIVATE BALCONY



(Categories AA, AB, AC,
AD, and AE)

Large bedroom with twin beds, which make up into a queen bed. Sitting area with sofa bed and desk. 2 TVs, walk-in closet, refrigerator. Bath with tub and shower.



OUTSIDE DOUBLE WITH PRIVATE BALCONY



(Categories BA, BB, BC,
BD, BE, and BF)

Two lower beds, which make up into a queen bed. TV, closet, refrigerator. Bath with shower.



OUTSIDE OR INSIDE DOUBLE

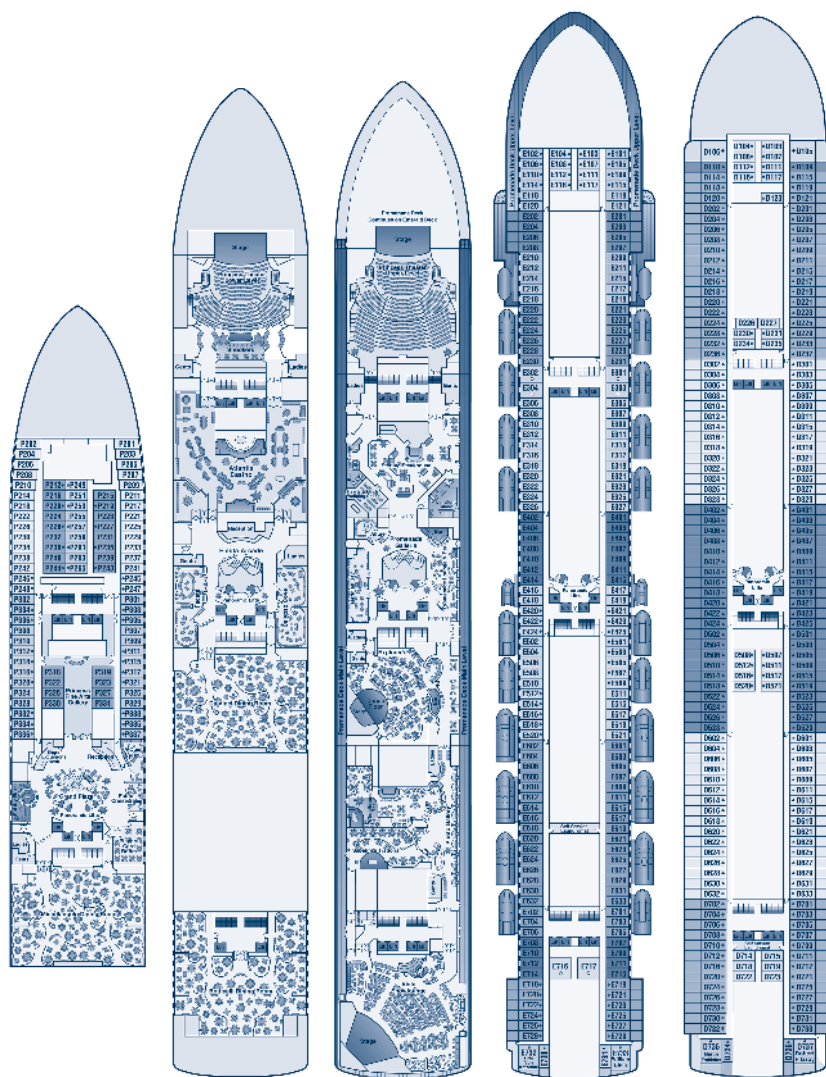


(Categories C, DD, D, EE, E, FF, F,
GG, G, HH, II, I, JJ, J, K, L, and M)

Outside staterooms have a picture window. (Categories E–HH obstructed.) Two lower beds, which make up into a queen bed. Many staterooms with two upper berths. Television, closet, refrigerator. Bath with shower.

PRINCESS CRUISES

GRAND PRINCESS



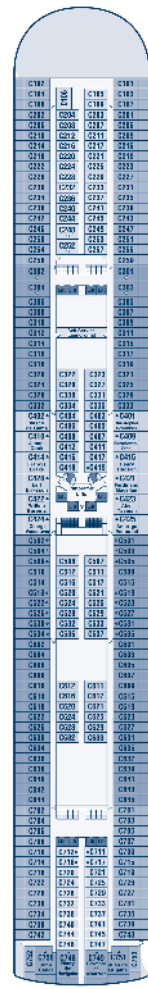
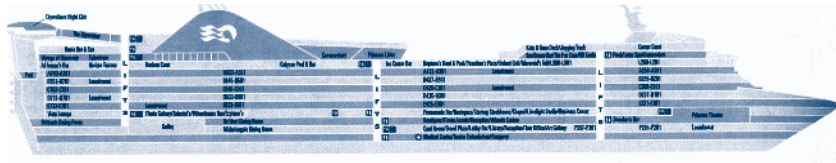
Plaza

Fiesta

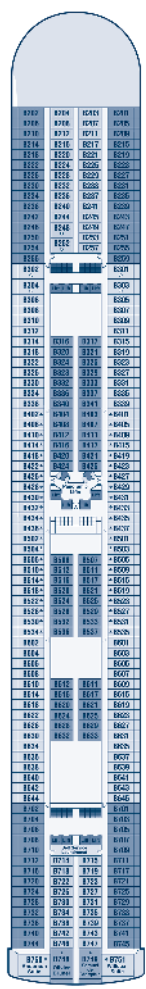
Promenade

Emerald

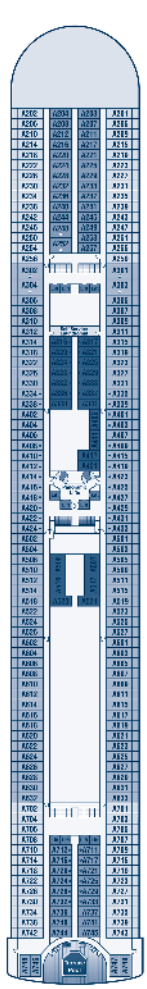
Dolphin



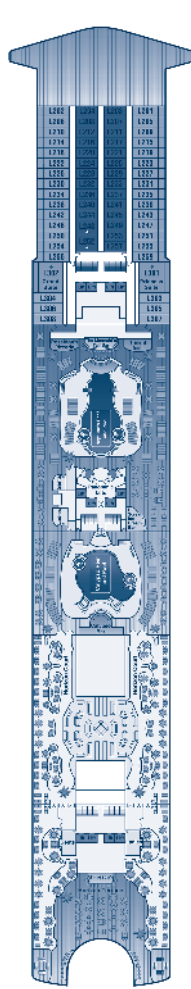
Caribe



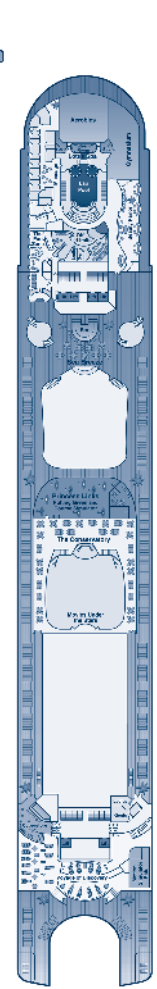
Baja



Aloha



Lido



Sun

unofficial TIP

The most stable cabins are at the water line near the center of the lower passenger decks—the best cabins for travelers prone to motion sickness.

Before selecting a cabin category, study the ship's deck plan. Normally, the schematic is near scale and is color-coded for cabin category. Checking the Princess Cruise Line rate chart with the ship schematic for the *Grand Princess*, the most expensive accommodations are on the Lido, Baja, and Caribe Decks, the first, third, and fourth highest decks respectively

with passenger accommodations. All three decks are removed from noise of the galley, engines, lounges, pool area, and showroom.

Check the drawing for decks where passengers walk or jog. Avoid cabins beneath jogging tracks or promenades. Similarly, avoid cabins where the window overlooks a track or walkway. Pinpoint lounges, showrooms, the casino, discos, and other potentially noisy, late-night areas. Avoid cabins directly above or below them. Engine noise may be audible in lower-deck cabins toward the stern.

Though private verandas, or balconies, have become increasingly popular and affordable, not all balconies are created equal. When shopping, always ask about balcony size and configuration. Some are barely large enough for a chair, while others can accommodate a chaise lounge, a couple of chairs, and a table. Some balconies are covered, providing both shade and privacy, but others are open to the weather, perfect for sun bathing, but also subject to the nosy gaze of passengers on higher decks. Balconies on the bow face forward and are often subject to a great deal of wind when the ship is under way. Stern balconies on the other hand offer more protection and additionally provide sweeping views to either side of the ship.

Even veteran cruisers have difficulty gleaning this information from a deck plan, but a knowledgeable travel agent knows how to check out these details when you ask. Analyze what you get for a few dollars more or less. In the chart above, for example, a balcony cabin on Baja Deck is only \$20 more than an oceanview (no balcony) cabin on the higher Lido Deck.

Be aware that the newer megaships are very long indeed. The *Grand Princess* is 951 feet long, more than the length of three football fields. If you have a cabin toward the stern, it's quite a trek to the ship's main theater near the bow. One roundtrip would be roughly a half-mile. With the way that the ship's public areas are distributed throughout the ship, it's easy to log upwards of four miles of walking an average day.

A PRELIMINARY LOOK AT DISCOUNTS AND INCENTIVES

YOU SHOULD NOW KNOW whether you are interested in a cruise offered in the brochure you are reading. If you are, the next step is to check the line's price incentives and discounts.

After two decades of steady growth, with dozens of new ships coming on-line, the supply of cabins outstripped demand (the number of people to fill them). Competition put pressure on cruise lines to cut deals to keep their ships filled, and a buyer's market prevailed. But that began to change in 2004, and for 2005, it's a seller's market with high occupancy and fewer discounts. The next two to three years will see a decrease in the number of new ships being added to the inventory and a double-digit increase in the number of passengers. As a result, competitive pressures will lessen and prices will increase. There will still be bargains but they may be harder to find, available less frequently, and will tend to be seasonal, directed toward a specific sailing, or be a last minute "fire sale."

Incentives and discounts offered in the lines' brochures are varied. First, the line sets prices according to times of greatest demand. High season is most expensive, followed by shoulder season, then low season. Savings may not be spectacular, judging from the brochure prices.

Remember: Fares in the brochure are base prices to which discounts are applied. Also, ships are less crowded and cabin upgrades somewhat more available during low and shoulder seasons.

After studying seasonal discounts, check early-booking discounts. Lines offer substantial discounts to travelers willing to book six months to a year ahead. The line has use of your money in advance and gets critical information on whether a particular cruise is filling. Early-booking discounts commonly are 15% to 50% off the seasonal rate, or may be expressed as a two-for-one deal. Either way, early-booking incentives are generally the largest discounts given directly by the lines, and once they're gone, they're gone. You get other benefits, too: your choice of cabin, often the most direct air routing, and your dining-room seating preference (if the line bases seating on first-come, first-served). That's the kind of information available in fine print or from an experienced travel agent.

Cruise lines also may offer cabin upgrades, credit for shipboard purchases, receptions with the captain, or a couple of nights at a hotel at the originating or terminating port. In addition to an early-booking discount, almost all lines offer other discounts (often up to 50%) to repeat passengers. Some discounts from cruise lines, travel agents, wholesalers, and consolidators never appear in the cruise lines' basic brochures. For help in finding them, read the section "How to Get the Best Deal on a Cruise."

ROUND-TRIP AIRFARE

UNLESS YOU LIVE WITHIN DRIVING DISTANCE of your cruise's originating port, you will require transportation to it. Until a few years ago, most lines included air transportation in the cruise cost and promoted it as "free air." But times have changed.

What Happened to “Free Air”?

First, check the cruise brochure to determine whether prices include air transportation. When lines include air transportation in their packages (for a higher cruise cost, of course), they agree to fly you round-trip from specific “gateway” cities. These gateway cities vary among cruise lines, but usually include all major U.S. and Canadian cities and many smaller cities. If air transportation is part of the cruise package but your gateway city is especially far from the port, an air supplement—an extra charge—may be levied.

Until the late 1990s, air/sea packages were touted as all-inclusive, with “free” airfare. Nothing, of course, was ever free. Cruise lines built air transportation into the cruise cost and called it “free.” By buying in advance and in large volume, lines could negotiate big discounts on airfares. These discounts enabled the cruise lines to offer complete vacation packages—the cruise with airfare—for a good price. Since 1997, however, cruise lines have increasingly published their rates as “cruise-only” fares and sell the air transportation as an add-on. The reason for the change is that as demand for air travel increased, airlines radically reduced the availability and size of discounts for cruise lines. Even in a post-9/11 world, airlines can fill their planes without offering reduced fares to major ports, particularly for weekend flights when cruise lines need them most. Today, cruise lines can obtain the discounts required for a good air/sea package only by buying airlines’ least desirable flights, including late-night flights, circuitous routes, and multiple stops. Luxury cruise lines are the exceptions, as they continue to offer air-inclusive packages to ensure that their customers get the most direct and convenient flights.

At the same time, many passengers often are discovering they can get better airfares and routing on their own or by using their frequent-flyer points. Plus, they receive their tickets well in advance. Often with air/sea packages, airlines issue tickets only at the last minute (to distribute passengers equally among available flights). The practice panics cruise passengers near departure who wonder where their tickets are. As it happens, cruise lines accumulate reservations for several months before contacting the airlines and nailing down flight itineraries and seats. Standard practice is to advise you of your air itinerary 30 to 45 days prior to sailing (Princess has a program called Flight Choice, where flight notification is made 60 days in advance). Understand, however, that we’re only talking about flight *information*. Actual ticketing does not begin until about 30 days from your sailing date, and your tickets might not arrive until a week or two before you walk out of the door. The process affords the cruise line maximum flexibility but vastly increases the probability of your receiving an inconvenient itinerary with multiple connecting flights, and with little time left to make changes. As a kicker, you may be surprised to discover that making your reservations well in advance doesn’t mean

that you'll get one of the better flight itineraries. A few lines give priority to early bookers, with flight itineraries based on the "seniority" of cruise reservations that are paid in full. With many other lines, it matters not whether you booked eight months or eight weeks ahead—you'll get what's available at the time the cruise line finally books the air travel.

If the air itinerary provided by the cruise line is not acceptable, you can request a change or a particular routing through your travel agent. Many cruise lines maintain "Air Deviation" desks to handle requests from passengers who want to change their assigned routing. Changes can cost \$35 to \$100 (as if you changed a ticket directly with an airline), and an additional air supplement may be charged if no seats are available in your designated airfare category. So, you ask, how bad can flight itineraries arranged by the cruise line be? A California couple was ushered off their ship and shuttled to the San Juan, Puerto Rico airport at 9:30 a.m. for a flight home that departed at 6 p.m. Following a cruise, a family of six were split up with four of the party scheduled for an early flight and the other two reserved for a flight that arrived eight hours later.

If you purchase an air-inclusive cruise vacation but elect to arrange (and pay for) your own air transportation, the cruise fare will be decreased because you are not using the air-travel part of the package. The amount to be lopped off your package price is shown at the bottom of the rate sheet as "Cruise-Only Travel Allowance." The allowance, for example, is about \$250 on one-week Caribbean air/sea packages.

Price and itineraries, however, are not the only considerations in buying air from the cruise line. When you buy the line's air add-on or an air-inclusive cruise, transfers are almost always included. The cruise line will meet you at the airport and transfer you to the ship. Likewise, at the end of the cruise, the line will return you to the airport.

When you purchase your air transportation independently or if you use frequent-flyer awards, you can usually buy airport transfers from the cruise lines. Carnival, for example, offers one-way and round-trip transfers, which must be booked 14 days in advance; price varies with location. Without such an arrangement, you must set up your own transfers. This seems complicated, but a travel agent can handle such details for you—and we advise you to let them. Be aware that at cruise's end only, some lines provide this transportation service regardless whether you bought your air through them.

When arriving at the embarkation airport, you will claim your baggage. Those on an air/sea package or with transfers will board a bus and their luggage will be transported with them to the pier.

unofficial TIP
Flights arranged by the cruise lines are often not eligible for frequent-flyer mileage. Plan to call the airline directly after the ticket has been issued to try and get proper credit.

There, luggage will be taken by porters, and you will see it several hours later, after it is delivered directly to your cabin. If the airline booked by the cruise line loses your luggage, the cruise line will do its best to get it to you (once it's recovered), even if the ship has sailed.

During busier times, cruise lines may fly you to the port city a day in advance and provide hotel accommodations. If you live in the western United States and are sailing from an eastern port, the cruise line may fly you to the port city on a late-night flight with arrival between midnight and 9 a.m. More considerate lines arrange hotel day rooms where you can rest before boarding your ship later in the day. Similar arrangements are sometimes made for East Coast passengers embarking on the West Coast, and passengers on European or Asian cruises.

The line, when it puts you in a hotel, assumes responsibility for transporting you to the pier. If you are to be accommodated in a hotel before embarkation, pack an overnight bag; you may not have access to your luggage until you're aboard ship.

Most air transportation purchased through cruise lines is coach class. Your travel agent can arrange seat assignments, boarding passes, and upgrades (when available).

If you are cruising during autumn (excluding holiday periods) or when airfares are discounted in your city, or if you can reach the port on a discount airline (like Southwest), you may want to book your own air travel to save money. If you can book your flights at or near the cruise line's air allowance, you will be able to choose your airline, ensure a good flight itinerary, accrue frequent-flier miles, and receive your tickets well before your departure date.

If you choose the air-inclusive package or buy air transportation as an add-on, take these precautions:

- 1. DO YOUR HOMEWORK.** Ask the cruise line if preferred air itineraries are allocated according to reservations seniority (i.e., those who book earliest get the best itineraries). Also ask when your booked flight itinerary will be available. If the cruise line does not give priority to those who book early or does not provide flight information far enough in advance to make changes, book your own air.
- 2. CALL EARLY TO RESERVE.** Remember that cruise lines contract for a specific number of seats for every cruise—when they're filled, the line has to scramble for additional ones. That's when you're likely to get a circuitous routing. But, to put this in perspective: The airline crunch comes at holiday times—Labor Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring break through Easter—and can be exacerbated by bad weather. So, if you plan a cruise during a holiday period, arrange it early and save yourself a pile of headaches. As a veteran travel agent advised, "Passengers should seriously consider taking the air/sea package from the cruise line during the winter months, especially if they are flying from a cold-weather gateway. If there are weather- or equipment-related delays, the cruise line

will help air/sea passengers get to the ship. If passengers have booked their own air, they are on their own if they miss the ship. Passengers who do their own air would also be well advised to purchase third-party travel insurance that covers trip interruption, delay, or cancellation due to weather- or equipment-related problems.”

The travel agent’s advice is valid, but only up to a point. The cruise line sees itself as merely an airline ticketing agent. As a matter of customer relations, many cruise lines will step in and assist a passenger who is delayed or misses the boat because of problems with flights that the cruise line booked. The salient point, however, is that the cruise line is under no obligation to help. If you read the terms and conditions of your Passage Contract, you’ll almost immediately bump into language like the following: “Under no circumstances does [X Cruise Line’s] responsibility extend beyond the ship. All arrangements made for the guests with independent contractors [such as airlines] are made solely for the convenience of the guest and are at the guest’s risk.” We’ll explore the ramifications of this and related issues later under “When Things Go Wrong.” For now, let us add that we recommend third-party travel insurance whether you book air through the cruise line or not.

3. ASK YOUR TRAVEL AGENT WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT YOUR TICKETS.

Most cruise brochures tell this in the fine print. If not, your travel agent will know from experience or can ask the cruise line. Normally, they arrive two to three weeks before departure. Smaller cruise lines generally deliver earlier than the big lines do.

- 4. PLAN YOUR ROUTE.** If you have a specific route you want to fly to your departure port, tell your travel agent when you book or as soon as possible, so that your plane tickets can be issued properly. If you receive tickets requiring layovers and a change of planes, have your agent contact the cruise line’s Air Deviation desk.

HOW TO GET THE BEST DEAL ON A CRUISE

TO GET A GOOD DEAL on a cruise, know the players and how the game is played. In the case of cruising, game rules pivot on the unalterable reality that a cruise is a time-sensitive product. If a cabin is not sold by sailing time, it loses all of its value. This makes selling cruises like playing “Beat the Clock.” From the time a cruise is announced, the line is on a countdown to sell all the cabins. The immense expense of operating a cruise ship makes the selling a high-pressure, big-stakes endeavor. Yet, for 2005 and beyond, lines are running well ahead of the norm in advance bookings, and this is tightening up the availability of discounts.

For consumers, the time sensitivity is a major plus. Any time a dealer must make a sale or write off the inventory (empty cabins, in this case), wheeling and dealing are likely, and this almost always benefits the buyer. However, we emphasize that there’s more to buying a

cruise than its price. If you allow yourself to be influenced only by “getting the best deal,” you are likely to end up on the wrong cruise. Talk to your agent and evaluate all factors.

Note that in American ports, it is no longer possible to show up at the dock, suitcase in hand, and negotiate a last-minute fare with the purser. For security reasons, cruise ships must submit passenger manifests to the FBI about a week prior to departure.

The Players: Cruise Lines

Lines have sales offices and, more and more, Web sites that can sell cruises directly to consumers. But as many as 95% of all cruises are sold through travel agents or other players, and you usually get a better price by buying from them. To their credit, cruise lines are loyal to those who sell their product and usually won't undercut the prices available to them. Practically, the lines don't want the bother, and until the Internet came along, it wasn't cost-effective. It costs cruise lines far more to maintain sales offices to serve the general public than it does to maintain a sales network through travel agencies and Internet sellers (which are expected to increase to 25% over the next few years). Note, however, that sales directly to consumers on the Internet are not necessarily at a discount.

But now many lines have “equalized” pricing and will penalize and even ban agencies from selling their products if they advertise a lower price. Carnival Cruise Lines, saying that it “would rather have 35,000 people selling Carnival than 10,” closed ranks with the little guys by offering the same prices to all of its accounts. Royal Caribbean has gone even further: Whether small agencies or giants, it announced recently that it would no longer deal with any agency that is found undercutting prices by rebating commissions. In addition, Celebrity, Oceania Cruises, and Norwegian Cruise Lines now have similar antirebating practices. Other major lines say, off the record, to be prepared for others to follow suit. For now, some lines continue to offer large operators preferential pricing, but that practice is dwindling. To gain an even greater advantage, the big sellers also use their extensive resources to gobble up blocks of cabins at group rates and then resell the cabins one at a time to individual travelers. That too may eventually become passé as major lines are beginning to forbid this practice as well. They hope to stabilize prices and avoid abuse of their policies.

The smaller agencies are also smacked by the way the cruise lines handle “distressed inventory,” for example, cabins yet unsold as the sailing date for a cruise approaches. Once again, not unexpectedly, these bargain-basement goodies are sometimes handed over to the line's big-volume brick-and-mortar and Internet accounts to move. Though most of us like to root for the underdog, it's tough to walk away from the great prices offered by larger sellers. It's worth remembering, however,

that the big guys usually can't compete with a good hometown travel agent when it comes to service, accessibility, and peace of mind.

With the cruise industry expanding exponentially, be alert for foreign cruise lines and new cruise lines trying to break into the American market. Sometimes these lines offer incredible deals to lure customers from the United States. In 2005, for example, the up-and-coming Italian Line, MSC Cruises, was offering seven-night Caribbean cruises for as little as \$545 for an inside cabin and \$945 for a balcony stateroom. Your travel agent may not be familiar with new players in the market, so you'll probably have to ask or do some research on your own, and you may want to use a cruise-only agent who knows a host of cruise products.

The Players: Wholesalers and Megasellers

Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton taught Americans that the more of something you buy, the lower the price should be. Businesspeople call it buying in quantity or volume discounting. In cruising, travel wholesalers and megasellers are volume buyers. Booking well in advance, they buy large numbers of cabins on specific cruises with the intention of reselling the cabins at a profit. Advance purchasing and volume discounts, coupled with the fact that the cruise lines do not have to pay commissions, allows them to buy at prices substantially below what an individual could obtain. Some cabins that go unsold can be returned to the cruise company by a certain date; others are bought on a nonreturnable basis. In the latter case, the wholesaler or megaseller absorbs the costs of any cabins that aren't sold. The biggest cruise discounts available to any player go to those who buy cabins in bulk on a nonreturnable basis. Wholesalers sell to travel agents and, often, like megasellers, directly to consumers. If the wholesaler sells a cruise through a travel agency, then the wholesaler pays the agent a commission.

Note that these players generally deal with lines having large ships, or they offer the best deals on a limited number of ships and lines. If they spread themselves too thinly over the spectrum of cruises, they diminish their clout with specific lines. Remember: It's in the wholesaler's or megaseller's interest to steer you to ships where they get the best deal. That may or may not be in your best interest.

The Players: Travel Agents

Travel agents act as sales representatives of the cruise lines. Unlike wholesalers and consolidators, they don't buy cabins. Instead, they sell from the line's inventory, on commission. Like cruise lines and wholesalers, however, agents earn the most when they sell in volume.

Some full-service travel agencies specialize in cruises, whereas others are cruise-only agencies, selling nothing but cruises and cruise-related travel. The latter sell so many cabins for certain lines that they

earn “override commissions”—a higher percentage level of commission over the norm. There is usually a volume threshold where the override kicks in. Some general travel agencies and independent agencies cash in on override commissions by joining a consortium—a group of agencies that pool their sales to receive the overrides.

To make the most in commissions and overrides, some agents push selected cruise lines, known in the industry as preferred suppliers. If the line that interests you is among your agent’s preferred suppliers, great. If not, your agent may try to interest you in a line with which the agency has such an arrangement. However, a good agent who wants to stay in business will never put a customer on an inappropriate cruise just to earn one commission check. Remember, agents rely heavily on good word-of-mouth for their business. Their goal is to satisfy you, so you will come back. Most will sell you any cruise if you specifically ask for it.

Because most cruises are sold by travel agents, it is critically important for cruise lines to develop extensive systems of loyal travel agents. Competition among cruise lines to influence agents is so heated that consumers sometimes become pawns in a marketing chess game.

Over the years, for example, Holland America has awarded its agencies bonus points redeemable for chocolate, picnic lunches, dinners in local restaurants, or any number of other choice perks. Such incentives may influence agents’ recommendations and narrow consumers’ choices. All cruise lines are not necessarily a good fit for all of an agent’s customers. Good agents place their clients’ needs and preferences first, but some agents go for the largest commissions and the most goodies.

As we noted earlier, in the past, many agents sacrificed part of their commission or override to make a cruise more affordable to a good customer and to compete with large-volume discount agencies. Some agencies selling cruises in volume still take lower commissions to underprice other agencies. But again, recent cruise-line policy changes have cut these practices but have not eliminated them. In many locations, competition among agencies for cruise business is as keen as it is among cruise lines, particularly with the proliferation of cruise-only agencies and large Internet sellers. And now, with airlines having decreased agents’ commissions, the competition for cruise business has grown even hotter.

In the final analysis, buyer beware. Protect yourself best by developing a long-term relationship with a knowledgeable travel agent who works to put you on the cruise that’s right for you.

HELPING YOUR TRAVEL AGENT HELP YOU When you call a travel agent, ask whether he or she has cruised, how many times, and on what lines. Firsthand experience is invaluable. If the answer is no, find another agent or be prepared to give your agent copious direction. Ask who your agent’s preferred vendors are. Just asking that question

will tell the agent you are a savvy buyer. Compare the agent's recommendations with information in this guide. Request permission to contact other clients who have been on the cruise line recommended, and ask your friends. Someone you know may have sailed on the line. Also check the independent cruise Web sites listed earlier under "Gathering Information." These sites feature cruise reviews from both travel writers and the general public.

To help your travel agent obtain the best possible deal, do the following things:

1. Determine from brochures, friends' recommendations, the Internet, and this book a general idea (a framework if you will) of where and when you want to cruise, which lines offer the kind of cruise that most appeals to you, and how much you can spend. Remember that your cruise tickets are only a part of your costs. Budget also for air travel and for shore excursions, alcoholic beverages, tips, and shopping. Many a cruise passenger has rung up an onboard credit account that rivals the cost of the cruise itself.
2. Check cruise ads in the Sunday travel section of your local newspaper and compare them to ads in the newspapers of a key cruising market (New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Dallas, Chicago, Boston, Washington, or Atlanta) near you. Look for deals that fit your plans and that include a line you like. Also, read ads in specialty magazines, such as *Cruise Travel* and *Frommer's Budget Travel*, and check out Internet sites selling discounted cruises.
3. Call consolidators or retailers (including Internet sites) whose ads you have collected. Ask about their offers, but do not book your trip with them directly.
4. Tell your agent about cruises you find, and ask if he or she can match or beat the price, or provide any "added value." Some producers may offer a bottle of wine, a fluffy robe, or another perk. Be aware that promotional ads are often bait to get your attention. The "lead" price probably applies to a limited number of cabins on a specific sailing. This element is probably the trickiest part of obtaining the best deal. Every ship has 6 to 20 categories of cabins. Often, unless you can pinpoint the date, itinerary, and cabin category being advertised, it may be hard to know whether you are getting a good deal. Nobody said this was easy.
5. Choose among options uncovered by you and your travel agent. Whatever option you elect, have your agent book it. It may be commissionable (at no additional cost to you) and will provide the agent some return on the time invested on your behalf. Also, your agent should be able to help you verify the quality and integrity of the deal, and be there to assist if any glitches arise.

HOW THE GAME IS PLAYED: THE SALES COUNTDOWN

CRUISE LINES WORK WELL in advance to schedule cruises and develop promotional brochures. It is essential to roll out marketing campaigns quickly to avoid “fire sales” as sailing dates near.

Most itineraries and dates are announced 10 to 18 months in advance. Particularly attractive dates on popular ships and itineraries sell out quickly. Likewise, cruises to seasonal destinations like Alaska fill fast. The highest- and lowest-priced cabins sell out first. Usually the last cruises to fill are low- and shoulder-season cruises to year-round areas. Many consumers used to wait for last-minute discounts available when cruise lines hit the panic button. The lines finally wised up, reasoning that early-booking discounts could generate cash flow and indicate sales prospects for each cruise. Although some distress selling continues, cruise lines are learning to control the inventory more efficiently.

Escalating Base-Rate Model

To see how this works, let’s examine a pricing model adopted by several prominent cruise lines. When the cruise is announced, the line advertises a base fare, discounted from the brochure figure by, say, 40%. The line warrants that the discounted base fare may increase as the countdown progresses, but will never be lower. Therefore, a consumer who books a November cruise in the preceding April would pay less than a passenger who books in June. That passenger, in turn, would pay less than someone booking in August, and so on.

This strategy allows the line and the travel agent to tell the customer that “this cruise will not be cheaper than today.” The customer knows that the rate may rise, but will never be lower. The line can maintain the discounted rate if the ship is filling slowly, or raise it incrementally as the cruise approaches being sold out. We call this the escalating base-rate model.

Identifying the pricing model is useful, because then it’s easier to understand what the cruise line does to nudge the ship to capacity.

In practice, cruise lines operate two pricing systems. Primary is the escalating base-rate system. If the cruise sells to near capacity, only that system will be employed. If sales lag behind expectations, however, the line goes to its separate and collateral model: the special-situations system.

Special-Situations System

Special-situations initiatives—usually time-limited and tightly targeted efforts for boosting sales—run concurrently with, and independently of, the escalating base-rate system. Examples of such initiatives include a deeply discounted senior citizen’s rate, a direct mailing to previous customers offering a big discount, a regional

campaign, advertising last-minute bargains on the Internet, or a heavily discounted group-sales overture to a large company for their executives or employees.

Each special-situation initiative targets a carefully selected market segment. Initiatives may run sequentially or concurrently but usually are short-lived and end when the cruise sells out. What is really important about special-situation initiatives is that the discount offered might be much greater than the base-rate discount. If you can locate such an initiative, you may have found the lowest possible fare. If the special is advertised in Atlanta and you live in Buffalo, the package's air component will be useless to you. However, if you can buy the cruise-only part of the special and arrange affordable airfare from Atlanta, you've got a deal.

A common special-situations approach is for the cruise line to join forces with specific travel agents or Internet sellers. Like travel agents who have preferred suppliers, cruise lines have preferred retailers. When a cruise is not selling to expectations, some lines have policies permitting them to enlist favorite big-volume agencies to help move the remaining cabins; other lines' policies may prohibit this, in an effort to give all retailers equal opportunities for sales. When this tactic is used, it develops promotions with these agents featuring extra-deep discounts and special incentives, such as cabin upgrades or discounted air add-ons. Many preferred agencies and Web sites sell cruises only and field hundreds of calls daily. If they have an especially juicy deal to offer, they can sell lots of cabins fast. Big-volume, cruise-only agencies advertise in magazines, including *Cruise Travel*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Frommer's Budget Travel*, and *Condé Nast Traveler*, and in large-market newspapers.

The Dump Zone

In the cruise marketplace, anything can happen. Some lines are either unequipped to nudge sales effectively or just aren't very good at it. Sometimes, lines expert in special-situations initiatives don't fill their cruises. The upshot is that a goodly number of empty cabins may be sold at distress prices during the final eight weeks before sailing, especially in the off-season.

When time is short, agents and cruise lines know it is much easier and less complicated to sell a cruise to someone who doesn't require air transportation to the port. Florida is a huge market for late-breaking deals because of its large population of retirees and its proximity to ports. Major ports on the Pacific Coast and Northeast likewise enjoy distress sales. If you live within easy driving distance of a major cruise-ship port, you live in a dump zone. You are well situated to benefit from last-minute discounts, but you probably will have no choice in cabin selection or dining-room seatings.

Discount Alphabet Soup

Before you shop for discounts, pick the cruise type that appeals to you. Once you start looking, don't get sidetracked by price alone. Instead, stay doggedly on the trail of the cruise that meets your needs and will satisfy and exceed your vacation expectations. Never equate cheapest with best, but don't equate it with worst, either.

More than a dozen types of cruise discounts are commonly offered, other than seasonal discounts. As you encounter them, be aware that catchy marketing come-ons, like "two-for-one" or "sail three days free," aren't always what they seem. For example, a promotion advertising 50% off the second person in the cabin (a frequent gimmick) is nothing more than 25% off for both (you probably could have done better with an early-booking discount). The best method for comparing rates, with or without discounts, is to calculate the per diem (per day) cost of your cruise vacation. Add the cruise cost and the airfare cost if it isn't included, plus taxes, port charges, and other applicable fees (transfers, etc.). Divide the total by the number of nights you will stay on the ship or in hotels included in the package.

Always compare apples to apples. Some cruising areas are more expensive. For example, Caribbean cruises should be compared to Caribbean cruises, not to Alaskan or Mediterranean cruises. Remember also that cruise lines are not created equal. Comparing a seven-day Carnival (Holiday Inn-type) cruise with a seven-day Silversea (Ritz-Carlton-type) cruise is meaningless. The cruise line profiles in Part Two will describe the differences.

Early-Booking Discounts

The more common of two kinds of early-booking discounts, the escalating base-rate model, was described earlier. Each line has a different name for it. Escalating base rates are capacity-controlled and can be withdrawn or escalated without notice. Most of the major lines employ capacity control pricing. The second type of early-booking discount is the flat cut-off date. If you book before the specified date, you get the discount. This, too, is common practice on selected itineraries. Passengers who pay in full by a specified date (as much as six to nine months before the cruise) receive a 10% to 20% discount. This discount is popular with Crystal, Silversea, and others in the luxury market.

Free Days

Passengers are offered 7 days' cruising for the price of 6, or 12 for the price of 10. Variations include complimentary days (with hotel) in the port city before and/or after the cruise, or "book a seven-day cruise and receive a free two- or three-day land package." Divide the double occupancy price by the number of days in the package to get a per-diem cost for comparative purposes.

Two-for-One and Second Passenger Cruises Free

The deal is that two passengers cruise for the price of one, but some tricky math is involved. Pick your cruise and cabin category and find the double-occupancy price per person, air included, on the brochure's rate chart. The two-for-one price is this rate less the cruise line's air cost for one person from your gateway city.

Let's say the brochure's air-inclusive double-occupancy rate is \$2,000. If the brochure does not give it, ask your travel agent to call the cruise line to learn the round-trip airfare cost from your gateway city. This amount is subtracted from \$2,000, and the remainder is your cruise-only cost for two persons. You must then make your own air arrangements or buy airfare from the cruise line as an add-on. Celebrity, Oceania, Princess, Costa, and Holland America are among the lines frequently offering two-for-one promotional fares. These fares work well if you can travel to and from the port on frequent-flier miles or by car. If you have to pay for air, however, comparative math might demonstrate that a discounted air/sea package is a better deal.

Two-for-one offers come and go with supply and demand. It's difficult to keep up with them. They also might pop up on short notice. Such fire-sale fares aim to boost short-term sales and can be withdrawn at any time.

Flat Rates

This is an early-booking program in which every cabin in the ship, except probably the luxury accommodations, is sold for the same flat rates (one for inside cabins and one for outside cabins) on a first-come, first-served basis. The earlier you book, the nicer your cabin. Flat rates are usually cruise only, but airfare may be purchased as an add-on. Flat rates are frequently offered by Princess, Crystal, and Norwegian Cruise Lines.

X% Off Second Passenger in a Cabin

In this very common discount offered by many cruise lines: The first passenger pays the double-occupancy brochure rate and the second passenger gets 40% to 70% off. Some simple averaging demonstrates that this works out to a discount of 20% to 35% per passenger.

Reduced Rate Air Add-ons

If you purchase airfare from the cruise line separately (as opposed to included in the cruise price), that is an air add-on. Sometimes cruise lines will couple a discounted cruise-only rate (no airfare) with a very attractive air add-on. This usually occurs when the cruise line is able to negotiate an exceptionally good bulk airfare purchase with an airline from a specific gateway city. In essence, the cruise line is passing some

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Normally, two-for-one fares are offered far in advance, with a cut-off date to secure early bookings.

of their savings along to the consumer. Typically, this kind of deal applies only to specific cities and is offered only for a short time. It often results from an airline's slow sales and its need to stimulate air travel from a particular area, as opposed to being a cruise-line initiative.

Senior Citizen Discounts

Because seniors have traditionally been the backbone of the cruise market, they are often one of the first groups targeted for a discount program if a line is having difficulty filling a cruise. Usually the discount requires that one person sharing the cabin must be at least 55 years old. The size of discount varies, as does the inclusion of airfare. Also, Carnival and some other cruise lines have year-round discounts for members of AARP, the American Association of Retired Persons.

Kids or Third/Fourth Passengers Go Free or at Reduced Rate

This discount is a fairly common for lines like Carnival, Disney, and Celebrity that target families and younger cruisers. Third and fourth persons or children sharing a cabin cruise free or at a substantial discount. Airfare for the third/fourth person or children is usually not included. Third/fourth person rates are generally part of a cruise line's basic rate structure (rather than promotional fares). They normally appear in the cruise line's brochure and are applicable year-round. Their promotional use might come into play seasonally by being reduced or waived altogether, perhaps in summer to stimulate family travel or in the shoulder season to stimulate first-timers to buy a cruise when three or four friends can share the cost.

Back-to-Back or Contiguous Segments Discounts

The seven-day cruise is the most popular product offered by any cruise line, as it suits the vast majority of people in terms of time and cost. However, there are people who have both the time and means for longer cruises. To satisfy both groups, the cruise lines have several choices. They may break longer cruises into seven-day segments, enabling a passenger to board in one port and depart from another. Or, they may offer two 7-day segments with different itineraries as one 14-day cruise, offering the second week at a greatly reduced price. For example, a ship departing from Miami sails one week to the eastern Caribbean and the next week to the western Caribbean. In combining the two, the only port repeated in 14 days is Miami, the departure port. Throughout our cruise line profiles, we highlight ships whose itineraries lend themselves to this sort of coupling and which offer attractive discounts for the second segment.

Repositioning Cruises

Rather than dispatch a ship empty, lines sell their repositioning cruises; to attract as many passengers as possible, they offer them at cut-rate prices. The majority of repositioning cruises are in spring

and fall when the great “migration” of ships occurs—mostly when ships that have spent the winter on Caribbean, Panama Canal, and Mexico cruises are dispatched to Alaska or to New England/Canada and/or Europe for the summer; and again in autumn, when these ships return.

Repositioning cruises with interesting and unusual itineraries, such as from the Caribbean to New England via the Eastern Seaboard, are unlikely to have as much of a discount as those with few ports of call, such as transatlantic crossings. Those with more days at sea, however, appeal to folks who really love to cruise and cherish having uninterrupted days or weeks at sea. However *Queen Mary 2*, for example, has a wealth of onboard activities designed for every type of traveler.

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When a cruise line moves a ship from one cruise area to another, this is called a repositioning cruise—and it represents one of the year’s biggest bargains.

Group Discounts

Persons traveling together can almost always negotiate a group rate. The larger the group, the better the rate. For a big group, at least one free berth or cabin is customarily provided for the organizer. What constitutes a group varies among cruise lines, but eight or more persons traveling together and occupying at least four cabins generally can obtain a discount, extra amenities, or a cabin upgrade.

Standby Rates

Lines may offer deeply discounted standby rates for specific itineraries and sailing dates. Normally, you rank your ship, departure, and cabin preferences and submit them to the line with a deposit. If your preferred date is available, the line notifies your travel agent at least 30 days in advance. If you are offered your first choice, the deposit is nonrefundable. Airfare is additional.

Cabin Upgrades

Four basic ways to get a cabin upgrade are:

1. ADVERTISED OR UNADVERTISED SPECIALS Usually publicized primarily (some are in press releases to media) to travel agents, upgrade programs give them a powerful selling tool. Upgrades apply to specific sailings and can be guaranteed by the agent and line at time of booking. Such specials allow consumers to buy the cheapest fare and be upgraded from one to five cabin levels.

2. SOFT SAILING UPGRADES A soft sailing refers to a cruise that is likely to depart at substantially less than full capacity. Booking the least expensive cabin category on a low- or shoulder-season cruise offers the best opportunity for receiving an upgrade. Early booking an inside cabin on a ship with few inside cabins (study the ship’s deck plans) might result in upgrading to an outside cabin. But, with today’s

high occupancy rates, you might be stuck with the inside cabin. Just be prepared to accept it if you are not upgraded.

3. GUARANTEES If a cruise is sold out of the cabin category you request when booking, the line will offer a guarantee, promising a cabin in your preferred category or better. You pay the same rate as for the cabin you requested, including early-booking or other applicable discounts. Because guarantees are offered only when a cruise is sold out or oversold in a requested category, chances of getting the upgrade are good. Cabin location is up to the cruise line.

4. PAID UPGRADES A number of lines, particularly on soft sailings, sell upgrades. Sometimes the upgrades are as little as \$15 per person per cabin category.

Confusion among passengers regarding cabin-upgrade availability often leads to frustration and disappointment. A travel agent wrote us:

PLEASE, PLEASE tell your readers that cabin upgrades are a privilege and not a right. . . . With most ships sailing at [near] 100% capacity, most people have a slim-to-none chance of getting upgraded—and almost certainly not from an inside cabin to an outside cabin. Many cabin upgrades are given at the time of booking, but “guaranteed cabin categories” do not mean guaranteed upgrades—these are based solely on availability. The only thing that is guaranteed is that they will get a cabin in at least the category they are booked in! Former passengers and people who book the earliest are the most likely to get upgrades, if they become available. If a certain cabin category is that important to someone, they should book it and pay for it, and not hope to be upgraded to it. . . . Plus, any travel agent that tells [clients] to take a “guaranteed” or “run of ship” rate to increase their chances of being upgraded, is setting up their clients for disaster. The agent may say one thing, but the client hears the word “upgrade” and thinks this is a given. Then when it doesn’t happen, the client gets angry with the travel agent and the cruise line.

Free Stuff

Cruise lines might offer cameras, binoculars, and other goods as booking incentives. Or, freebies may be tied to a theme cruise; for example, a photography cruise sponsored by a camera manufacturer. Big-volume producers and savvy smaller agencies may offer a bottle of wine or a photo album.

Organizational Discounts

Cruise lines commonly develop relationships with organizations like the American Automobile Association or AARP. Check for discounts available through organizations to which you belong.

Credit Card Programs

Some cruise lines have credit card programs. Whenever you use the credit card, you accrue points or “cruise dollars.” These can be

applied toward a cruise or taken as a credit to spend aboard. Cardholders receive mailings promoting discounts, and charging a cruise on the card may result in cabin upgrades. Similarly, miles accrued on the American Express program offering one mile for every dollar charged are redeemable for cruises.

Travel Agents' Discounts

We have found that agents selling the same discount program for a cruise may quote different prices. Usually the difference is small, 2% to 5%. What's going on is that a few retailers are sacrificing part of their override commissions to lowball the competition. Big-volume, cruise-only agencies routinely do this, but local agents frequently will knock a few dollars off their commission to retain a good customer. Ads that claim "We will beat or match your best offer" usually mean an agent is rebating some commission to his or her clients. But beware of this practice. Commissions represent an agent's costs and profit. As any businessperson knows, if you give away your profit, you will end up with red ink. In addition, cruise lines including Carnival, Oceania, Norwegian Cruise Line, Royal Caribbean, and Celebrity have cracked down on agencies that rebate in any advertised price. So the number of agencies rebating at all is greatly reduced.

Cruise Loan Programs

Pioneered by Princess, cruise loan programs are seen by the lines and travel agents as "a tool for taking away one of the clients' biggest stumbling blocks: paying in full for a cruise before sailing." Loans may also help sellers trade the customer up. Basically, you borrow your cruise's cost on a revolving line of credit (like most credit cards) and pay off the loan in 24, 36, or 48 installments, like a mortgage or car loan. The main difference between a mortgage or car loan and a cruise loan is that the former are secured by pledging your home or car as collateral. Because there is nothing to pledge as collateral on a cruise loan, interest rates are much higher. In 2004, the lowest annual percentage rate for a cruise loan was 9%; the highest, 29%. Loans are administered by participating banks that are unaffiliated with the cruise lines. If you obtain the lowest interest rate for cruise loans on a 36-installment loan, the monthly payment for a seven-day cruise costing \$5,000 per couple is \$161 per month. Multiply the \$161 by 36 months to see you'll actually be paying \$5,796 for your cruise. Most people would do better taking out a loan on their own.

Lost in the Information Haze

Deals come and go so rapidly that a travel agency has to be knowledgeable, well staffed, and computerized to keep on top of the action. Though big cruise-only agencies are the best equipped to handle the information flood, even they occasionally lag.

The National Association of Cruise-Only Agencies (NACOA) can provide a list of member agencies in your area. Check out www.cruising.org for a list of member agencies of Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA). Discount agencies usually advertise widely. Always check the reliability of any agency with whom you do business.

CRUISING THE INTERNET FOR CRUISES

CRUISE INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET has increased more than 1,000% in the past five years. There are thousands of Web sites to investigate. The majority are travel agencies, large and small. Even if you're a wiz at searches, you'll still need a great deal of time and infinite patience to find the facts you need. Despite Google and Yahoo and other useful search engines, cyberspace remains chaotic. We can't organize it for you, but here are facts that can help you navigate your own way on the ocean of information.

Essentially, cruise-related information on the Internet is precisely that—information. You can ask questions and order brochures, and recently, a few cruise lines have taken the next step enabling you to buy a cruise directly from them on the Internet (the numbers are expected to increase substantially over the next decade). The best way to find out if a particular cruise line is selling online is to check out its Web site. The Web addresses for all cruise lines with Web sites are included in this book.

The Internet has become a particularly handy tool for advertising last-minute specials. There are a number of sites which, after you sign up, will automatically send you an e-mail advertising deeply discounted cruises. Many sites specialize in cruises, while others offer air, hotels, rental cars, and a range of other travel products. Many sites will provide a form for you to complete listing the kind of deals (cruises, air, hotels, etc.) that you're interested in. When they send out their weekly e-mail, they limit the message to those products. Some of the best deals we've seen are on these Web sites, but buyer beware. Some Web sites have sold cruises without advising the customer of required passport and visa requirements or other pertinent information.

One of the most useful Web sites, launched in 2003, is **Cruise Compete.com**, which calls itself "the world's exclusive competitive cruise vacation pricing Web site." Recently, it added an advanced search tool to help travelers find their ideal cruise at the best available price, enabling travelers to find multiple cruise itineraries based on a preferred port of call or country. Cruisers also can narrow their search by departure port, date range, cruise length, and cruise line at the same time. After selecting a cruise based on destination, you can then click on a sail date to request competing quotes from nearly 100 member travel agencies across the country, potentially helping consumers save substantially on their cruise vacations. If, for example, you want to take a cruise to St. Kitts in the Caribbean, you type "St.

Kitts” in the search tool, and in a few seconds, CruiseCompete.com finds all of the cruises that go there. Another click and you’ll get the best prices. We are not aware of any other site on the Internet offering this type of function and ease of use. Information is also available from these sources:

- **Cruise associations** Trade organizations, including Cruise Lines International Association, that have their own Web sites (www.cruising.org).
- **Travel agencies** Hundreds of agencies have Web sites, and others participate through their trade organizations. Most take bookings online or via e-mail.
- **Travel publications** Major travel magazines, such as *Travel & Leisure* and *Travel Weekly*, and book publishers, including John Wiley & Sons (which publishes this book), have Web sites.
- **Individuals** Recognized travel experts and some people who consider themselves cruise experts or are interested in cruises have created their own sites.
- **Subscriber services** Many, such as AOL, have specialized programs on cruises and most feature special deals.

The typical cruise-line Web site offers about the same information available in a cruise brochure. However, fares are likely to be sample prices only. Cabin sizes or configurations aren’t specific. You usually can request a brochure by e-mail or on the Web (you may be required to give a phone number or e-mail address), but such sites are most useful when you know where and when you plan to cruise. Information, of course, covers the host cruise line only.

Some sites are well done, fun, clever, and even amusing, and they are getting better. Others are basic and slow to load—you would learn more by reading the line’s brochure. The best sites have special features, such as itineraries with links to maps and port information, or the facility to search by ZIP code for travel agencies near you. Often, the site is linked to other cruise-related information.

The range of information is as broad as it is voluminous—Princess Cruises’ Web site is huge! But it is also one of the best. Among other things, it enables you to book shore excursions in advance—a service that is becoming available from more and more cruise lines. There is no uniformity in presentation, style, or amount of detail between cruise lines. On Windstar Cruises’ Web site, you can go through a typical day on board, see a sample dinner menu, review itineraries with sailing dates, and read about special fares and onboard credits for Internet users. Carnival Cruise Lines, with one of the most extensive sites, offers pictures and descriptions of each cabin category, including drawings and pictures of cabin layouts—a rare feature. Some of the smallest cruise lines have the best Web sites; of course, with fewer or smaller ships, it easier to provide information and easier for consumers to navigate the site.

For news, guidance, and evaluations, www.cruisecritic.com is maintained by a team of cruise specialists and knowledgeable persons.

Included are candid, continuously updated ship reviews and evaluations on more than 100 ships, with descriptions on facilities, activities, amenities, itineraries, and fellow passengers; news on industry developments; and features ranging from seasickness to bargains. The Cruise Critic library contains trip reports and travel tips.

Similar information is available from www.cruisemates.com, a site by veteran cruise writer Anne Campbell and a group of established writers who specialize in cruises. When Campbell cruises, she sometimes offers daily reports with video. In addition to constantly updated information on special deals, Cruisemates promotes several specially priced cruises throughout the year. Campbell and others host message boards where people can ask questions or post their opinions on cruises, ports, and related matters.

Cruise Opinion (www.cruiseopinion.com) claims to have the largest database of cruise ship reviews on the Web. All are recently written and based on personal experiences. Each reviewer evaluates the ship in 42 categories using a rating of 0 to 100 and describes the cruise experience. Most reviews were provided within the last year. A recent check showed over 4,500 reviews on file, with more added daily.

CruiseReviews (www.cruisereviews.com) is limited but more current than Cruise Opinion. The site lists about 20 major cruise lines and all their ships. About a third had been reviewed recently. Those we checked were short, but pointed.

Other sites you might want to check out include:

- **Expedia.com, orbitz.com, and travelocity.com.** The three big players in Internet travel sales. Besides offering copious content, each post weekly discounts on a broad range of travel products.
- **Lastminutetravel.com** offers a full range of travel products, including cruises and air.
- **Lowestfare.com** sells all travel products but limits its e-mails to a small number of particularly hot deals.
- **Cheaptickets.com** posts a weekly newsletter advertising mostly air and hotel deals.
- **Bestfares.com** is a good all-purpose travel discount site.

Additional Web sites specializing in cruise information and discounts include seasaver.com, cruise.com, i-cruise.com, cruiseplanners.com, cruiseholidays.com, and cruise411.com.

Many of these Web sites offer deck plans; ship descriptions and reviews; tips on insurance; advice for couples, singles, seniors, and the disabled; and of course, hot deals. Last-minute specials and bargain rates can be found on all of the sites.

Buying on the Internet

If you want to purchase a cruise from an Internet company, first try to run the transaction through your travel agent. If possible, make

the booking through the site's phone number as opposed to purchasing electronically. Even if you handle the entire transaction electronically, verify by calling the seller's phone number that competent help in the form of a live person is available if you need it. Because many online sites specialize in last-minute deals, you probably won't have much time to resolve a problem should one occur. Before you book, ask the seller when your reservation will be recorded as fully paid in the cruise line's system. Repeat the process with the airline if you buy air from the cruise line. On the date provided by the seller, call the cruise line and airline directly to confirm that everything is order. If time is short when you make your reservations, you should request overnight delivery; it's worth the cost for the peace of mind. Regarding air travel purchased through the cruise line, you are likely to get electronic ticketing. At least it saves you from having to worry about paper tickets being delivered on time.

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If the deal is only available through the Internet direct to the consumer, make sure before you buy that the site provides a phone number so that you can get a real person on the line if something goes amiss.

Online Auctions

A twist in discounting is auctioning cruises online at such sites as **www.onsale.com**, **www.ubid.com**, and **www.allcruiseauction.com**. If ever there were a need for "buyer beware," it is here. We know that some people have scored true bargains, but we also hear of people bidding more for a cruise than they would have paid through their travel agent. The bottom line: If you want information, cruising the Internet can be useful and fun. It can also be frustrating and time-consuming. You will learn quickly which sites are worthwhile.

unofficial TIP

Be cautious about comments on message boards, forums, and chat rooms from unidentified sources whose reliability you can't check.

We believe that this book—we say in all modesty—together with cruise lines' compendiums and a knowledgeable travel agent, remains the most efficient and effective way to help you select the right cruise—that is, the cruise right for you.

Price Protection

The airlines and cruise lines encourage you to book early to obtain the lowest fares. But what if you plunk down \$1,200 for a cruise and discover a few months later that the same class of cabin on the same cruise is selling for \$800? Getting a refund for the difference or being able to cancel and rebook at the lower rate is known as price protection. The cruise lines claim to be flexible and cooperative in this regard, but when it comes to giving back money already in their pocket, things usually get sticky. Sometimes customers must "qualify" for deals offered at lower prices. These qualifications sometimes

make sense, as when a deal is offered to persons over 65 years of age, or to a promotional fare offered on a strictly regional basis, for example to residents of Dade County, Florida. Often, however, the qualifications for obtaining the lower rate are specious in the extreme. A common practice among cruise lines is to reject requests to rebook after the passenger has made his final payment. If you have been a good little passenger and paid on time, you're rewarded for your punctuality by being prohibited from taking advantage of lower fares available to most everyone else. Another way cruise lines accomplish the same thing is to limit the lower fare to "new bookings only." In other words, if the right fist doesn't get you, the left will.

Almost all cruise lines assess penalties for canceling within a certain number of days from the sailing date. If you cancel before the applicable penalty date, you're free to rebook at the lower promotional fare. Problem is, cruise lines time the announcement of cut-rate deals to fall well inside the penalty period.

The most straightforward and consumer-friendly policy we were able to uncover is offered by Royal Caribbean and Celebrity. These lines will allow a passenger to rebook at any lower rate for which they qualify until the "sailing closes" (usually one or two days prior to departure). If you're age 50 and try to take advantage of a senior deal, you won't qualify, but for deals offered to the broader market, you'll be allowed to rebook without penalty.

Finally, the best price protector you'll ever have is a good travel agent. A good agent can often use her influence and clout to beat some of the silly arbitrariness out of the cruise lines. If the agent can't arrange an actual rebate, she frequently can get you compensated through other concessions such as cabin upgrades, shipboard credit, and the like. Remember that your agent will probably have dozens, if not hundreds, of clients booked on various cruises at any one time. Thus, it's unrealistic to expect her to monitor discount deals circulated by the cruise lines. It's your job to check for lower prices periodically, and if you find something, bring it to her attention. But again, increasingly, lines are cracking down on retailers who advertise low-ball pricing, and there will be less of this battle mentality in pricing for different agencies.

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

YOU KNOW THE PLAYERS and how the game is played. Now it's time to put your knowledge into action.

Step 1. To Agent or Not to Agent

Your first big decision is whether to use a travel agent. This guide, cruise lines' brochures, Sunday newspaper travel sections, cruise specialty magazines, and the Internet will enable you to narrow your

choices. Even so, a reliable travel agent can contribute immeasurably in offering advice and facilitating the process. If you have a travel agent who has served you well, particularly if you're a volume customer, you should use her. If you don't have a regular agent, ask your friends for recommendations. Make sure the agency has a good reputation and that the agent with whom you are dealing is experienced in selling cruises. Using a travel agent will not cost you more, since the cruise line pays any commissions.

unofficial TIP

Try to select a travel agent near your age or one who shares your interests and lifestyle.

Step 2. Narrow Down

Using this book and the other material, make a priority list of four lines, ships, and cruises. Be flexible. Also be alert to the possibility of travel agents' pushing their preferred suppliers, who may not be on your list. If so, ask why the agent feels the supplier might meet your needs. You might be surprised at the response. Sometimes consumers are not the best judge of the right cruise fit for themselves.

Step 3. Scout the Discounts

Using information collected from newspaper travel sections, Internet, and other sources, ask your agent if she can meet or top any special deals you have found or provide extra "value" in some way. Call a few high-volume, cruise-only agencies on your own. Ask about cruises on your priority list, then ask what's the best deal the agency is selling. Always ask for the bottom-line cost in dollars rather than the percentage discount. Repeat the quote to the agent and verify what is included (airfare, accommodations, transfers, and so on). Take notes.

unofficial TIP

Never fall into the trap of buying a cruise simply because it sounds like a great deal—especially if you are buying your first cruise.

Your top priority is to determine which cruise is right for you. Only then is it time to scout deals. The best way to ruin your cruise vacation is to book the wrong ship or the wrong cabin in an effort to save a few dollars.

Step 4. Buy Early or Buy Late

As we said, the biggest discounts are usually given for buying early (four to eight months before sailing) or late (during the last six weeks). First-time cruisers have greater choice and peace of mind taking the early-bird route. Experienced cruisers are in a better position to play the best-deal game. But any time you hold out for a deal, you decrease your options for getting the cabin, dining room seating, and airline routing you prefer. In the long run, these factors are much more important to the quality of your cruise than saving \$50 or \$100.

Step 5. Give the Seller a Price to Beat

When you've narrowed the field to one or two cruises and you're ready to buy, call the three or so agents who quoted the best prices in your first round of inquiries. Say, "I've been quoted a price of \$X for this particular cruise; can you beat it?" Give your travel agent a chance to match it. If he can't, he may be able to verify the deal's integrity or uncover hidden problems. If the deal is commissionable, have your agent book it, or if the agent has invested a lot of time on your behalf, offer a \$50 or \$100 consultation fee.

Step 6. Check It Out

If you decide to buy from an agency outside your city or state, try to determine whether it's bonded and a member of its local Better Business Bureau and/or Chamber of Commerce. Also check whether it's a member of the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA), the Association of Retail Travel Agents (ARTA), the National Association of Cruise Only Agencies (NACOA), or Cruise Line International Association (CLIA). Membership isn't a guarantee of ethical business practices, but the organizations have a vested interest in maintaining the good reputation of cruising and try to attract only upstanding members.

American Society of Travel Agents ☎ 703-739-2782
www.astanet.com

Association of Retail Travel Agents ☎ 800-969+6069
www.artonline.com

Cruise Line International Association ☎ 212-921-0066
www.cruising.org

National Association of Cruise-Only Agencies ☎ 305-663-5626
www.nacoaonline.com

To find out how consolidators and wholesalers respond to questions about their affiliations and accreditations, we called all of the cruise discounters advertising in *Cruise Travel* and *Condé Nast Traveler* magazines. Some agencies were gracious and seemed to understand that customers have a right to check their credentials. An amazing number, however, were surly and uninformative. "Who are you?" and "What do you need to know that for?" were typical responses. Representatives from four agencies said they didn't know the answers to our questions but would call us back. Of course, we never heard from them. When you call to check an agency, accept nothing less than complete courtesy, openness, and cooperation. Life's too short, and your cruise is too important, to deal with rude salespeople. Remember to show the same respect. Good travel agents will work hard for you, but they can spot someone on a fishing expedition. Just be prepared. Some agents will not put quotes in writing if they feel you are only "shopping around" and will buy on price alone and not on price *and* service.

Step 7. Protect Yourself

When you pay for your cruise, use a credit card and insist that the charge be run through the cruise line's account, not the agency's account. This precaution is important. Financially shaky agencies sometimes use their customers' payments to settle agency debts instead of to secure the customer's booking. If these agencies fold, the customer is often left with no cruise and no refund. Paying with a credit card allows you to cancel payment if the cruise is not provided as promised. Reputable travel agents and other sellers are more than happy to run the charge through the cruise line's account and will absolutely not be offended by your request. Financially sound sellers make a practice of running credit card charges through the cruise line's account anyway. This is done so that the cruise line will have to pay the credit-card merchant fees. If you purchase your cruise from any seller other than your usual travel agent, ask the seller when the paid reservation will be posted in the cruise line's system. On the date provided, call the cruise line directly to confirm the reservation.

Protect your cruise investment with travel insurance. Most comes with lots of bells and whistles, but three things should concern you: (1) loss of your paid fare if you must cancel or if your cruise is interrupted, (2) the potentially huge costs of emergency medical evacuation, and (3) major medical expenses while traveling that your primary health insurance doesn't cover.

Though overpriced at about \$5 to \$8 per every \$100 of coverage, travel insurance nevertheless is a prudent expenditure. You never know when you might become ill, have a death in the family, or miss your sailing because of a flight cancellation or delay.

Although travel insurance coverages can be purchased separately, they are usually "bundled." We recommend you purchase good coverage for trip cancellation/interruption and emergency medical evacuation. Trip cancellation/interruption insurance covers the insured traveler and traveling companion(s) against losses caused by illness, injury, or death. Most policies cover losses resulting from the interruption of your trip by the death, serious injury, or serious illness of a close family member back home. **Access America** (www.accessamerica.com) and **Travel Guard** (www.travel-guard.com) also offer coverage for the illness, injury, or death of a business partner.

If you must cancel your cruise before departure, most cancellation/interruption insurance plans will reimburse you for the cruise's full cost, less any refund you receive from the cruise line. Though cancellation and refund policies vary, most lines provide a full refund if you cancel 61 or more days before your departure date. Remember that these policies generally cover only the extent of your investment. If you are buying a \$1,500 cruise, you don't need \$10,000 in insurance.

Ideally, insurance will allow you to cancel your trip for any reason. Most policies, however, stipulate situations that qualify for coverage.

unofficial TIP

If you buy a cruise at the double-occupancy rate and your companion must cancel, your policy should cover the single supplement if you want to continue alone.

At a minimum, insist on being covered for death, injury, illness, jury duty, court appearances, accidents en route to the airport or pier, and disasters at home, including fire or flood. The same coverage applies to your traveling companion(s).

Policies usually cover airline or shipworker strikes, but not earthquakes or other disasters at scheduled ports of call. Cruise lines reserve the right to alter the itinerary once under way to avoid bad weather or other problems. Also, please keep

in mind that some insurance companies may only allow you to cancel *for any reason* up to 24 or 48 hours *prior* to scheduled departure.

The fine print in many policies can be tricky, and seemingly innocuous loopholes limit the carrier's obligation. One essential question regarding cancellation/interruption insurance is whether it covers preexisting conditions: any for which you were treated by a physician in the 60 days (90 days in Maryland) before the policy was purchased. In better policies, if the pre-existing condition is controlled by medication, it is covered. In insurance company language, however, "controlled" is very different from "treated." If you have high blood pressure and medication maintains it at normal, safe levels, your condition is controlled. If you have a tumor and are receiving radiation, carriers would say you are being treated, but that your condition is not controlled. If your tumor caused you to cancel your cruise, the policy would not reimburse you. The same stipulations regarding preexisting conditions apply to your family back home. If, for example, your mother dies while you're traveling, your trip interruption coverage would be void if her death was related to a preexisting condition. We recommend that you question the insurance carrier directly about any health problems, obtaining written confirmation of coverage if necessary. One reputable travel agency advised us that you stand a better chance of having preexisting conditions covered with private insurance than with many cruise-line insurance plans.

Pregnancy is covered by most policies if you cruise during your first two trimesters. If a complication arises, the policy will pay. Amazingly, if you deliver your baby normally while on a cruise, you are not covered. Many cruise lines won't accept a pregnant passenger in her third trimester.

Another potential land mine in cancellation/interruption insurance is operator failure. What if your travel agent, airline, or cruise line goes belly up? Although brochures and most policies say they will pay in the event of operator failure or default, fine print sometimes defines *failure* and *default* as bankruptcy. Because many businesses fail without declaring bankruptcy, this is an important distinction. Note that most policies exclude the failure of the company

that sold the cruise (usually a travel agent) or the company that sold the insurance. If you buy insurance from a travel agency, you're covered if the cruise line or airline fails, but not if the agency fails. This is yet another reason you should pay for your cruise with a credit card and insist that the charge be run directly through the cruise line's account, not the travel agent's. It's also a good reason to buy travel insurance directly from the insurance company, something easily done on the Internet. If all of this sounds far fetched, think again. Four established cruise lines—Commodore, Premier, Renaissance, and American Hawaii—went under within the past few years.

Trip interruption coverage, sold with trip cancellation policies, supplements what you recover from the cruise line if something goes wrong during your trip. If a family member dies, for example, and you must fly home from a port mid-cruise, the interruption coverage will pay for your plane ticket home plus reimburse you for the unused portion of your cruise (less any refund you receive from the cruise line). The policy also would pay the single supplement of your cabin companion if he or she remains on the cruise. Some insurance companies also place a certain dollar limit on their trip interruption coverage and normally list the amount in their policy. Try to find a company with the highest percentage—say 150% of the trip cost rather than just 100%. Remember, when plans change you may incur additional air or hotel charges

Trip interruption insurance covers fire, flood, vandalism, burglary, and natural disaster as it affects your home, but does not cover similar catastrophic events if they occur at your place of business. In our estimation this is a huge gap in travel insurance coverage. As it turns out, it's also a gap in standard business-casualty insurance. If your office building burns down while you're cruising in Alaska, chances are about 99 to 1 that your business insurance will decline to reimburse you for the cost of returning home or for the unused portion of your cruise.

Something much less likely than a fire at your office, however, is now covered. As a consequence of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, most travel insurance policies offer coverage for cancellation or interruption occasioned by an act of terrorism. Coverage varies from policy to policy.

A common but very important coverage exclusion relates to "travel arrangements canceled or changed by an airline, cruise line, or tour operator, unless the cancellation is the result of bad weather or financial default." What this means is that your trip cancellation/interruption insurance doesn't cover you if, say, your flight is cancelled for reasons other than weather, and you miss the boat. Logically, one would think, this is exactly the sort of circumstance for which you need travel insurance. When we asked the insurance companies why such events are excluded, their response, to quote one

company representative, was, “Oh, we couldn’t cover that. It happens too often.” Isn’t that reassuring?

Bundled with trip cancellation/interruption is emergency medical evacuation insurance. This pays to transport you to a place where you can obtain high-quality medical care. In some areas of the Caribbean and even more remote cruise areas in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, you might prefer not to entrust your care to local doctors. The insurer in conjunction with a qualified physician usually must verify your condition and authorize the evacuation. Once authorized, the insurer usually selects the means of transportation.

As a rule, evacuation insurance does not cover hospital stays, doctors, diagnostic procedures, treatments, or medications, though medical coverage sometimes is bundled with a comprehensive policy covering trip cancellation/interruption. Ask your primary health insurer, Medicare, or HMO whether you are covered for medical attention required when traveling abroad. If you are not covered, buy supplemental insurance.

If you book an upscale cruise and pack Rolex watches, gems, and other valuables, check your homeowners policy to determine what’s covered when you travel. If you aren’t covered, take out a rider. When you travel, carry your valuables on your person, not in checked luggage. Even better, leave them at home.

Cruise lines and travel agencies, as a rule, do not self-insure. In other words, the policy they sell is an off-the-shelf or customized product of an independent travel insurance company. This is true even when the policy has the cruise line’s name in the title, for example, “Happy Sea Cruise Line Total Protection.” As mentioned earlier, any third party selling a policy is automatically excluded from “supplier default” coverage. Thus, if you buy that Happy Sea travel insurance and Happy Sea Cruise Line goes belly up, you could get caught holding the bag. Because of many cruise lines, wholesalers, and travel agencies defaulting (going out of business) in the wake of 9/11, most travel insurance companies now maintain a list of travel suppliers, including cruise lines and cruise retailers, that they will *not* cover. Most of the failed cruise lines were on those lists prior to their ultimate collapse.

Finally, most travel insurance companies post their policies, as well as their list of excluded travel suppliers, on the Internet. Read the policies before you buy, and call the company’s customer service representative if you have any questions. Here are several major insurers and their phone numbers and Internet sites:

Access America Service Corporation ☎ 866-807-3982
www.accessamerica.com

CSA Travel Protection ☎ 800-873-9855
www.travelsecure.com

Travelex ☎ 888-457-4602
www.travelex-insurance.com

Travel Guard ☎ 800-826-4919
www.travelguard.com

Travel Insured ☎ 800-243-3174
www.travelinsured.com

There are also other smaller firms that may have good plans as well; ask your agent. When shopping for travel insurance, remember that language in the brochure is marketing language. The language in the policy legally defines the carrier's obligations.

If your cruise line underwrites its own policy, compare it with one or more of the policies listed above. If the cruise policy is comparable and the line's in good shape financially, consider it. The line has a greater interest in your satisfaction than an insurance company does and may be more helpful in a crisis. Be aware, however, that there is some risk involved with buying your insurance from the cruise line. If the line goes out of business, as Commodore, Renaissance, American Hawaii, and Premier did, your claim will be thrown in with claims of all of the cruise line's creditors waiting to be reimbursed, and you may get back only pennies on the dollar, if anything.

When you buy travel insurance, make sure the policy covers you *from the date of purchase until the day you arrive home from your vacation*. This is extremely important: You can't imagine the problems some folks have had with policies that did not take effect until departure time or that didn't cover the travelers' whole time away from home. In one example, a couple from Texas bought travel insurance from a cruise company. On their own, they scheduled a two-night hotel stay at their originating port and another two-night stay at their port of disembarkation. When the husband became ill on the second day after the cruise, they tried to invoke the medical coverage on their travel insurance. Much to their chagrin, they were told that their policy only covered the days of the cruise, not the extra precruise and postcruise days the couple had arranged themselves. This is yet another example of why it's usually preferable to purchase your policy directly from the travel insurance company.

Finally, be aware before you leave home that if you need to make a claim, the travel insurance companies will hold you to an exacting standard of documentation. From the time you book your cruise, hang onto every correspondence, invoice, statement, canceled check, and receipt. For trip cancellation/interruption, travel delay, and/or medical claims, you will need some or all of the following:

1. Proof of complete trip payment.
2. Proof of insurance payment.
3. Invoice from your travel agent or tour operator showing complete trip costs and cancellation penalties.

4. If your situation involves illness, accident, or death, you'll need to produce doctor's medical records, hospital records, and/or a death certificate.
5. Paid receipts for all expenses incurred.
6. Original travel documents.

A final note: If you have made the decision to forego travel insurance, consider a few important points before declining. Understand the serious financial and personal difficulties you could find yourself in should an unexpected illness or family emergency develop. First, most travelers decline because they say "Oh I have insurance with my company or Medicare." Understand that these plans generally only cover you while you are within the United States, not overseas. If a serious illness develops, you will be taken off the ship and sent to a foreign land with no resources. Travel insurance almost always comes with resources, such as a 24-hour help line to provide support while you are dealing with medical problems in a foreign land. Yes, travel insurance may not immediately pay the bills on site at a foreign hospital, but it will reimburse you later for those fees so you don't forfeit your kids college fund or your own retirement nest egg unnecessarily. Understand as well that treatment while onboard a ship is not free and not necessarily inexpensive. For example, one travel agent reports she had a 29-year-old customer who was in excellent health prior to his cruise. He took no travel insurance, then suffered a massive heart attack; his bill for one day in the ship's medical center until he could be evacuated was \$6,000. That didn't count the charges from the land-based hospital. Travel insurance is not really a nicety, but a necessity.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

AS YOU'VE ASCERTAINED FROM the discussion of travel insurance above, there are number of things that can go wrong between the time you book your cruise and the day when you arrive back home. Long-range planning minimizes bad surprises and generally allows sufficient time to work out any snags. Last-minute deals can sometimes save a ton of money, but cramming all of your planning and arrangements into a few short weeks or days before departure increases the probability of a problem arising with little or no time to resolve it.

Eliminating problems should be an integral part of your long-term planning. Begin by analyzing your risks. Take a look at your health and the health of your family and business associates. There may be foreseeable risks which suggest that it's not really the best time to take a cruise. Before you book your cruise, get a handle on the financial stability of your intended cruise line. Make sure you pay with a credit card and have the charge run through the cruise line's account as opposed to the travel agent's or other third-party sellers. Buy travel insurance that takes effect on the date of purchase and provides coverage until you get home. Buy it directly from the insurance company. If you are traveling to a part of the world where you'd prefer not to be

treated by the local health-care industry, make sure emergency medical-evacuation coverage is included in your policy. Go over all preexisting medical conditions with the insurance carrier before you buy. Make sure you have already acquired trip cancellation/interruption coverage. If you have special concerns, such as the possible death of an aging parent or business partner, make sure those situations are covered by the policy. Realize that there are a number of circumstances besides death that may require your unexpected return home. We have readers whose cruises were interrupted by a fire at their place of business, a tree falling on their home, a burglary, and an unexpected lawsuit, to name a few. In short, the broader and more inclusive your trip cancellation/interruption coverage, the better.

Problem 1: Missing Flight Information

If you purchased your air from the cruise line, or if air was included in the price of your cruise, you should receive your flight *itinerary* 30 to 45 days prior to departure. If less than 30 days remain prior to departure and you haven't received your information, call your travel agent and have her find out what's going on. If everything checks out, phone the seller. Work your way from reservationist to supervisor to manager to owner as required until you get a satisfactory explanation. Take the same approach with the seller if the cruise line has no record of your reservation.

unofficial TIP
If you bought your cruise through the Internet or from a nonlocal seller, call the cruise line first to make sure your reservation is in their system and that full payment has been received.

Problem 2: Missing Cruise Documents or Airline Tickets

Your date of departure is looming, but you haven't received your airline tickets and/or cruise documents. If you have a good travel agent, you are virtually assured that everything will get sorted out in plenty of time. If you purchased on your own through a print ad, the Internet, or from a seller with whom you do not ordinarily do business, the situation is much iffier. In that case, start by calling the cruise line directly and making sure that your reservation is in order and *that payment has been received*. If you purchased air with your cruise, and you know your flight itinerary, go through the same process with the airline. If everything is properly recorded, next call the seller. You'll probably be told that late delivery of documents, especially airline tickets, is standard practice (unfortunately true) and not to worry. Most of the time this will be valid advice, but if something is actually screwed up (documents lost in mail, misplaced, etc.), you won't have much time, once the seller acknowledges a problem, to resolve it. The one thing you can count on is that the cruise line and airline are going to refer you back to the seller for resolution.

The only exception to this is when your cruise reservation is paid in full and the cruise line knows that the seller has gone belly-up. In this

case, the cruise line will usually arrange for you to pick up your cruise documents at the pier. Regarding the airline, if your reservation is in the system and fully paid, and if you have an electronic ticket, you're home free. Just go to the airport and produce your photo ID and confirmation. If paper tickets are lost, you're back to dealing with the seller. If it's a weekend or holiday and you can't contact the seller, call the airline and ask for a customer-service representative. All airlines have different policies, but the representative will usually try to help if the reservation is in the airline's system and fully paid.

If your reservations, either air or cruise, are not in the cruise line's or airline's system, you've got a big problem. It could be as simple as a transmission error between the seller and the cruise line, or it could mean that the seller lost your reservations; failed to record your payments; erroneously cancelled your reservations; or is about to, or has, gone out of business. Assuming the seller is still in business, call the seller, explain your situation, and then start working your way up the chain of command until you get someone on the phone with the knowledge and authority to address your problem.

Most of these situations can be avoided, of course, by doing business with a brick-and-mortar travel agent in your hometown, by a reputable Internet seller affiliated with a reliable travel consortium, and by arranging your air itinerary through the travel agent (or on your own) rather than through the cruise line. Buying your own air, unfortunately, puts you at some risk for a couple of other unpleasant eventualities having to do with missing the ship and losing your luggage, but we'll deal with those problems later. Finally, on the topic of arranging your own flight itinerary, we don't want to overstate the case. While working on this section of the guide, we received a direct-mail promo from an excellent European cruise line offering outside cabins at half price with air to Europe included. Would we hesitate to buy because the cruise line is providing air? Not for a second.

Problem 3: Bad Weather or Air-Traffic Delays on Departure Day

When you book your air, either on your own or through the cruise line, give some thought to what weather and air-traffic conditions are likely to be on your day of departure. If you're traveling the same day as your cruise departure, over a holiday period, or at a time of year when bad weather is likely, you might want to take some precautions. Begin analyzing your airport choices. In the New York area, for example, be aware that Newark and Kennedy have longer runways, more de-icing equipment, and electronic traffic-control systems that often allow them to function when La Guardia is shut down. New Yorkers can also take a Washington-bound train directly to the Baltimore–Washington Airport (BWI) from Penn Station in under three hours. (Washingtonians can do the same on a northbound train.) BWI has a better track record than any of the three New York airports for on-time departures.

During holiday periods or bad weather, the chance of a serious snafu increases exponentially with every flight connection you have to make. If, with a little inconvenience, you can eliminate a connection, it's usually worthwhile to do so. Let's say you live in Louisville, Kentucky; Columbus, Ohio; or Charleston, West Virginia, and you're flying to Fort Lauderdale for a cruise out of Port Everglades. If there's no direct flight, you might be better off driving to the Cincinnati Airport (located in northern Kentucky) and taking a direct flight from there to Fort Lauderdale, thereby eliminating the connecting flight.

unofficial TIP
Always book the earliest flight of the day on an airline that offers a number of flights throughout the day to your destination.

Early morning flights have a much better on-time record than do flights later in the day. Plus, if there's an equipment problem or a cancellation, the airline can put you on a later flight. *For maximum peace of mind, travel to the port of departure one or two days prior to your sailing date. If things go awry on your travel day, you've still got sufficient time to make alternative arrangements.* Why risk jeopardizing a cherished vacation? Arrive a day early at minimum.

You've probably heard the ongoing debate regarding electronic versus paper airline tickets. Generally speaking, we prefer electronic tickets with the proviso that you double-check with the airline to insure that your correct itinerary is in their system and that your reservations are shown as fully paid. The one situation where paper tickets are preferable is when your flight is cancelled and your airline cannot book you on another flight. In this case, you'll want to make arrangements with an alternative carrier. Most carriers will honor the tickets of another airline in the event of cancellations or labor actions, but they will require paper tickets or some form of documentation as proof of purchase.

Problem 4: Missing the Boat

This is the nightmare scenario that haunts all cruisers. If you're savvy in your travel planning, and especially if you plan to arrive at your departure port a day or so ahead of time, you'll almost eliminate the likelihood of missing the boat. We all know, however, that travel, like life, can get mixed up in ways that we never anticipate.

If you purchase your air from the cruise line, the cruise line will do its utmost to get you on the ship. There are many, many documented cases of ship departures being delayed while awaiting the arrival of a delinquent flight full of cruise passengers. Likewise, cruise lines have flown passengers who actually missed the boat to rendezvous with the ship at the first port of call. The more passengers that are affected by late flights, the more likely the cruise line is to hold the ship. The most important thing to understand, however, is that the cruise is absolutely not under any legal obligation to hold the ship or to assist in any other manner. If you read the terms and conditions of

your Passage Contract, you'll almost immediately encounter language like the following: "Under no circumstances does [X Cruise Line's] responsibility extend beyond the ship. All arrangements made for the guests with independent contractors [such as airlines] are made solely for the convenience of the guest and are at the guest's risk." What you *can* count on, exclusively as a matter of customer relations, is for the cruise line to do what is practicable. Do 30 late-arriving guests on a weather-delayed flight from Cleveland justify delaying the departure of a 3,000 passenger cruise ship? Perhaps, but don't count on it. We know of at least one situation when the ship sailed while two busloads of flight-delayed passengers waited at the airport to be driven to the port, 20 minutes away.

Sometimes, when air is arranged through the cruise line, and passengers miss the boat owing to flight delays, the airline will help out. Assistance usually comes in the form of a meal and perhaps a hotel room. If the airline flies to your first port of call, it will try to book you on a flight so that you can meet the ship. Because the airline is not responsible for weather or air-traffic delays, it has no legal obligation to help. Like the cruise line, any assistance rendered is primarily a matter of customer relations.

If you book your own travel arrangements to the departure port, you're on your own. As far as the cruise line is concerned, you're totally responsible for getting to the ship. If you miss the ship through no fault of your own, however, as in the case of a delayed flight, you will have that travel insurance we recommended to fall back on. Travel insurance is also your safety net if you miss the boat because of sickness, or because of bankruptcy of the cruise line. Missing the boat because of an airline strike is also usually covered by travel insurance, though the conditions for coverage vary from policy to policy. If you or your cruise line book you on an airline involved in a labor dispute, discuss the situation with your insurance carrier to determine under what circumstances you're covered. When it comes to travel insurance, don't, as the saying goes, leave home without it. Also, ask a ton of questions and compare plans carefully.

Problem 5: Lost Luggage

If you book air through the cruise line, the cruise line will make every effort to get your luggage to you (once it's recovered), including flying it to meet you at a port of call. Once again, this assistance is purely voluntary as opposed to obligatory. If you handle your own air, you must depend on the airline (generally without any assistance from the cruise line) to get your recovered luggage to you. In such situations, the probability of your luggage catching up with you while on your cruise is slim. Minimize the chances of your luggage being lost by arriving in port a day early and/or eliminating connecting flights where possible. Buy travel insurance, and make sure it pays if

your bags are delayed more than 24 hours. The possibility of lost luggage is a good reason to pack essentials for an overnight in your carry-on luggage.

Problem 6: You Get Sick during Your Cruise

Although most cruise ships carry a physician and usually one registered nurse, only the new large ships are equipped to handle serious problems; and some, such as Princess' ships, maintain satellite contact with state-side hospitals when serious diagnosis is needed. Nonetheless, the majority of cruise ships fly under foreign flags, and hence their physicians are not required to be licensed to practice in the United States. From the cruise physician's perspective, shore-based facilities are better equipped to handle serious illness and emergencies. In practical terms, this means that the cruise physician will want to transfer you to a hospital on shore at the first opportunity if he anticipates your illness taxing the limitations of his clinic. Also, you should know that according to the fine print in your passage contract, the cruise line is not responsible for medical care you receive while on board. As with the problems discussed earlier, travel insurance is a must. When you purchase your policy, make sure any preexisting condition is covered and understand the policy's medical evacuation coverage.

In the last several years there has been a media circus swirling around the periodic occurrence of gastrointestinal viruses aboard cruise ships. Referred to in the media as "outbreaks" and "epidemics," the press has so sensationalized cases of the viruses that they have become known as the "cruise ship disease." The facts, however, tell a different story. The viruses, known as Norwalk virus, Norwalk-like virus, and norovirus (collectively known as NLV) occur everywhere (on land as well as at sea), ranking second only to the common cold in the number of cases reported. Because of the extraordinary sanitation practices aboard cruise ships (operated and monitored in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control [CDC]), these NLV occur far less frequently on cruise ships than among the general population. Expressed differently, NLV is a very common ailment and incidents occur far more often in the home, office, and at school than on cruise ships. Most cruise ship outbreaks are not caused by a "sick ship" but by sick people who bring it onboard.

Symptoms can include vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps, and a low-grade fever. NLV is not an upper respiratory virus such as the flu, and is usually not life-threatening, unless someone has other, more serious, medical problems.

NLV is transmitted from person-to-person through direct contact, and indirectly from surfaces that are then touched by another person. NLV can also be transmitted through a food or water source; the CDC has concluded that person-to-person transmission has been the means of transmission on almost all cases reported on cruise ships.

“We continue to work very closely with the cruise lines,” said David Forney, chief of Vessel Sanitation Program of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “These ships are maintaining the highest standard of sanitation in the world.”

If cases of a gastrointestinal virus are reported, cruise lines take extensive precautions to contain the spread through aggressive sanitation measures and open communication with their guests prior to boarding and while onboard the ship. Some of the measures employed when responding to reported cases may include:

- Passengers with obvious symptoms may not be allowed to board.
- To avoid the risk of spreading the virus, passengers who experience typical gastrointestinal symptoms are usually told to remain in their cabins until they are noncontagious but could be asked to disembark at the next available port. The CDC endorses this procedure.
- Crew with symptoms may be similarly quarantined until they are noncontagious but may also disembark the ship at the next available port.
- An aggressive on-board communications effort to encourage guests to frequently wash their hands. Washing one’s hands regularly (each hour or two) is a very good way to reduce the spread of contact viruses.
- Aboard ship, staterooms and public areas are cleaned and disinfected daily, including, but not limited to, counters, bathroom surfaces, door handles, railings and grab bars, exercise equipment, and TV remote controls. Some lines also offer hand sanitizers at the entrance to the gangway or at a buffet line.
- On turn-around days, extra crew are brought on board to disinfect the ship with the CDC recommended chlorine-based solution from top to bottom before additional passengers board.
- Onboard medical facilities and staff are always available to prescribe medication for symptomatic treatment of gastrointestinal symptoms.

Be aware that the cruise lines are so sensitive to bad press surrounding NLV and the need to assure that as many guests as possible remain well that some have enacted rather draconian policies, endorsed by the CDC. A man from Maryland on a Caribbean cruise sought care for gastrointestinal symptoms and was notified that he would be involuntarily disembarked at the next port of call. Though there were any number of alternative explanations for the symptoms, and no diagnostic testing was done, the man and his wife were ordered ashore the next day. Quarantined until time of disembarkation, his symptoms completely resolved after about ten hours. Onboard medical staff, realizing then that the symptoms could not be attributed to NLV, apologized but informed the couple that the decision was made by the line’s home office and could not be reversed. After the man’s return home, laboratory tests ordered by his doctor showed no evidence of a viral infection. The cruise line was so intent in getting the man off the ship that they evidently failed to clear the couple’s entry into the port. Later, when they went to the airport for

their flight home, they were detained by immigration for supposedly entering the country illegally. In case you're wondering, the cruise line did pay the couple's travel expenses home. Granted, this is a worse-case scenario, but it always helps to know what could happen.

Problem 7: Onboard Complaints

If your stateroom toilet backs up, the air conditioner conks out, or the showroom performers quit, don't expect a refund. If it's not resolved onboard when it happens, the best you are likely to get is a discount on a subsequent cruise. Once again, it's that pesky passage contract that purports to absolve the cruise line from all responsibility, anytime, anywhere. In point of law, however (as any attorney who specializes in travel will tell you), some of the language is nothing but smoke, totally unenforceable and made part of the contract as a bluff to inhibit you from taking legal action. Understand, however, if you decide to sue, that cruise lines operate under maritime law, and you might have to file the lawsuit in the country where the ship is registered. It's not an accident that so many cruise ships fly under the so-called flags of convenience, particularly those of Liberia and Panama.

Legalities aside, it's always preferable to settle problems on the spot. Usually, you will direct your complaint to the chief purser or to the hotel manager, and usually they will be quite responsive. Be polite and friendly, and keep your anger under control. As a last resort, if your complaint is not addressed, fax the president of the cruise line. Resend each day until your problem is resolved. Keep copies of your faxes in case the complaint goes unremedied for the entire cruise. As of this writing, Carnival is the only cruise line that will allow you to cancel your cruise and disembark at the first port of call once underway if things are not satisfactory. You can get a refund for the *unused* portion of your cruise fare.

If you are really unlucky, like when your cabin is for some reason uninhabitable and the ship is completely full, your only option is to negotiate the best deal you can or leave the ship on your own initiative at a port of call. If you jump ship, regardless of the reason, you're on your own. Consequently, we recommend contacting your travel-insurance carrier for advice about how to best proceed before taking action.

Problem 8: Credit Hold

It has become common practice for cruise lines to ask passengers to complete a form prior to leaving home authorizing the cruise line to hold X dollars in credit per day for each day of the cruise. On a Holland American cruise, for example, the line held \$60 per day. The same credit card covered both husband and wife, so the credit hold amounted to a not insignificant \$2,160. In practicality, if the card had a \$3,000 credit limit, the credit hold would only leave only \$840 of available credit on that card for the couple to use for onshore shopping, restaurants, etc.

Cruise lines use credit holds to make sure a passenger's onboard charges are covered. On land, each transaction on your card is approved and processed individually. On a cruise it doesn't make sense for the line to pay \$10 or so in satellite telecommunications to process that \$4 beer you enjoyed on the Lido Deck. Consequently, charges are recorded but not processed until the end of the cruise. At that time they are totaled and the ship runs through a single transaction. To make sure you have the credit available to pay your onboard charges, the line puts a credit hold on what it estimates you'll charge. Among other things, the practice largely eliminates messy credit problems at the time of disembarkation.

Though using credit holds addresses a legitimate problem (passengers without sufficient funds or credit to pay their onboard tab), there are a couple of problems. First, the cruise lines do not communicate what they are doing very well, and some of the credit-hold preauthorization forms are confusing. Because many passengers don't realize what's going on, they are surprised and embarrassed when their credit card is subsequently rejected while they attempt to purchase something ashore.

The second problem is that the cruise line may hold much more per day than you'll actually charge onboard. The solution to these problems is to carefully review any form the cruise line sends, particularly one that requires your signature. If the credit amount the cruise line holds is out of line with your normal onboard spending habits, negotiate with the purser a lower per-day amount when you board the ship. Remember, however, those spa treatments and shore excursions are expensive. Your onboard spending may very likely exceed your bar bill and a couple of T-shirts for the grandchildren.

Be aware that cruise lines that do not send preauthorization forms for credit holds will probably put a similarly calculated credit hold on your card when you present it during embarkation. The salient point in the latter case is to ask the amount of the credit hold. Finally, remember that a credit hold is not a charge on your credit card. The credit hold is an amount reserved, and nothing is actually charged to your card until your total onboard bill is processed at the end of the cruise.

Problem 9: Itinerary Changes/Cancelled Ports of Call

You will discover that the cruise line has complete discretion in regard to changing the itinerary or canceling a scheduled port stop. This discretion is necessary in order to insure the safety of the passengers, ship, and crew. It is this flexibility that permits a ship to circumvent storms or offload a passenger at a nonscheduled port for medical reasons or other emergencies.

Problem 10 : Shore Excursion Problems

Because shore excursions are conducted off the ship and produced by local tour companies, the cruise line will decline responsibility for

any problem you have, however serious. Sometimes, however, as a matter of customer relations, a cruise ship might offer you a refund or assist you in obtaining satisfaction from the tour operator. Nevertheless, you should always register your complaint with the cruise line immediately after the tour. Though of little comfort to you, so doing may result in the cruise line forcing an errant tour operator to clean up its act.

WHAT'S THE REAL COST OF A CRUISE?

SOME READERS REPORT being surprised by all the extras that are not covered by their cruise fare: items like beverages on board, spa services, photos taken by the ship's photographer, shore excursions, wine tastings, specialized cooking, exercise or computer classes, and even designer ice cream treats. Although all these things add up to a hefty sum, we don't consider them to be "hidden" charges. Except for port charges (if the cruise line doesn't include them in the fare), such purchases are optional. Any travel provider will try to sell you stuff; it's like the popcorn or beer vendors at the ballpark. You know they'll be there and that what they sell will be expensive. Buy or not as you see fit, but don't be surprised by their presence. The cruise lines find these services to be very lucrative profit centers, which help them keep basic cruise prices down. Also, these multiple options increase guest choices onboard, which attracts different types of customers to cruise ships. Because most folks don't like to scrimp on their vacation, however, it's wise to anticipate these expenditures. Even the little stuff like beverages and photos can tack on \$200 to \$400 to a week-long cruise. So be forewarned.

Concerning port charges, after some lawsuits in Florida seeking to redress the less-than-forthright ways that certain cruise lines represented port charges, almost all cruises from Florida to the Caribbean now include port charges in the cost of the cruise rather than tack them on as a separate charge. Still, watch out for port charges, particularly for Europe and Asia.

PREPARING *for* YOUR CRUISE

A CRUISE MAY BE ABOUT the easiest vacation you can take when it comes to making preparations, because so much is done for you, particularly when you buy an air/sea package. During the cruise, entry formalities are handled by the ship for its passengers in most cases, sparing you the need to fill out immigration forms or clear customs in each port of call.

In most ports you can simply walk off your ship after it has been cleared by local authorities; spend the day sightseeing, shopping, enjoying a sport or other pleasant pursuits; and return to your ship without having to do anything more than pass through metal detectors

and put your purchases through an x-ray machine for security reasons, and show your boarding pass.

The destination of your cruise will make some difference—the more exotic the location, the more you may have need for planning ahead, perhaps for inoculations, visas, and the like. And of course, the weather during your cruise will determine the wardrobe you select.

Such advice may seem obvious to those who have traveled, and if it does, let this information serve simply as a reminder or checklist. Even the most seasoned travelers have been known to pack their cruise tickets and passports in their checked luggage or leave their traveler's checks at home.

CRUISE LINE BROCHURES

THE EASIEST PLACE TO START your preparation is by reading the brochures from the cruise line you selected for your cruise. These have a wealth of useful information. To be sure, much of it is glossy pictures and promotional puff to entice you to take a cruise, but almost all materials contain several pages, usually toward the back, aimed at answering the questions people ask most often.

These include the specifics about dining hours, smoking/non-smoking provisions, paying for incidentals on board ships, embarkation and sailing times, and similar tips. In this book, too, each of the major cruise line profiles in Part Two includes a chart entitled Standard Features, which will answer similar questions pertaining to a specific cruise line and its ships.

CRUISE LINE VIDEOS/DVDS

MOST CRUISE LINES HAVE VIDEOTAPES or DVDs of the cruise you are taking that they would be happy to send you—for a fee. Most cost about \$15 to \$20. Essentially, it is a promotional video, but it will give you an idea of what to expect, particularly if your cruise is to an area of the world in which you have not traveled previously. You will probably receive a flyer from the cruise line to order the tape directly from a distributor. Some cruise line Web sites allow for purchasing the video online; some sites feature virtual ship tours and shore excursions.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

IN 2005, THE U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT BEGAN phasing in a new border-control program that will ultimately require a valid passport to both enter and leave the country. The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative brings an end to decades of travel to Mexico, Canada, and the majority of Caribbean nations with only a birth certificate as proof of citizenship. The implementation dates are as follows:

- **December 31, 2005** Passport required for all air and sea travel to or from the Caribbean, Bermuda, and Central and South America.

- **December 31, 2006** Passport required for all air and sea travel to or from Mexico and Canada.
- **December 31, 2007** Passport required for all air, sea, and land border crossings.

Aliens residing in the United States need to have valid alien registration cards and passports. All non-U.S. citizens must have valid passports and necessary visas when boarding any cruise ship departing from and returning to U.S. ports.

Passengers on some cruises visiting Europe, former Soviet bloc countries, Asia, Africa, and South America may also be required to have a visa. *A valid passport usually means one that will not expire for at least six months.* If yours has less than six months left, it may be rejected by either the cruise line or ports of call.


Often, on cruises to these destinations, ship authorities will ask you to surrender your passport when you check in and will keep it until the end of your cruise. This enables them to clear the ship more quickly in foreign ports. In such cases, you do not need to worry about giving over your passport to the ship. The passports are locked away securely and are taken out only if local authorities ask to see them. Finally, never pack your passport in your suitcase; carry it with you at all times.

TRAVEL REQUIREMENTS

SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS for passports, visas, and vaccinations will be provided by your cruise line or travel agent. However, obtaining the necessary visas and any other documentation required for embarkation, debarkation, and reentry into the United States is your responsibility; if you do not have the proper documents, you will be denied boarding. If you buy your cruise on the Internet or from a seller not located in your city, the seller may neglect to inform you of required travel documents and other pertinent information. Even when you purchase from your local travel agent, however, it's a good idea to independently confirm document, visa, and vaccination requirements for the countries you'll be visiting. Nobody likes a last-minute surprise.

Documents that will be accepted as proof of identification vary with each cruise line. You will need to inquire in advance if the information is not provided in the cruise line's brochure, which it usually is—in the fine print.

Children traveling with anyone other than their parents or legal guardian must have permission in writing for the child to travel. Failure to comply with this requirement can also result in denial of boarding.

 **unofficial TIP**
U.S. passengers under 18 years of age are usually not allowed to board a cruise ship at initial embarkation without a passport. No refund of the cruise fare will be given to families without such identification.

DRESS CODES AND PACKING

WHAT TO PACK will be determined by your ship, its destinations, and, to some extent, the itinerary. An adventure cruise might be three weeks

long, but not a single night will be formal or even very dressy. The dress code is usually explained in the cruise line's brochure; we also note it in the Standard Features in each cruise line's profile in Part Two.

There are no limits on the amount of luggage you can bring on board, but most cabins do not have much closet and storage space. More importantly, because you are likely to be flying to your departure port, you need to be guided by airline regulations regarding excess baggage. All airlines have weight restrictions. Buy too many souvenirs and you will pay. So pack light on the outbound journey with that in mind.

As a consequence of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, all checked and carry-on luggage is carefully screened before being allowed on board. Even if you pack something in your checked baggage as seemingly innocuous as a corkscrew, knitting needles, or a pair of small scissors, these items might possibly be confiscated and not returned until you disembark. Moreover, none of your checked luggage will be delivered in the normal fashion to your cabin. After an hour or two of panic, thinking your baggage is lost, you'll be summoned to ship security. There you will be asked to identify the offending luggage and objects and to sign forms acknowledging that you brought such items aboard, and that they have been impounded for the duration of the cruise. While on your cruise, be aware also that purses, bags, and packs that you carried ashore will be searched before you're allowed back on board. Ditto for anything you purchased while ashore.

Despite the image you may have about fancy parties and clothes, the reality is that shipboard life is very casual. You will spend your days in slacks, shorts, T-shirts, and bathing suits. Lightweight mix-and-match ensembles with skirts, shirts, blouses, shorts, and slacks are practical. For women, colorful scarves are another way to change the look of an outfit. Cocktail dresses or dressy pants suits are appropriate for evening wear.

Men usually are asked to wear a jacket at dinner in the dining room. A dark suit and white shirt work fine in place of a tuxedo if the evening is black tie. Add a selection of slacks and sport shirts, and one or two sports jackets. If you are heading for a warm-weather cruise (Caribbean, Mexico, Hawaii, Tahiti), pack as you would for any resort destination. Lightweight, loose-fitting clothing is ideal, and cotton or cotton blends are more comfortable than synthetic fabrics for the tropics. Include two bathing suits if you are likely to be spending much time in the sun and at the beach. Don't forget a cover-up and flip flops for the short jaunt between your cabin and the pool or other outside decks, as cruise ships ask passengers not to wear bathing suits or go barefoot in the public rooms.

Take along cosmetics and suntan lotion, but don't worry if you forget something. It will most likely be available on board or in port-

side duty-free shops. Sunglasses and a hat or sun visor for protection against the sun are essential. A tote bag comes in handy for carrying odds and ends, as do plastic bags for wet towels and bathing suits on returning from a visit to an island beach. You might also want to keep camera equipment in plastic bags as protection against the salt air, water, and sand.

The first and last nights of your cruise are usually casual, and the nights your ship is in port almost always call for informal dress. At least one night will be the captain's gala party, where tuxedos for men and long dresses for women are the norm, but a jacket and tie for men and a cocktail dress for women are also just fine.

Bring your most comfortable walking shoes for shore excursions. Tennis, deck, or other low-heeled rubber or nonskid shoes are recommended for walking about the ship, up and down gangways, getting in and out of the ship's tenders, and for sightseeing. And you will need a sweater for breezy nights at sea or for the air-conditioning in the dining room or shore-excursion bus. A small flashlight, a fold-up umbrella, and a light jacket are often handy.

Pack lightly. But most of all, be comfortable. You do not need to rush out and buy an expensive wardrobe. Obviously, if your cruise is in a cool or cold climate, you will need to plan accordingly. A Baltic or Scandinavian cruise in summer is likely to encounter colder temperatures than you might think—similar to a New England fall—but then can quickly turn to a hot summer day. Plan for layers when the weather is uncertain.

As we mention elsewhere, it's a sound practice to have a small carry-on bag for your medications and cosmetics and to include a change of clothing for your first afternoon aboard your ship, in the event of a delay in the delivery of your luggage. Also, bring a fold-away bag to carry all those souvenirs, gifts, and duty-free bargains that probably won't fit in your suitcase.

Every evening, an agenda for the following day is delivered to your room; it states the dress code for the following evening. It may be:

CASUAL Comfortable daywear, such as slacks, shorts, or jeans, but some cruise lines will state specifically that T-shirts, tank tops, or shorts are not allowed in the dining room for dinner.

INFORMAL Dresses and pantsuits are suggested for the ladies; jackets for the men, but ties are optional.

FORMAL Cocktail dresses or gowns for the ladies, and tuxedo, dinner jacket, or dark business suit for men; jacket and tie are required.

It varies greatly by line, but as a general rule, the lineup might be like this:

unofficial TIP

For a one-week or shorter cruise, you should be able to fit everything you need into one suitcase.

3- TO 4-NIGHT CRUISES One formal, one informal, and one or two casual.

7- TO 8-NIGHT CRUISES Two formal, two informal, two or three casual.

10- TO 14-NIGHT CRUISES Three or four formal; four or six informal; four or five casual.

You are asked to comply with the ship's stated dress code, if for no other reason than out of respect for your fellow passengers. Generally, the suggested attire is respected throughout the evening or at least until after the shows in the main showroom and the late-night buffet, when it is a gala event. Often, those who want to stay up late for the disco or casino change to more comfortable dress, if they prefer.

COSTUMES

A FEW SHIPS still have one night as a masquerade party, and others have theme nights for which some people bring an outfit—a 1950s and 1960s night or a country-and-western night, for example. It's entirely up to you whether or not to participate. The cruise line's brochure usually tells you about theme nights, or you can ask your travel agent for theme nights featured on your cruise, if you want to join in. If you don't have space for a costume, the cruise staff can help you make one.

SPORTS EQUIPMENT

IF YOU PLAN to play golf or tennis frequently, you might want to bring your own equipment, and of course, you'll need the appropriate clothes and shoes. Ships that have golf practice facilities and shoreside golf programs sometimes supply the equipment for a nominal fee. Inquire.

Fins and a snorkeling mask (particularly if you have one fitted with your eyeglass prescription) are bulky, but might save you a \$10 to \$20 fee each time you go snorkeling on your own. If you buy the ship's shore excursions, the snorkeling equipment is included. Scuba gear is usually included in dive packages, too, and except for your regulator, is impractical to bring on a cruise.

Hiking boots, jogging shoes, riding attire, and other sporting gear will depend entirely on you and the nature of your cruise. For adventure or expedition cruises, such as to Antarctica, your cruise line will give you ample information about dress and the equipment you need; some supply guests with winter parkas and boots.

MONEY MATTERS

DOLLARS ARE READILY ACCEPTED throughout the Caribbean and in some other regions, as are traveler's checks and major credit cards. In Europe or Asia, the ship's purser or front office usually offers foreign currency exchange facilities, or the ship brings someone aboard to provide the facility in each port of call.

If you do exchange money (it's a great opportunity to teach kids about other currencies—euros in Martinique, Dutch guilders in Curaçao, pesos in Mexico), exchange only small amounts for your immediate use. Seldom will you have time to exchange the money back before returning to your ship, and you lose money every time you make the exchange. An exception is a European cruise. If you are visiting multiple European countries, say France, Italy, Spain and Greece, simply exchange a lot of dollars in advance for euros, which can be used in many countries.

Even with U.S. dollars, always carry small denominations—ones, fives, tens. Chances are, if you are owed change, it will be returned in the local currency. Incidentally, U.S. coins are seldom accepted in foreign countries and are impossible to exchange except in quantity at foreign-exchange banks. Likewise with foreign coins when you want to exchange them back into U.S. currency. Most become souvenirs.

Some travelers report problems cashing traveler's checks in foreign cruise ports, especially on the weekend. Major credit cards have become the currency of travelers worldwide and are accepted in most places. On a cruise, you will often find them the most convenient method of payment for settling your account aboard ship, for shopping at duty-free shops, and for payment of local restaurant or hotel bills. However, do not expect to use them in select off-the-beaten-track locations. The Cuna Indians of the San Blas Islands—an exotic stop on Panama Canal cruises—want your greenbacks. After you return home and receive your credit card bills, review them carefully. The theft of credit card numbers is a worldwide problem and cruise passengers, who are normally in for only a day, are easy prey.

PRESCRIPTION MEDICINE AND OTHER MEDICAL REQUIREMENTS

AS WITH ANY TRIP, whether on land or sea, you should have all your required medicine with you and carry it in original bottles and in your hand luggage, not packed in your suitcase. As a further precaution, bring copies of your medicine prescriptions—and for your eyeglasses, too.

If you have dietary requirements, you or your travel agent should communicate them to your cruise line at the time you book your cruise. Most ships can accommodate normal requirements of low salt and low fat, but more complex ones that require special stores be carried aboard require planning. Do not take anything for granted. Inquire. For example, many ships do not normally stock skim milk. In each of the cruise line profiles in Part Two under Standard Features, the amount of advance notice a cruise line requires to handle special diets is indicated.

Cruise ships that travel beyond coastal waters are required to have a doctor on board; most large ships have nurses and adequate medical facilities for normal circumstances. The doctor and nursing staff

have limited daily office hours, which are printed in the ship's daily agenda, and they are always on call for emergencies. There are charges for most medical services.

SUNBURNS

YOU WILL NEED TO TAKE PRECAUTIONS against the sun when you are on a Caribbean, Mexican, Antarctic, southern European, or southeast Asian cruise. The sun in these regions is much, much stronger than the sun to which most people are accustomed. Always use a sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher, preferably 30 and above, and do not stay in the direct sun for long stretches at a time. Nothing can spoil a vacation faster than a sunburn.

LEARNING THE LINGO

CRUISE SHIPS HAVE A LANGUAGE all their own. Though it is not necessary to enroll in a Berlitz course to learn it, becoming familiar with a few terms will be worthwhile so you won't feel lost at sea, if you will forgive the pun.

Passengers don't reserve rooms on a ship, they book **cabins**, which cruise lines sometimes call by a fancier name, **staterooms**. The price level of a cabin is known as its **category**.

When you reach your ship, you will **board** or **embark**; when it's time to leave the ship, passengers **disembark**. If the ship arrives at a port where it cannot pull into the dock, the ship will **anchor** and passengers are taken ashore in a **tender**, one of the small ancillary vessels or lifeboats that travel onboard the ship.

Several terms will assist you in finding your way around the ship. The **bow** is the front of the ship, the **aft** is the rear, and the center portion is **midship**.

Heading forward, toward the **bow**, the right side of the ship is known as the **starboard side**; the left side of the ship is called the **port side**. Ships have **decks**, never floors. Decks are named after such things as precious stones (Emerald Deck), activities (Sports Deck), places (Monte Carlo Deck), and planets (Venus Deck).

If you've built up an appetite from all this exploring, you can go to the **main seating** (or sitting) and eat early, or the **second seating** and dine late. Both times are assigned by the line. Some lines also offer two early and two late seatings. Some ships have **single seating**, which means that all passengers eat at the same time for all three meals. Some ships also have **open seating**, in which case you may sit anywhere—at any unoccupied table or join others. By invitation, you may even find yourself at the **captain's table**.

Onboard, there are people to help you decode ship lingo. The **purser's office** is the information center, similar to a check-in desk at a hotel. The **hotel manager** is in charge of all passenger-related shipboard services, such as dining, housekeeping, and so on. The **chief steward** is responsible for cabin services, and **cabin stewards** or **stew-**

ardesses take care of cabins; the **dining steward** is your waiter. The **cruise director** functions as the emcee, and the **cruise staff**, who are his assistants, run all activities and entertainment and make sure that you are having a good time. Finally, there's the **captain**, who is in charge of everything.

Cruise lingo is part of the fun, so don't take it too seriously. Here are the most common terms you are likely to encounter.

Add-on A supplementary charge added to the cruise fare, usually applied to correlated airfare and/or post-cruise land tours.

Aft Near, toward, or in the rear (stern) of the ship.

Air/sea A package consisting of the two forms of travel, that is, air to and from the port of embarkation, transfers to and from the port, as well as the cruise itself.

Astern Beyond the ship's stern.

Batten down To secure all open hatches or equipment for sea worthiness while the ship is under way.

Beam Width of the ship (amidships) between its two sides at its widest point.

Berth Dock, pier, or quay (key); also, the bed in the passenger cabins.

Bow Front or forward portion of the ship.

Bridge Navigational and command control center of the ship.

Bulkhead Upright partition (wall) dividing the ship into cabins or compartments.

Category The price level of a cabin, based on location on the ship, dimensions, and amenities.

Colors A national flag or ensign flown from the mast or stern post.

Course Direction in which the ship is headed, usually expressed in compass degrees.

Crow's nest Partially enclosed platform at the top of the mast, used as a lookout.

Deck plan An overhead deck-by-deck diagram illustrating cabin and public room locations in relation to each other.

Disembark Depart from the ship.

Dock Berth, pier, or quay (key).

Draft Measurement in feet from water line to lowest point of ship's keel.

Even keel The ship in a true vertical position with respect to its vertical axis.

Fathom Measurement of distance equal to six feet.

First seating The earlier of several meal times in the ship's main dining rooms.

Fore The forward mast or the front (bow) of the ship.

Forward Toward the fore or bow of the ship.

Funnel The smokestack or "chimney" of the ship.

Galley The ship's kitchen.

who's who on the cruise ship



Captain



Chief Engineer



Chief Officer



Doctor



Electrician



Electrician Chief



First Engineer



First Officer



Hotel Manager



Nurse



Purser



Radio Operator



Second Engineer



Second Engineer

*Uniform designations of Seabourn Cruise Line; other cruise lines may vary.
Courtesy of Seabourn Cruise Line.*

Gangway The opening through the ship's bulwarks (or through the ship's side) and the ramp by which passengers embark and disembark.

Gross registered ton A measurement of 100 cubic feet of enclosed revenue-earning space within a ship (see Space ratio).

Hatch The covering over an opening in a ship's deck, leading to a hold.

Helm Commonly the ship's steering wheel, but more correctly the entire steering apparatus consisting of the wheel, the rudder, and their connecting cables or hydraulic systems.

Hold Interior space(s) below the main deck for storage of cargo.

House flag The flag denoting the company to which the ship belongs.

Hull The frame and body (shell) of the ship exclusive of masts, superstructure, or rigging.

Knot A unit of speed equal to 1 nautical mile per hour (6,080.2 feet), as compared to a land mile of 5,280 feet.

League A measure of distance approximating 3.45 nautical miles.

Leeward In the direction of that side of the ship opposite from which the wind blows.

Manifest A list or invoice of a ship's passengers, crew, and cargo.

Midship In or toward the middle of the ship; the longitudinal center portion of the ship.

Nautical mile 6,080.2 feet, as compared to a land mile of 5,280 feet.

Open seating Seating in the main dining room(s) is not assigned. You eat where and with whom you wish.

Paddlewheel A wheel with boards around its circumference, and, commonly, the source of propulsion for traditional American riverboats.

Pitch The rocking back and forth (bow to stern) motion of a ship that may be felt in heavy seas when the ship is under way.

Port The left side of the ship when facing toward the bow.

Port charge Port taxes, collected by the line and paid to a local government authority; it may include other miscellaneous charges, such as gasoline surcharge and fees, as well as fees to dock in a particular port.

Port tax A charge levied by the local government authority to be paid by the passenger.

Prow The bow or the stem (the front) of the ship.

Purser A senior management position on board ship. In most cases, the purser is like the general manager of a hotel, but in some cases, he or she is more of the financial or administration officer.

Quay (pronounced "key") A dock, berth, or pier.

Registry The country under whose flag the ship is registered and with whose laws the ship and its owners must comply; in addition to compliance with the laws of the countries at which the ship calls and/or embarks/disembarks passengers/cargo.

Rigging The ropes, chains, and cables that support a sailing ship's masts, spars, kingposts, cranes, and the like.

Roll The alternate sway of a ship from side to side.

Running lights Three lights (green on the starboard side, red on the port side, and white at the top of the mast) required by international law to be lighted when the ship is in motion between the times of sunset and sunrise.

Second, third, or fourth seating The later meal times in the ship's dining room(s).

Space ratio A measurement of cubic space per passenger. Gross registered ton divided by the number of passengers (basis two) equals space ratio.

Stabilizer A gyroscopically operated finlike device extending from both sides of the ship below the water line to provide stability for the ship and reduce its roll.

Stack The funnel or chimney from which the ship's gases of combustion are released into the atmosphere.

Starboard The right side of the ship when facing toward the bow.

Stateroom Cabin or suite.

Steward Personnel onboard ship.

Stem The extreme bow or prow of the ship.

Stern The extreme rear of the ship.

Suite Upscale accommodations with more space, more in-room amenities, a bigger balcony and, at times, more rooms than standard or balcony cabins.

Superstructure The structure of the ship above the main deck or water line.

Tender A small vessel, sometimes the ship's lifeboat, used to move passengers to and from the shore when the ship is at anchor.

Transfers A bus or van ride between the ship and other locations, such as airports, hotels, or departure points for shore excursions.

Upper berth A single-size bed higher from the floor than usual (similar to a bunk bed), usually folded or recessed into the wall or ceiling by day.

Wake The track of agitated water behind a ship in motion.

Water line The line at the side of the ship's hull that corresponds to the surface of the water.

Weigh To raise; for example, to weigh the anchor.

Windward Toward the wind, to the direction from which the wind blows.

TIME *to* GO

IF YOU PURCHASE an air/sea package, your cruise begins from the moment you arrive at the airport. Here's how.

CRUISE DOCUMENTS

NORMALLY, YOU RECEIVE your travel documents—including tickets, transfer vouchers, boarding forms, and luggage tags—about two weeks before departure. Some cruise lines, particularly deluxe and smaller ones going to offbeat destinations, begin sending material a month or more in advance, and often include information on ports of call and on

shore excursions sold on board ship. A “Welcome Aboard” brochure is intended to familiarize you with your ship. Read it.

The final documents will include your airline and cruise tickets. Your agent should have checked them before sending them to you. Check them yourself. If you buy your cruise late, documents may come directly to you from the cruise line. Check them, too. Remember that you must show your cruise ticket when you check in at the dock.

Luggage tags show the cruise line’s name and logo. They have spaces for your name and address and the name of your ship, cruise and cabin numbers, and departure date and port. Complete the luggage tags using information contained in your cruise ticket. Attach at least one tag to every piece of your luggage, including your handbags. (An amazing number of people, in their excitement, leave hand luggage behind on an airplane, in the airport, or on a motorcoach. If it’s tagged, airline or port personnel will know immediately what to do with it.)

When you arrive at the airport, you will claim luggage and it will ride on the transfer bus with you for the drive to the pier. There it will be taken by baggage handlers and will show up in your cabin in a few hours. If not, do not panic. Cruise ships, especially large ones, have thousands of bags to load and sort as passengers arrive. In our experience, luggage is moved from the airport to your cabin with amazing speed.

AIRPORT ARRIVAL AND TRANSFERS

AS YOU LEAVE YOUR AIRPLANE in Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, San Juan, Vancouver, or any major departure city, you will be met by uniformed cruise line representatives, usually holding a placard showing your ship’s name. The representatives gather their charges and escort or direct them to a waiting motorcoach. Keep your transfer voucher handy; you must show it to board the bus.

If you do not spot your cruise line representative, ask airline personnel or other cruise lines’ reps for help. Or go to an airport “red” phone and ask that your line’s representative be paged. Or proceed to where motorcoaches pick up passengers for transfer to the pier.

ADVANCE ARRIVALS OR DELAYED RETURNS

ALMOST ALL LINES have hotel and sightseeing packages for people who choose to arrive at their port of departure in advance of their cruise or linger there afterward. Packages are described in your cruise brochure. If your cruise begins after a long flight, lines normally schedule the first day for cruising to give passengers time to overcome jet lag. If the itinerary calls for immediate ports of call, you might consider arriving a day before departure.

unofficial TIP

Be sure to carry all documents and essential literature you receive from your cruise line or travel agent with you. Do not pack them in your luggage.

Give the most serious consideration to a day-in-advance arrival when you buy the cruise by itself, are arranging your own transportation to the departure port, or your travel falls during busy travel periods when weather in the northern United States often turns bad and flights are delayed (such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, and President's Day weekend).

If you're on an air/sea program, your line has a greater incentive—although not necessarily a legal one—to get you to the ship when you've been delayed, either by postponing the sailing or by arranging a hotel room and transporting you to the first port of call. In such instances, you're likely to be one of many stranded passengers.

Your name is on a passenger list, and the cruise line representative at the airport expects you. They are in touch with the airline and your ship and probably are setting strategy before you arrive. If you're traveling on your own and are delayed, your cruise ship has no record of your flight and no obligation to help, although most will try. If you arrive at least a day early, you can avoid this hassle.

This is highly recommended whenever possible. Why risk missing the ship due to a flight snafu? Some people advise arriving early to avoid standing in line for check-in. We view this as the least valid reason unless you want to be on as early as physically possible to enjoy onboard amenities. Queues at the airport and dockside departure gates are a fact of life in mass-market travel. If you're so impatient that you cannot stand in a check-in line—even if it takes an hour—without having your blood pressure skyrocket, then you're probably on the wrong cruise. Megaships have megapassengers, and they must be individually processed. (It would speed the process if everyone arrived with all their documents completed properly.)

AT THE PIER

IF YOU'RE LUCKY, you will be among the first to arrive from the airport and the first in line for check-in. More likely, you'll be among several hundred others, and, depending on the cruise line, day of the week, size of the ship, and other contingencies, you will stand in line ten minutes to two hours. Pull out a magazine or travel book and start reading.

Large ships have a check-in system, asking you to line up behind your letter in the alphabet. Despite occasional glitches, this works well. You often have until 60 minutes before departure to board the ship. Some lines let you board until 15 to 30 minutes before departure, but we don't suggest cutting it that close.

Normally, lines begin processing passengers at noon or 1 p.m. for a 4 or 5 p.m. departure. But they seldom allow passengers to embark sooner than two or three hours before departure, because time is needed for previous passengers to disembark and the crew to clean the ship and prepare your cabin. Some luxury or premium lines will let you come aboard sooner sometimes for a fee, but you must remain in public areas.

VISITORS

FOR SECURITY REASONS, lines do not allow visitors. If your friends or family want to send you off in style, they can contact your travel agent to arrange a party for you in your cabin, complete with flowers, wine, and champagne, or a birthday cake or anniversary surprise in the dining room when the ship is at sea.

SETTLING IN

BOARDING YOUR SHIP

SOME SHIPS, PARTICULARLY the most luxurious ones, have uniformed cabin stewards and stewardesses at the gangway to take you to your cabin and carry your hand luggage. Your escort may offer a quick orientation or ask you to wait for your regular steward, whose name is probably on a small tent card on your dresser. Also in your cabin is ship's literature, including an agenda for the day's events, a deck plan, and possibly stationery.

CHECKING OUT YOUR CABIN

TAKE A QUICK LOOK AROUND the cabin to be sure everything is working—it usually is on new ships, not necessarily on old ones. Check how to operate air conditioning, lights, and the hot water faucets—some fancy new ones are tricky, and the water can scald you. Check the location of life preservers, blankets, and pillows—do you have enough? If anything is missing or not as you requested—twin beds instead of a double—report it now. If you cannot locate your steward, go to the purser or front desk. If you do not get satisfaction, work your way up to the hotel manager.

HAIR DRYERS/ELECTRIC SHAVERS

ALMOST ALL CABINS on modern ships have standard 110-volt AC electrical outlets: Your small hair dryer and electric razor won't need an adapter. A few older ships need them. Most new ships have hair dryers. We list this information in the ships' profiles in Part Two, in Standard Features, under Cabin Amenities.

LAUNDRY AND DRY CLEANING

ALMOST ALL SHIPS have laundry service. Far fewer have dry cleaning facilities. Generally, laundry service is good and reasonable but ship laundries tend to use lots of bleach. Price lists and laundry bags are in your cabin. Give your articles to be cleaned or pressed to your steward. They usually are returned in a day, and same-day service is available for an extra fee. For safety reasons, ships ask that passengers not use irons in their cabin, but many have public laundrettes with an iron and ironing board, as well as coin-operated washers and dryers. The Standard Features section in our cruise line's profile details the availability of laundrettes.

TELEPHONES AND OTHER COMMUNICATIONS

ALL BUT A FEW SHIPS have telephones in cabins with instructions for using them. Most phones have direct-dial to the United States 24 hours a day, but be aware of the price. Usually, you are charged \$8 to \$15 per minute for a ship-to-shore call. Receiving a call or a fax may cost \$5 to \$7 or more per minute. Policies vary. Some allow you to call collect or charge your call to your shipboard account. Shore to Ship has technology enabling passengers to dial toll-free numbers in the United States directly from their cabins. The price is \$6.95 per minute, maximum 10 minutes per call. Crystal Cruises was among the first to enable passengers to send and receive e-mail with relative ease. Now, many cruise ships have added e-mail facilities.

If someone wants to reach you at sea, they can telephone the ship by calling ☎ 800-SEA-CALL, asking for the ship by name, and giving its approximate location. The specific phone number for your ship is often included in the documents you receive from the cruise line in advance of your cruise. Charges for this call will appear on the caller's long-distance telephone bill. Ship-to-shore telephone and fax services are normally available only at sea. When the ship is in port, onshore communications must be used.

Cell phones work locally in ports and up to about two miles at sea, depending on the phone and the location. But beyond two miles, they seldom are effective, except perhaps for some very expensive models. With e-mail becoming so readily available on cruise ships, it is the best, least costly means to stay in touch with family and friends, or to tend to business during a cruise. Also, "Internet stores" in ports of call have become available around the world and are usually very inexpensive to use to send and retrieve e-mail.

Almost all new ships also have an Internet cafe with a dozen or more computer terminals, and older ships and many small ones have installed at least one or two terminals for passengers use. Many older ships have also been retrofitted with these cafes. Charges range from 25 cents to 75 cents per minute, including dial-up time, which can often take five minutes or more at sea. On week or longer cruises, many ships also offer weekly rates. Wi-Fi access was recently added to the newest ships of Norwegian Cruise Line as well as to Seabourn Cruise Line's entire fleet. The new Carnival *Valor* also has bow-to-stern Wi-Fi access. More lines are following suit.

CHECKING OUT YOUR SHIP

AFTER YOU CHECK OUT YOUR CABIN, you might want to tour the ship or, alternatively, relax in a lounge or visit the spa. The ship will be your home for a while, and it's nice to feel at home as quickly as possible.

CHECKING ON YOUR DINING RESERVATIONS

WHEN YOU BOOK YOUR CRUISE, your travel agent should state your dining preference and request reservations. On ships with assigned seating times, you may request first or second seating, or on ships with four seating times, any of those. Tables for two, four, six, or eight are available; and guests can ask for smoking or nonsmoking areas, although most ships departing from U.S. ports now have smokeless dining rooms. Most lines say they honor requests on a first-come, first-served basis, yet few confirm them in advance. Generally, dining reservations are confirmed only by the maître d'hôtel on board.

Royal Caribbean International is among the few lines that print passengers' dining reservations on their cruise tickets. Why, in this computer age, all can't do the same is a mystery—unless it's to allow the maître d'hôtel to control last-minute shuffling and to ensure he gets his tips.

You may receive confirmation of your dining arrangements on check-in, or it may be in your cabin. If not, check on it. Even lines that give you a dining reservation in advance may ask you to confirm it with the maître d'hôtel. If you have a problem with your dining arrangements, know that most cruise lines will accommodate your change request, though not necessarily on the first night. Rest assured, you won't be the only one. No other item causes more consternation than dining-room reservations.

unofficial TIP
If assigned arrangements are not what you requested, make a bee-line for the maître d'hôtel.

If you let the cruise line or maître d'hôtel place you randomly at a table and you are unhappy with your companions, do not hesitate to ask the maître d'hôtel to move you. Nothing is worse than spending a week dining with people with whom you have nothing in common and no basis for conversation. And you don't need to.

DINING HOURS

CONSUMERS OFTEN ASK about dining hours before they cruise. They vary so much that it is difficult, if not impossible, to give an accurate generic overview. Keep in mind that each line, each itinerary, and sometimes each ship may have varied hours. You will get a complete list of hours on board, and some general information before boarding about dining times and seatings. Ask your travel agent or cruise line.

But before booking, it is more important to assess how you will dine and to pick a line that meets your needs. Do your homework up front. What type of dining do you prefer? Are you more structured or flexible in dining times? Do you like to socialize with other passengers every night or do your own thing? Check brochures, Web sites, consumer cruise bulletin boards, and ask questions of your agent or friends. Find

out exactly what the dining policies and dining style are on every ship you are thinking of sailing on (see our descriptions in Part II).

For those seeking the most flexibility, some luxury lines offer open seating and anytime dining programs. On the mass-market side, Norwegian Cruise Line offers the highly flexible Freestyle Dining—guests eat where, when, and with whom they want; and guests can also access a host of onboard alternative restaurant choices in addition to the main dining room. Some are free, some come with a charge. Expedition and small ship lines may have open seating but set very specific times for their dining service.

Princess, in another twist, offers both a flexible dining experience and a more traditional fixed one; guests choose which so they can have the best of both worlds. Some lines also have open seating for breakfast and lunch, yet more structured, assigned seating times and tables for dinner. That means you are assigned a table with other guests and you dine at that same table, at that same time, every evening; of course you don't have to dine there every night. Guests often take a break and have room service one night, or visit an alternative restaurant or the buffet restaurant on another. But if you do dine in the dining room on any evening you will eat at that table and with those people each night.

Generally, there are two fixed dinner seatings between 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. and between 8 and 10 p.m. But even those times can vary. Carnival and Holland America have both adopted four seatings within the same period to offer more flexibility for guests. So if you have strong preferences, tell your travel agent, who can explain what the dining hours and choices are on individual lines.

Whichever line you pick, you won't go hungry. In addition to the regular meals, most lines offer a host of other options. These might include room service, ice cream on deck, pizza parlors (some 24 hours), a late-night snack or buffet, afternoon tea, barbecues on deck, early-bird coffee and continental breakfast in a lounge, cocktail canapés, and a host of alternative dining options.

ESTABLISHING SHIPBOARD CREDIT

MOST LINES USE A CASHLESS SYSTEM aboard ship. At check-in, you receive a card—like a credit card—which will be your identification card and probably your cabin door key. If you want to establish credit for purchases on board, drinks at the bar, wine in the dining room, and so forth, you must present a major credit card at check-in or the purser's office (you will be told at check-in) to have an imprint made and signed.

On the last night of the cruise, you receive a printout of your charges for review. You can pay the amount with cash or traveler's checks or have it billed to your credit card. In profiles in Standard Features in Part Two, we list credit cards each cruise line accepts. Also see our discussion of credit holds on page 113.

PREPARING *for* TIME ASHORE

PORT TALKS AND SHOPPING GUIDELINES

ALL SHIPS OFFER “PORT TALKS”—briefings on the country or island and port where the ship will dock. The quality of these talks varies enormously among lines and ships, depending largely on the cruise director’s knowledge and the importance the line puts on such programs.

Most mainstream lines with large ships do a lousy job with port talks. On the other hand, adventure and expedition cruises offer superb talks. Small ships generally have a better track record than large ones.

Avoid being misled. If, during a port talk, the cruise director or anyone else recommends one store over another, shop around before buying. The store recommended may be the best place to buy—or it may not.

Also, be cautious of advice that fabulous buys are available in duty-free shops on board and in ports. Most often, you can do as well or better at discount stores and factory outlets at home. If you are considering sizable purchases of jewelry, cameras, china, or crystal, bring a list of prices from home and comparison shop. Be sure you are comparing similar products. Prices in shipboard shops are a good gauge; they usually are competitive with those in ports.

In the Caribbean, expect to save up to 20% on such well-known brands as Gucci, Fendi, and Vuitton, and on French perfumes, which must be sold at prices set by the makers. Any store caught undercutting the price will be dropped from distribution. The biggest savings are on cigarettes and liquor, not because the price is so much less, but because you save the hefty U.S. taxes imposed on them.

When preparing for your day ashore, be aware also that purses, bags, and packs that you carry along will be searched before you’re allowed back on board. Purchases you make while shopping will likewise be inspected.

SHORE EXCURSIONS: SOME PITFALLS AND COSTS

ALTHOUGH THERE HAS BEEN much improvement recently, “Shore excursions”—the tours passengers buy from the cruise line to take at ports—are often the weakest element of the cruise vacation. Cruise lines are finally recognizing the needs of younger, more active passengers by providing more adventurous excursions featuring horseback riding, hiking, mountain biking, scuba diving, snorkeling, sailing, and even a MIG flight over Moscow. But the core product—large to medium group sightseeing tours—needs more work, given the shore excursion’s importance to the cruise experience.

All the latest cruise lines’ research indicates that what attracts customers to buy a particular cruise are the specific ports of call on the itinerary. Travelers often view their shore trips as one of the more important aspects of the cruise. In response, major cruise lines have

beefed up their shore excursion departments to offer more compelling tours, which often includes exploring a destination on foot as well as by bus, van, or boat.

Shore excursions are available at every stop on a ship's itinerary, almost always at additional cost. The exceptions are adventure and expedition cruises, where shore visits are an integral part of the experience (and one reason these cruises appear to be more costly than mainstream ones). Also, cruises in China usually include the cost of shore excursions, not because cruise lines are altruistic, but because the Chinese want it that way.

Shore excursions have traditionally been sold aboard ship either by a shore excursion office or, rarely, from the purser or cruise director. It has been assumed that people prefer to buy excursions on board because their interests and plans change once the cruise begins. However, that assumption may have no foundation in fact. After you have been subjected to the way shore excursions are sold aboard many ships, you might say as we do: There must be a better way.

Often you must choose your excursions on the first night of the cruise, especially for the first port of call. Unless you have done your homework in advance of your cruise, you will be buying blind. The shore excursion office usually has limited hours. For the first few days of a cruise, particularly on large ships, ticket lines are long. Therefore, it really pays to read your cruise literature plus books and magazine articles about your destinations in advance.

If possible, take advantage of the opportunity to book shore excursions in advance. In addition to significantly increasing your chances of getting the excursion you want, you also avoid the hassle of booking on board. Usually, a pamphlet on shore excursions is included in the literature sent prior to your cruise. Not all brochures list prices, but they are listed on those cruise lines' Web sites that provide a booking facility. Absent that convenience, you can request prices through your travel agent, if you need them for budgeting pur-

unofficial **TIP**

More and more, cruise lines are enabling passengers to purchase shore excursions in advance on the line's Web site, and some, even by phone or mail.

poses. We are happy to report that more lines are including prices in their literature. Also, more often pamphlets are specific to cruise itineraries, making it easier to select tours of interest.

Shore excursions normally are operated by local tour companies. Motorcoaches seating 30 to 50 passengers are the most common form of transportation, particularly on general sightseeing tours offered by large ships. Minibuses and vans are common for smaller groups; location and terrain are also factors in the choice of conveyance. Most tours assume that passengers are on their first visit to the locale—one reason shore excursions are a weak link.

Standard shore excursions vary little among cruise lines and are, for the most part, passive and unimaginative city and/or countryside tours to the best-known sights. There are exceptions, like the excursions on Greek Isles cruises, where escorts are university graduates who must pass stiff examinations to qualify as guides, and customized tours offered by smaller ships and luxury liners. Happily, many cruise lines have added a variety of sports activities and tours that emphasize nature and culture in an effort to appeal to younger travelers and in response to passengers' requests.

After years of being bad to awful, shore excursions available on Caribbean cruises have recently shown a great improvement, as cruise lines have worked with local operators to be more creative, provide greater variety of tour offerings, and enhance the tour experience with more substance and better-trained guides.

As a rule of thumb, most standard half-day tours cost \$25 to \$35 in the Caribbean, but they can cost twice that amount in Alaska and Europe. Adventure excursions run \$50 and up, mainly because the groups are small and hence, cost more per person to operate. Full-day tours can run as much as \$70 to \$150, and some, like helicopter tours, might cost \$200 or more. Often the most expensive are the first to sell out. That's usually because the number of participants is limited, or they are perceived as great value or a once-in-a-lifetime experience, or it's an excursion that would be difficult to arrange on one's own. Variables that affect price include the locale, the number of participants, local costs, and mode of transport.

As you study excursions offered by your line, look for options that keep things simple. Excursions that involve multiple activities, sights, and stops could drive some people nuts. It's on the bus, off the bus, back on the bus, head counts. "Wait, Thelma's in the restroom!" "Where are Harry and Louise?" "I left my credit card in the stuffed parrot shop! I'll be right back." With few exceptions, you'll spend more time driving among sites and loading and unloading the bus than you will touring or doing something interesting.

When you read descriptions of available excursions, check how long the primary activity or event is. If the written material doesn't say, ask the cruise director. You'll sometimes discover that the half-day "riverboat excursion" spends only an hour on the water. The remainder of the time is spent commuting and waiting for fellow passengers to shop.

In ports where most attractions you want to see are clustered in a small area, you may save time by taking a cab or walking. Rental cars are another option. By forgoing a \$48-per-person half-day shore excursion, two people can apply the \$96 toward cab fares, rental cars, and admissions to attractions. In most ports, you can see and do a lot for \$96.

Ask probing questions about each port. Is it a good and safe place to explore on foot? What are the local people like? At some ports, tourists are subjected to swarms of in-your-face hucksters and peddlers. In such places, escorted tours, though regimented and inefficient, can be a less stressful way to visit.

When the ship arrives in port, people who have purchased shore excursions are allowed to disembark first and are usually asked to follow a departure schedule to avert a traffic jam at the gangway. This is seldom a problem when the ship docks and passengers can disembark quickly. It can be a problem when the ship must tender, because it cuts an hour or more (depending on ship size) from the time you have in port if you plan to tour on your own.

AT *the* END of YOUR CRUISE

TIPPING

THERE ARE NO DEFINITIVE RULES about tipping, but because it causes so much consternation for passengers, cruise lines offer guidelines, distributing them aboard ship. Some even publish them in their cruise brochures, which is helpful if you want to budget for tipping in advance. In Part Two, the cruise ship profiles' Standard Features includes Suggested Tipping. The guidelines are similar: Tip slightly less on budget cruises, slightly more on luxury cruises. Lines will also tell you if gratuities are included or if they are automatically added to your bill. Follow guidelines or your inclinations. Ship officers and senior management are never tipped. For all service personnel, tips are their main source of compensation. Only a few deluxe ships include tipping in the cruise cost (noted in the cruise line profiles).

In a session at voyage's end, the cruise director will discuss disembarkation procedures and outline tipping guidelines. There no longer is anything subtle about tipping. Either the line will automatically add the tips; if not, on the final cruise day, your cabin steward will leave a supply of envelopes for distributing your tips, possibly with guidelines. Lately, the envelopes are crassly stamped with titles—Cabin Steward, Dining Steward, Waiter—in case you did not know whom to tip!

On ships without “automatic” tipping, tips are usually given to individuals—your cabin stewards and dining room waiters. On ships with Greek crews and on many small vessels, tips are pooled for distribution to include those behind the scenes, such as kitchen staff.

The advent of alternative dining venues has confused tipping customs in recent years. Passengers sometimes were deducting from the amount given to their dining room wait staff in order to compensate for gratuities rendered at the alternative restaurants. To create a more uniform approach, a number of cruise lines add gratuities directly to

your shipboard bill. Most of these offer the option of decreasing or increasing the amount on your bill depending on how you felt about the service. Whatever the tipping protocol on your cruise, you can be sure it will be explained to you in detail, probably several times.

If tips are not added to your shipboard bill, custom dictates that you distribute tips the last night of the cruise. Some lines, particularly deluxe ones, will arrange prepayment of tips. Check the Standard Features section in our cruise line profiles for each line's "Suggested Tipping" information.

DEPARTING

TO SMOOTH DISEMBARKATION, your captain and cruise director will ask you to follow procedures outlined in the cruise director's final talk and repeated on closed-circuit television in your cabin and in the daily agenda. On the last day, your cabin steward will give you luggage tags to be completed and attached to your bags. You are asked to place your bags (except hand luggage) outside your cabin door before you retire. Times vary; some lines want them out by 8 or 10 p.m.—an unreasonable hour for passengers dining at the late seating. Such requests are for the ship's convenience, because no luggage can be unloaded until the ship docks. Do what's convenient for you and tell your cabin steward what to expect.

The last night of a cruise is almost always casual; plan your packing accordingly. And don't pack everything. Remember you still need to dress the next day. It's not unheard of for people to pack shoes, underwear, and even needed travel documents in their exuberance to put their bags out.

Luggage tags use a color-coded, alphabetic system that enables the ship to disembark passengers by cabin locations and airline departure times for those on air/sea packages. (Passengers on the earliest flights disembark first.) Tags also identify your airline so that your bags will go to the correct place at the airport.

Ships normally dock about 7 or 8 a.m. the last day and require about an hour to unload luggage, meaning no passengers will disembark before 9 a.m. The ship is very eager to unload passengers as quickly as possible. Some people find disembarkation so abrupt that it's unpleasant. Try to remember that the next group of passengers will arrive soon, and staff and crew have only about four hours to prepare the ship and be all smiles for them.

Breakfast is served either at normal hours with the full menu or at abbreviated hours with a short menu. Room service usually isn't available. You will be called to depart by the color of your luggage tags. After leaving the ship, you encounter chaos that varies depending on the port. Usually, you proceed first to immigration and then to the baggage holding area, where your luggage has been placed according to the color of your tags. You are responsible for finding it

and taking it to Customs. In Miami, for example, baggage handlers help you, and the Customs official stands by the exit to take the declaration form you completed aboard ship. They may check your passport, so have it handy.

After clearing Customs, your luggage will go with you to the airport on the transfer bus. Find the motorcoach going to your airline's departure area, show your transfer voucher, give the driver your luggage, and climb aboard. If you aren't on an air/sea package, you may be allowed aboard the motorcoach unless you have lots of luggage. Otherwise, taxis are nearby.