



# Part 1

## Planning, Booking & Preparing for Your Cruise

*With advice on choosing and booking your ideal cruise and tips on getting ready for the cruise experience.*

- 1 Choosing Your Ideal Cruise
- 2 Booking Your Cruise & Getting the Best Price
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# 1

## Choosing Your Ideal Cruise

Forget the “overfed, newlywed, nearly dead” stereotype of cruising. That’s old school. Today, you can sail a floating country club to little yachting islands in the Caribbean, bop around Hawaii in the first new U.S.-flagged cruise ships in generations, take an expedition from Alaska over to the Russian Far East, take the *Queen Mary 2* across the pond to England, sail among the reefs and indigenous cultures of Central America, or explore North America’s great rivers on floating

B&Bs. There are also trips programmed with your needs and preferences in mind, whether you’re a senior, a traveling family, a swinging single, a wheelchair user, or a swinging, wheelchair-using granddad. There are also active adventure cruises, cruises geared to fine food and wine, cruises with a cultural or historic bent, and, of course, the classic fun-in-the-sun relaxation escape. In this chapter, we’ll introduce you to the lot of them.

### 1 Homeland Cruise Regions in Brief

Whether because of convenience or an aversion to flying (that is, the cost of flying or the fear of it), the idea of cruising from a port within driving distance has a lot of appeal for a lot of folks. And anytime a lot of folks want to do something, you can be sure the cruise lines will be right there on the spot, ready to hand them an umbrella drink. Today, you can cruise to the Caribbean from Miami or from New York, New Orleans, Houston, and about 10 other ports. You can visit Bermuda on ships that depart from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Alaska, Mexico, and Hawaii are now accessible from half a dozen embarkation ports along the West Coast. With all of these choices, there’s a good chance you can drive right up to the gangway. In the chapters that follow, we cover all regions to which you can cruise from 19 U.S. and 3 Canadian home ports. Below is a snapshot of those regions, to get you started.

#### CARIBBEAN/BAHAMAS/CENTRAL AMERICA

When most of us think of a cruise, we think of the islands. We imagine pulling up in our gleaming white ship to a patch of sand and palm tree paradise, a steel band serenading us as we stroll down the gangway in our shorts and flip-flops and into the warm sun. Well, the good news is that this image is a pretty darn accurate depiction of many ports in the Caribbean, Bahamas, and Central America. Sure, some are crowded with other cruise ships and passengers and many are pretty weak in the palm tree department, but you’re guaranteed nearly **constant sunshine** and plenty of beaches. On some you’ll find lush **rainforests**, **volcanic peaks**, **Mayan ruins**, winding **mountain roads**, and beautiful **tropical flowers**. And all of them have **great beaches** and that laid-back don’t-hurry-me island pace.

Most Caribbean cruises are a week long, though you’ll also find 5-, 6-, 8-, 9-, 10-, and 11-night sailings. Cruises to The Bahamas are usually 3- and 4-nights, though

many Caribbean routes also include a stop in Nassau or one of the cruise lines' private Bahamian islands. Stops at Cozumel, Playa del Carmen, and other spots along Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula are common, as increasingly are visits to Central American ports like Belize City, Belize, and Roatan, Honduras. You'll find itineraries usually stick to one region of the Caribbean, either **eastern** (typically calling on some combination of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, St. Martin, and The Bahamas), **western** (usually Grand Cayman, Jamaica, Cozumel, and Key West, and sometime Belize or Honduras), or **southern** (less defined, but often departing from San Juan and including Aruba, Curaçao, Barbados, St. Lucia, Antigua, or Grenada). Small-ship cruises frequently visit the less-developed islands, mostly in the eastern and southern Caribbean, including the beautiful British Virgin Islands and ports such as St. Barts, Dominica, Nevis, and the tiny islands of the Grenadines. **Season:** Year-round, with the greatest number of ships cruising here between October and April.

## THE PANAMA CANAL

Imagine the particularly 19th-century kind of hubris it took to say, "Let's dig a huge canal all the way across a country, linking two oceans." Imagine, too, the thousands of workers who pulled it off. Both those things are much on the mind of people today as they sail through the Panama Canal, one of the great engineering achievements of all time. There's a lot of history here, as well as a lot of rich Central American culture to explore on port days surrounding your transit. Many ships offer only two Panama Canal cruises annually, when repositioning between their summer season in Alaska and the fall/winter season in the Caribbean, but these days many cruise lines are including **partial Canal crossings** as part of extended western Caribbean itineraries from Florida, sailing through the Canal's locks westbound to Gatun Lake, docking for a day of excursions, and then sailing back out in the evening. The big draw on these itineraries is the pure kick of sailing through the Canal, whose walls pinch today's megaships so tight that there might not be more than a few feet on either side. The Canal's width is so much on shipbuilders' minds that they coined a term—*panamax*—to describe the largest ships that are able to transit. **Season:** Roughly November through April.

## ALASKA & BRITISH COLUMBIA

Alaska is America's frontier, a land of mountain, forest, and tundra just remote enough and harsh enough that it remains mythic, even if some of its towns do have Starbucks. The main draws here are all things grand: huge glaciers flowing down from the mountains, enormous humpback whales leaping from the sea, eagles soaring overhead, and forests that seem to go on forever. Alaska Native culture figures in too, with the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian tribes all holding considerable power in everyday life, from the arts to the business world. Most cruises concentrate on the Southeast Alaska panhandle (the ancestral home of those three tribes), which stretches from Ketchikan in the south to Yakutat in the north, with British Columbia to the east and the vast reaches of interior Alaska and Canada's Yukon Territory to the north. Typical cruises sail either round-trip from Seattle or Vancouver, British Columbia, or north- or south-bound between Vancouver and one of Anchorage's two major port towns, Seward and Whittier. Both options concentrate on ports and natural areas along the Southeast's **Inside Passage**, the intricate web of waterways that link the region's thousands of forested islands. Highlights of most itineraries include glaciers (famous Glacier Bay or several others), the old prospector town of Skagway, state capital Juneau, and boardwalked Ketchikan in the south. Cruises between Vancouver and Anchorage may also visit natural areas along the **Gulf of Alaska**, such as Collee Fjord and Hubbard

Glacier. Small-ship cruises frequently visit much smaller towns and wilderness areas on the Inside Passage. Some avoid civilization almost entirely, and a few particularly expeditionary (and expensive) cruises sail far west and north, past the Aleutian Islands, and cross the Bering Sea into the Russian Far East. **Season:** Roughly from mid-May through mid-September, although some smaller ships start up in late April.

## THE MEXICAN RIVIERA & BAJA

The so-called Mexican Riviera is the West Coast's version of the Caribbean—a string of sunny ports within proximate sailing distance of San Diego, LA, and San Francisco. The first stop geographically is Cabo San Lucas, a party-oriented town at the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula, with the Pacific Ocean on one side and the Sea of Cortez on the other. Think beaches, beer, and bikinis, with thatched palapa bars providing some character. From there, cruises head southeast to such ports as Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlán, Acapulco, Ixtapa, and Manzanillo, a stretch famed for white-sand beaches, watersports, deep-sea fishing, and golf, with some history thrown in for good measure. Hernando Cortes blew through the region in the 1520s looking for treasure, and in the 1950s and '60s Hollywood did the same, mining the area both for locations and for off-camera relaxation. Small-ship lines also offer **Baja/Sea of Cortez** cruises that concentrate on the peninsula's small towns, natural areas, and remarkable whale-watching. These cruises typically sail from Cabo or the state capital, La Paz. **Season:** The heaviest traffic is October through April, though ships sail year-round—especially short 3- and 4-night cruises that stop in Cabo or Ensenada, just south of the U.S./Mexico border. Small ships typically cruise Baja in the winter months.

## BERMUDA

Perhaps the one place in the world where you'll have a chance to see hundreds of British men's knees, Bermuda is a beautiful island chain known for its powdery pink sand beaches, created by pulverized shells and coral over the eons; golf courses; and sane and friendly manner. The locals really do wear brightly colored Bermuda shorts with jackets, ties, and knee-highs, but don't feel obligated to join them. **Hamilton** and **St. George's** are Bermuda's two main port towns, though the largest ships will dock on the west end at the **Royal Naval Dockyard**. Ships pull alongside piers at all three places and it barely takes 2 minutes to walk into town. There's plenty to do, too, from shopping in Hamilton for English wool and Irish linens, to checking out the many historical sites, which range from the 300-year-old St. Peter's Church to the impressive nautical exhibits at the Dockyard's Maritime Museum. Most people, though, are headed for Bermuda's many dreamy beaches, which are easily accessible by taxi or motor scooter. To keep things from getting too chaotic, Bermuda limits the number of ships allowed to call there, so there are generally just six doing 7-night cruises from New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and occasionally Norfolk, Virginia. **Season:** Late April through early October.

## HAWAII

If a place can simultaneously be the number-one honeymoon destination in America *and* one of the few places to which the Brady Bunch schlepped Alice and the kids, it must have something going for it, right? It does: Hawaii is gorgeous, with an almost embarrassing richness of stunning beaches, hula girls, and hunky Polynesian men, and the weather really is perfect all the time, putting both locals and visitors in a friendly and mellow mood. Learn to surf, go to a luau, snooze on the sand, enjoy the local coffee, or check out the native Hawaiian culture, which the locals are fiercely proud of. The past

survives alongside the modern world in a vibrant arts scene, which includes traditional Polynesian dance and music, as well as painting, sculpture, and crafts. And the diverse landscape of the islands ranges from fuming volcanoes to crashing surf, serene beaches, lush jungles, and abundant orchids and other tropical flowers. Pearl Harbor is another important attraction.

For the foreseeable future, Norwegian Cruise Line rules the roost in Hawaii, with three ships (and a fourth on the way) doing year-round cruises round-trip from Honolulu. Other lines typically visit the islands in April, May, September, and October, on their way between seasons in Alaska and the Caribbean. The four main calls are to **Oahu**, with the famous Waikiki beach; **Maui**, home of the historical town of Lahaina; **Kauai**, the most natural and undeveloped of the four; and the **Big Island**, where the state's famous volcanoes reside, including Mauna Kea and the still-active Kilauea. **Season:** Year-round; the islands are about the same latitude as Jamaica.

## EASTERN CANADA/NEW ENGLAND

Humpback, finback, and minke whales, lobster pots, Victorian mansions, and lighthouses on windswept bluffs are just a taste of what a journey along the coast of New England and Canada has in store for cruise passengers. America and Canada were born in these parts, so you'll be in for lots of **historical sites** along the way, from Boston's Paul Revere House to Halifax, where *Titanic* victims were brought (and many buried) after the ship's tragic sinking nearly 100 years ago. Itineraries may include passing through **Nantucket Sound**, around **Cape Cod**, and into the **Bay of Fundy** or **Gulf of St. Lawrence**. Some ships traverse the St. Lawrence Seaway or the smaller Saguenay River. The classic time to cruise here is in autumn, when a brilliant sea of **fall foliage** blankets the region, but as the route becomes more and more popular, cruise lines are scheduling 4- to 12-night trips in spring and summer, too. Big 2,000-passenger-plus ships cruise here as well as much smaller vessels carrying a tenth of that load. Most sail to or from New York, Boston, Montréal, and Québec City. **Season:** Most ships cruise here in September and October, with a few lines also offering late spring and summer sailings.

## U.S. RIVER CRUISES

So who needs the ocean? If your interests run toward history, culture, and nature, a river cruise is a fantastic option. Small ships sail throughout the year, navigating the historic **Mississippi River** system to cities and towns of the South; sailing through the **California Wine Country** for tastings, tours, and meals at noted vineyards; following Lewis and Clark down the Pacific Northwest's **Columbia and Snake rivers**; and even offering cruises on the **Eric Canal** and the rivers of New England, timed to take in the fall foliage. Some of these ships (like the American Canadian Caribbean Line vessels) are tiny and basic, carrying fewer than 100 passengers and designed to sail in very shallow, narrow waterways. Others (like the *Delta Queen* and American West ships) are vintage or re-created stern-wheelers that evoke classic 19th-century river travel. **Season:** Throughout the year in different regions. (See small ship reviews in chapter 8 for itineraries.)

## 2 Itineraries: The Long & the Short of It

Decided where you want to go? So now you have to hone in on the itineraries that are available. Do you just want to get away for a few days, or are a few weeks more your style? Do you want an itinerary that visits somewhere different every day, or are you looking forward to some relaxing sea days, too? And, if you're flying or driving a long way to the cruise's home port, do you want to spend a few days seeing that part of the

country as well, before or after your cruise? Options are what you have; choices are what you need to make.

### LONG CRUISE OR SHORT?

The vast majority of cruises are **7 nights** long and depart on a Saturday or Sunday, whether we're talking Caribbean, Alaska, Hawaii, or Mexico. Many of us like the weeklong vacation concept, but if you're looking to spend less money or you're a first-time cruiser interested in testing the waters, you can pick from a slew of 2-, 3-, 4-, and 5-night cruises, and even a few 6-nighters. Many of the **3- and 4-night cruises** sail from Florida to The Bahamas or from California to Baja, Mexico. You can also find a lot of **4- and 5-night cruises** to the Caribbean and Bahamas, as well as 4- and 5-night New England/Canada cruises in the summer and fall. Naturally, these depart on different days of the week, with some timed to sail over the weekend.

On the one hand, shorter cruises make sense if you're not sure you'll like the cruise experience, but they probably won't show you cruising in its best light. Why? Because mini-sailings are geared to people who can only get away for a few days and want to pack as much party into a short time as possible. (This is especially true of the 3-night weekend cruises offered by Carnival and Royal Caribbean.) Longer cruises are generally mellower. There's also the fact that cruise lines tend to put their oldest, most beaten-up ships on short-cruise schedules, saving their new ships for their bread-and-butter weeklong itineraries.

Longer cruises, ranging from **9, 10, and 12 nights** to multiweek voyages, allow you to really feel like you've gotten away, and settle into the community on board your ship. Longer cruises tend to be relaxed and steady, and are popular with older folks who have the time and money to travel. You'll find a few longer sailings in Alaska, the Caribbean, and New England/Canada, and also many long **repositioning cruises**, offered when ships leave one cruise region and sail to another (for instance, heading from Alaska to the Caribbean in stages). These are often deeply discounted and sometimes visit unusual ports, but they often also spend several days at sea between ports.

### DAYS AT SEA VS. DAYS IN PORT

When evaluating an itinerary, take a look at its day-by-day schedule. A few ships will visit a different port every day, but it's much more typical for them to have at least 1 or 2 days at sea—either because they have to sail a long way between ports, or just to give passengers a chance to rest (and spend some money on board, while they're at it). Many cruises these days—especially ones that sail from more northerly home ports to Caribbean destinations—are spending up to 3 days at sea on a 7-night itinerary and 4 on an 8-night itinerary. That's not a bad thing if your main vacation goal is to decompress, but if your goal is to see a lot of different ports, this is not an ideal situation. Ditto if you think you'll get “are we there yet?” antsy between ports.

### CRUISETOURS & ADD-ONS

Cruise lines offer a variety of options for extending your vacation on land, either before or after your cruise. These range from simple 1- and 2-night add-on **hotel packages** to longer resort stays and full-blown land tours of a week or longer. The latter, known as **cruisetours**, are offered mostly in Alaska, where Holland America, Princess, Royal Caribbean, and Celebrity have elaborate hotel and transportation infrastructure. Many parts of inland Alaska can be accessed this way—Denali National Park, Fairbanks, Wrangell–St. Elias National Park, Nome, and Kotzebue

included. If you've a mind to, you can even go all the way to the oil fields of the North Slope of Prudhoe Bay, hundreds of miles north of the Arctic Circle. Many tours also head east into Canada, spending time in the starkly beautiful Yukon Territory or heading to Banff, Lake Louise, and Jasper National Park in the Canadian Rockies.

Caribbean-bound ships originating in Florida often offer extensions to Orlando's theme parks. Disney, naturally, is tops in this regard, offering seamless 1-week land/sea vacations, with 3 days in the park and 4 aboard *Disney Wonder*, or vice versa. Other regions offer their own specialties: Small-ship cruises in Baja, for example, typically offer an extension to the amazing Copper Canyon, larger than the U.S. Grand Canyon.

### 3 Different Boats for Different Folks

Different cruise lines offer different kinds of experiences, but judging physical factors such as the size and age of the ship are also part of choosing your ideal cruise. What kind of boat floats your boat?

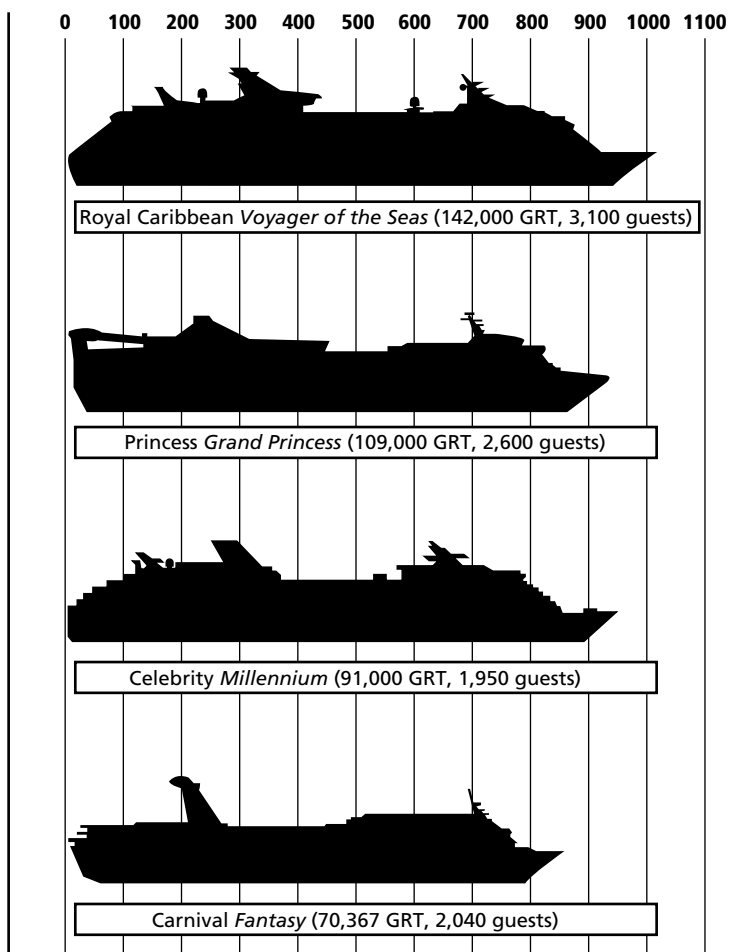
#### MEGASHIPS (1,800–3,600 PASSENGERS)

For the past dozen years, the so-called “megaships” have dominated the market, carrying upwards of 1,800 passengers and offering an onboard experience any city-dweller will recognize: food and drink available at any hour, entertainment districts filled with neon and twinkling lights, monumental architecture, big crowds, and a definite buzz. You often won't see the same faces twice from day to day, and, in fact, if you don't plan specific times and places to meet up with your spouse, lover, or friend, you may roam the decks for hours looking for them. (Some passengers even bring a set of walkie-talkies to stay in touch—annoying to the rest of us, maybe, but it keeps them happy.) The megas have as many as 12 or 14 passenger decks full of shops, restaurants, bars, and lounges, plus cabins of all shapes and sizes. Most have a grand multistory atrium lobby, three or four swimming pools and hot tubs, theaters, a pizzeria, a specialty coffee shop, and one or more reservations-only restaurants. Mammoth spas and gyms boast dozens of exercise machines and treatment rooms, and vast children's areas include splash pools, playrooms, and video arcades. Countless activities are offered all day long, including dance lessons, wine tastings, fashion shows, art auctions, aerobics classes, bingo, bridge, cooking demonstrations, pool games, computer classes, and trivia contests. And at night you have a choice of piano bars, discos, martini and champagne bars, sports bars, casinos, theaters, and show lounges.

But even the megas aren't all alike. **Carnival** and **Costa**'s ships are the most theme-park-like, with their over-the-top decor and ambience. **Royal Caribbean**'s and **NCL**'s megas (especially their newer ships) are more like Times Square hotels, blending a lot of flash with some elegant areas. **Princess** goes for a sort of Pottery Barn design sense and fun but not-too-daring activities and shows, and **Holland America**'s and **Disney**'s megas blend tradition with some bright, modern spaces. **Celebrity** is king in terms of sleek modern decor and a near-upscale ambience.

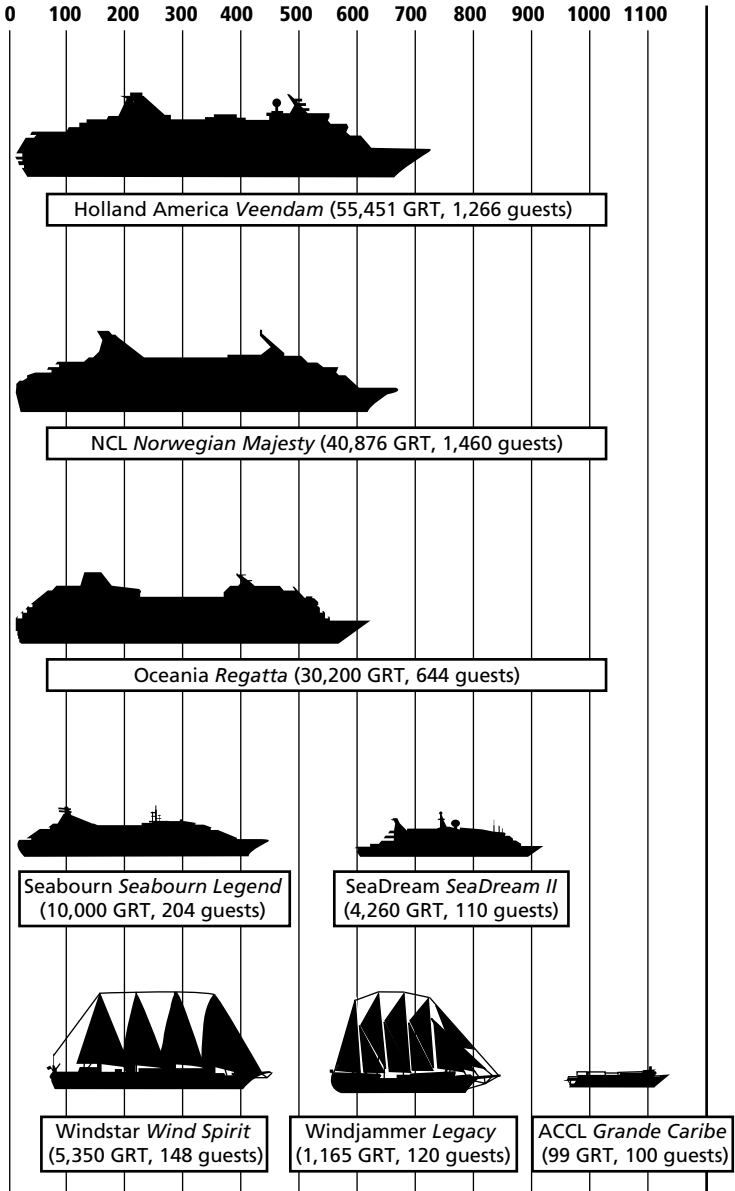
As a general rule, these ships are so large that they're limited as to where they can go. Ships in the 100,000-ton range are too big to fit through the Panama Canal, and so operate from the same coast year-round—West Coast ships doing Mexico itineraries in winter and Alaska in summer, say; East Coast ships either staying in the Caribbean year-round or spending the summers sailing in Europe or New England/Canada. Some ports also lack docking facilities to accommodate these huge ships, meaning you either won't visit them at all or you'll have to be tendered ashore in shuttle boats.

## SHIP SIZE COMPARISONS



Ships in this chart represent the range of sizes sailing in the Caribbean in 2005. See reviews in chapters 6–9 for sizes of ships not shown here, then compare. Note that GRT=gross register tons, a measure of the interior space used to produce revenue on a vessel. One GRT=100 cubic feet of enclosed, revenue-generating space.





## MIDSIZE SHIPS (600–1,800 PASSENGERS)

For a while it looked as if midsize vessels were going the way of the dodo, but the past couple years has seen a small resurgence in their fortunes, and a number of older but still not *old-old* midsize ships continue soldiering on.

The term *midsize* is, of course, relative. Measuring in at between 20,000 and 60,000 gross tons, most of these ships are still larger than some of the great old ocean liners. *Titanic*, for instance, was only 46,000 tons. They're plenty big and spacious enough to provide a diverse cruise experience, though you won't find the range of activities you do on the megaships. Consider that a good thing: For some people, a more toned-down, lower-key cruise is just what the doctor ordered. Most of **Holland America's** fleet fits that description, aside from its mega-size Vista-class ships. **MSC Cruises** operates two 58,600-ton, 1,590-passengers vessels in the Caribbean, and is really embracing the midsize zeitgeist in their onboard programming. **Oceania Cruises** operates three even smaller vessels, carrying only 684 passengers apiece in a country-club type setting. **NCL** also still offers several midsize, though they're the older ships in their fleet and are already on the chopping block. (All will have left the fleet by 2009.)

Among the true ultraluxury lines, midsize is about as big as it gets excluding Cunard's megaliners. **Crystal** and **Radisson** both operate ships in the 50,000-ton range, carrying 700 to 940 passengers—a telling figure when you consider that MSC and NCL's similarly sized ships pack in twice as many passengers. Along with high-toned service, cuisine, and amenities, personal space is a major difference between the mainstream and luxe lines.

## SMALL SHIPS (12–450 PASSENGERS)

If the thought of sailing with thousands of other people makes you want to jump overboard, a smaller ship may be more up your alley. Small ships are ideal for those who crave a calm, intimate experience where conversation is king. As in a small town, you'll quickly get to know your neighbors, since you'll see the same faces at meals and on deck throughout the week.

The small ships in this book can be broken down into four groups: sailing ships, coastal and river cruisers, expedition ships, and small luxury ships.

Sailing ships have sails. How obvious is that? But what's not necessarily obvious is how much—or how little—those sails are used to actually propel the ship. On Maine's coast, the 14 independently owned ships of the **Maine Windjammer Association** are honest-to-god sail-powered vessels, most without engines of any kind. If the wind stops blowing, their only option is to let down their motorized yawl boat and try to push the ship into wind. The ships of **Windjammer Barefoot Cruises**, **Star Clippers**, and **Windstar**, on the other hand, usually operate under wind power for a part of each cruise, but they have engines to do most of the pushing. All these vessels tend to attract as many passengers in their 30s as in their 70s, all of them looking for something a little different than a regular cruise.

Most of the other small ships in this book are coastal and river cruisers—small vessels designed to sail in protected coastal waters and rivers. Very casual (and for the most part relatively plain), these ships offer a cruise oriented heavily toward nature, wildlife watching, culture, and history, with onboard naturalists to help interpret what you see. In addition to coastal cruisers, **Cruise West** and **Clipper Cruises** also operate tougher expedition ships able to sail in the open ocean. Rounding out the small-ship options are the nostalgic Mark Twain-style stern-wheelers of **Delta Queen** and

**American West**, which turn the clock back on trips along the Mississippi, the Pacific Northwest's Columbia and Snake rivers, and Alaska's Inside Passage.

See "Active Travel & Adventure Cruises," below, and chapter 8, "Small Ships, Sailing Ships & Adventure Cruises," for more details on all these options.

The small luxury ships of high-end lines such as **Seabourn**, **Silversea**, and **SeaDream** offer a refined, ultraelegant ambience. Cabins are spacious, gracious waiters serve gourmet meals on fine china, and guests dress to impress. These ships also offer few activities besides watersports, putting more emphasis on quiet relaxation and quiet, more high-end ports, such as St. Barts. **American Safari Cruises** operates truly tiny yachts carrying only 12 and 22 passengers. Service-oriented like the luxe ships, they also offer an adventure-travel vibe, with lots of built-in active excursions.

### OLD SHIP OR NEW?

The age of a ship used to be a bigger topic than it is now. The 2000 edition of this book included no fewer than 12 really old vessels, 10 of which have either been sold off, laid up, or scrapped. Aside from Cunard's classic *QE2* (now sailing primarily from England), the small luxury yacht *Sea Cloud*, and most of the Maine Windjammer Association fleet, the only truly antique ship in this book is Imperial Majesty's old and endearing *Regal Empress*, a liner built in 1955 and still going strong, if a little worn around the edges. She's probably the last chance you'll have to sail on a mid-century liner.

The majority of ships in this book, by contrast, have been built in the past 16 years, though a few date to the late 1980s. Those older ships are generally a bit dated, though some cruise lines are doing a lot of work to bring them up-to-date. Royal Caribbean, for instance, is updating the interiors of their older ships to look more like their new ones, and offer some of the same options.

## 4 Cruises for Families

There's a reason so many families with kids go on cruises—it's easy! Okay, as the mother of young twin boys, traveling is never "easy" with kids, but a cruise is sure convenient, not to mention safe and relaxing for mom and dad. Cruise lines have been going to great lengths to please parents and kids alike, as families become an ever larger and more influential segment of the cruising public. In fact, since 2000, Royal Caribbean, among the most family-friendly lines, has seen more than a 50% increase in the number of kids under 3 cruising with their parents. Same story with Carnival, which now carries 300% more children under 18 than in 1995. The latest trends? Catering to toddlers and teens. Royal Caribbean introduced daily playgroups for parents and toddlers (6 months–3 years), while elaborate teen facilities are all the rage across the industry. Lines know teens are their future business, and they do their best to keep teenagers entertained and out of mischief.

It's the megaships that cater most to families and attract the largest numbers of them, with playrooms, video arcades, and complimentary **supervised activities** generally provided for children ages 2 or 3 to 17 (generally young children must be potty-trained to participate), and programs broken down into several age categories. Some lines set a minimum age for children to sail aboard (usually 6–12 months), but Disney offers a supervised nursery for ages 3 months and up, and it wouldn't surprise us if this became a trend. See the individual cruise line reviews for details.

**Disney** offers the most family-friendly ships at sea today, followed by **Royal Caribbean**, whose ships (especially the Voyager- and Radiance-class ships) have huge play areas. The post-1990 **Carnival** ships do a pretty good job, too (and kids as young

as 4 months are included in the group babysitting program), as do the new **Norwegian** ships (especially the new *Norwegian Dawn* and *Norwegian Star*, with their awesome kids' center) and all **Princess** and **Celebrity** ships built after 1993, when family cruising was becoming more mainstream. Even lines traditionally geared to older folks are getting in on the kid craze. Holland America is just finishing up a renovation of all of its ships' kids' facilities, and the *QM2*'s kids' facilities and programs are the best-kept secrets at sea.

See the section "Best Cruises for Families with Kids," on p. 10, for more info.

**BABYSITTING** To ensure that parents have a good time, too, there are adults-only discos and lounges, and babysitting in the evenings until about 1 to 3am on many ships (though not all). After the complimentary daylong roster of supervised activities wraps up somewhere between about 7 and 10pm, most mainstream lines offer **group babysitting** slumber-party style in the playroom starting at about 10pm, usually for ages 3 to 12, at a cost of about \$4 to \$6 per hour per child. Some lines, though, accommodate younger kids. Disney's nurseries take children as young as 3 months and Carnival includes kids as young as 4 months; they have toys, cribs, and nap areas geared to infants and toddlers. The counselors will even change diapers! **Private in-cabin babysitting** by a crewmember is also offered by several lines (Celebrity, Royal Caribbean, and most high-end lines) at a steeper \$8 to \$10 per hour for the first child and/or second (sometimes it's a few bucks more for a sibling). Using a private babysitter every night isn't cheap, but Heidi's gone this route when cruising with her twin toddlers and swears by it—how else to dine and have a cocktail or two in peace after a long baby-centric day? (Of course it's key that your kids are good sleepers, so they can be tucked in and asleep before the sitter arrives to avoid meeting a new face at bedtime.)

**FAMILY-FRIENDLY CABINS** Worried about spending a whole week with the family in some cramped little box? Depending on your budget, you may not have to.

Of course, a family of four can share a cabin that has bunk-style third and fourth berths, which pull out of the walls just above the pair of regular beds, and a few lines, such as Carnival and NCL ships, will even accommodate a fifth person on a rollaway bed on certain ships if space permits. If you've got a baby, a crib can be brought in if requested in advance. But there's no other way to slice it: A standard cabin with four people in it will be cramped, and with one bathroom . . . well, you can imagine. However, when you consider how little time you'll spend in the cabin, it's doable, and many families take this option. The incentive to share one cabin is price—whether children or adults, the rates for third and fourth persons sharing a cabin with two full-fare (or even heavily discounted) passengers are usually about half of the lowest regular rates. Norwegian Cruise Line allows children under 2 to sail free with two full-fare passengers (though you must pay port charges and government taxes for the kids, which will run about \$100–\$200 per person). Disney offers a reduced rate of \$99 per 3- and 4-night cruise and \$139 per 7-night cruise for children under 3, and Crystal has offered free passage for all children under 12 for summer sailings in Alaska. **Note:** Because prices are based on double adult occupancy of cabins, single parents sailing with children usually have to pay adult prices for their kids, though deals for single parents are offered every once in a while.

If you can afford it, and equate space with sanity, **consider booking a suite or junior suite.** Many have a pullout couch in the living room (or, better yet, two separate bedrooms) and can accommodate up to three or four children. *Disney Magic* and *Wonder* boast the family-friendliest cabins at sea: The majority of the ships' 875 cabins are equipped with two bathrooms and a sitting area with a sofa bed, plus there's a tub and minifridge. (While minifridges or minibars are fairly standard these days, tubs are a

## Family Cruising Tips

Here are some suggestions for better sailing and smoother seas on your family cruise.

- **Reserve a crib.** If you'd like a crib brought into your cabin, request one when booking your cruise.
- **Minifridges/minibars are standard on most new ships.** Ships more than 5 or 10 years old may only offer them in suites. And if yours is a minibar stocked with beer and peanuts, you can ask your steward to clear it out so you have space for milk and snacks.
- **Bring baby food.** If your infant is still on jar food, you'll have to bring your own; ships don't supply it, with the exception of Crystal Cruises (with prior notice). And don't forget diapers either.
- **Keep a tote with you on embarkation day.** Fill it with diapers, baby food, bathing suits, or anything you'll need for the afternoon. After boarding a big ship, it may take a few hours for your luggage to be delivered to your cabin.
- **Pack some basic first-aid supplies, and even a thermometer.** Cruise lines have limited supplies of these items, and charge for them, too. If an accident should happen on board, virtually every ship (except the smallest ones) has its own infirmary staffed by doctors or nurses. Keep in mind that first aid can usually be summoned more readily aboard ship than in port.
- **Warn younger children about the danger of falling overboard,** and make sure they know not to play on the railings.
- **Make sure your kids know their cabin number** and what deck it's on. The endless corridors and doors on the megaships often look exactly alike, though some are color-coded.
- **Prepare kids for TV letdown.** Though many ships today receive satellite TV programming, you won't get the range of options you have at home.

rarity unless you're splurging on a suite.) They're like minisuites and comfortably sleep families of three or four—but, of course, you pay more for all of this. The ships' bona fide suites accommodate families of five to seven. Royal Caribbean's and Princess's newest ships have family suites as well—the minisuites on the Grand class are great for families—but remember, they're no bargain: You pay for the larger size and beefed-up amenities.

If you have older kids, it may just be cheaper to book **connecting cabins**—two separate standard cabins with interconnecting doors, which allows you to be close to each other, but separate. Almost every ship reviewed in this book offers connecting cabins, with the exception of most small ships and a small handful of midsize and megaships.

**TAKING THE KIDS ON SMALL SHIPS** If your children are at least 10 or 12, some of the casual, off-beat cruises (for example, aboard Windjammer's *Legacy* and *Polynesia* and Star Clippers' *Royal Clipper*) can be loads of fun for some kids and educational to boot. You won't find a kids' playroom stuffed with toys, TVs, video games, or many other kids on board for that matter, but these cruises are more about exploring the ports anyway, so you'll only be aboard ship in the evenings. If your child is

## Getting Married on Board or in Port

If you'd like to have your marriage and honeymoon all in one, you can legally get hitched on many cruises, either aboard ship or at one of your ports of call.

Practically all the mainstream lines offer wedding packages, with Carnival, Princess, and Royal Caribbean being the romance leaders, followed by NCL, Celebrity, Disney, Holland America, and Costa. In almost all cases a local justice of the peace, notary, or minister must officiate; so even if you choose to hold your ceremony aboard ship, it will have to take place while the ship is in port, not at sea. Eight of Princess's ships (the Diamond-, Coral-, and Grand-class ships) have **wedding chapels** on board, as do Royal Caribbean's Voyager-class ships, Carnival's Spirit-class ships, and NCL's *Norwegian Sun*, *Star*, *Dawn*, and *Pride of America*. Other ships hold ceremonies in lounges that are decorated for the occasion.

If you want non-sailing family and friends to attend, you can hold the ceremony and reception at your port of embarkation, before the ship leaves. Guests will be on a special list with port security, though they'll have to bring the requisite ID to board. Ceremonies can also be arranged at various ports of call, including Aruba, Barbados, Grand Cayman, St. Thomas, Sint Maarten, San Juan (Puerto Rico), Ocho Rios and Montego Bay (Jamaica), and Cozumel (Mexico) in the Caribbean; Nassau in The Bahamas; Key West, Florida; Bermuda; and Juneau and Ketchikan, Alaska. If you've always wanted to be married on a beach or by a tropical waterfall, this is the way to go. In Alaska, you can even arrange to be married on the ice of Juneau's Mendenhall Glacier courtesy of **Temsco** (☎ 877/789-9501; [www.temscoair.com](http://www.temscoair.com)), which also handles glacier helicopter tours for the cruise lines. If contemplating marriage in a port of call, remember that your cruise itinerary limits how far afield you can go, since ships generally stay in port for only 3 to 10 hours.

**Wedding packages** generally start around \$750 for shipboard ceremonies; that price usually includes the services of an officiant (though you can bring your own if you prefer), a bouquet and boutonniere, champagne and keepsake glasses, a wedding cake, and the services of a photographer but not the photos themselves—those will cost extra, should you choose to buy them. The \$750 package offered by Carnival—one of the big leaders in shipboard weddings—accommodates eight people including the bride and groom. Prices go up from there based on the complexity and size of any reception you want to have (from a simple open bar and hors d'oeuvres to

inquisitive and somewhat extroverted (not to mention well behaved), he or she may be able to talk with the crew and learn how a sailing ship operates.

## 5 Cruises for Honeymooners & Anniversary Couples

You want romance? You're in luck. Practically all cruises have what it takes to make your honeymoon or anniversary cuddly and cozy: moonlit nights, the undulating sea all around, dimly lit restaurants, and maybe a private balcony or whirlpool tub in your

a formal meal in the ship's restaurant) and by port, with the top price being \$2,145. Additional guests can be accommodated at a rate of \$24 per person. Ceremonies can also be performed off-ship in port, at higher prices.

**THE LEGAL DETAILS** No matter where you choose to wed, you must arrange for a marriage license from the U.S. or foreign port far in advance of the cruise itself. Policies vary from country to country, so you'll save a lot of headaches by having the cruise line help you with the details. When you're arranging your cruise, the line or your travel agent can fill you in on the rules and regulations of your marriage port and assist you with the application form and any other paperwork. Carnival and Princess have actual wedding departments to help you with these matters; other lines handle wedding planning through their guest-relations office or refer you to a wedding consultant with whom they work. Be sure to check with these departments before booking your cruise to be sure wedding space is available on the date you have in mind.

**HAVING THE CAPTAIN OFFICIATE** Have your heart set on the big boss performing your marriage rites at sea? If so, you've got only one choice: Princess Cruises. Their Diamond-, Coral-, and Grand-class ships are currently the only ones where the captain himself does the honors, performing six or seven civil ceremonies a week. Adorned with fresh flower arrangements, stained glass, and warm caramel-wood furniture, the ships' charming wedding chapels seat about three dozen. Assistant pursers, decked out in their handsome dress blues, are available to escort a bride down the mini-aisle. Three different ceremony packages are offered, starting at \$1,800 per couple (plus \$400 for licensing fees). Depending on which you choose, they include photography, video, music, and salon treatments for the bride. You can also arrange onboard receptions that can be custom-tailored with a variety of options—hors d'oeuvres, champagne, wedding cake, and so on. Friends and relatives who aren't sailing can even monitor the wedding courtesy of the ships' chapel web-cams, which broadcast an updated photo every minute or so. (Look at the very bottom of the Princess website homepage for "Bridge Cams." Pick a ship, then click on "wedding chapel" from the drop-down menu.) Don't wait till the last minute if you're considering Princess for your wedding, as there's often a waiting list.

cabin. Of course, different ships are romantic to different kinds of people. The mega-ships offer a big, flashy kind of romance, like a trip to Vegas without the dry heat. The ultraluxury lines are more like a trip to Paris, with gourmet cuisine, fine wine, perfect service, and the finest bed linens. And some of the small-ship lines are like staying at a Vermont B&B—though others are more like a Motel 6, but with a better view. Beyond the ships themselves are the ports of call, offering experiences that are variously exotic, charming, exciting, and sybaritic.

## HONEYMOON & ANNIVERSARY PACKAGES

Besides their inherent romantic qualities, cruises are a good honeymoon choice for lots of reasons—Sunday departures, so couples who marry on Saturday can leave the next day. Some lines offer honeymooner freebies such as a special cake in the dining room one night, or an invitation to a private cocktail party. Couples celebrating anniversaries are often invited as well. To get your share of freebies, be sure to tell your travel agent or the cruise line reservation agent that you'll be celebrating on the cruise. Beyond the freebies, the cruise lines aren't shy about selling a variety of **honeymoon/anniversary packages**. You'll get a pamphlet describing the available packages when you receive your cruise tickets in the mail. NCL's \$79 Honeymoon Package is about average for its price range, and includes champagne and strawberries at embarkation, a dinner for two with complimentary wine at the ship's specialty restaurant, an invitation to a cocktail party, a keepsake photo, and canapés in your cabin one evening. Their \$229 Deluxe Package adds breakfast in bed one day and two 25-minute massages at the spa. All the mainstream lines offer similar deals, with packages in the \$300 to \$500 range generally piling on more spa treatments, champagne, shore excursions, canapés, chocolate-covered strawberries, and the like. These packages must be ordered before the cruise.

Ultraluxe lines such as Silversea, Seabourn, Radisson, SeaDream, and Crystal are less involved in these kinds of promotions, but that's because free champagne and canapés, terry bathrobes, whirlpool bathtubs, and five-course dinners served in your cabin are all a matter of course.

## VOW-RENEWAL & "ROMANCE" PACKAGES

Some lines offer vow-renewal packages for couples who'd like to celebrate their marriage all over again, or packages that simply add romance to a vacation. On Holland America, for example, couples can renew their vows at a special group ceremony at sea, catered with drinks and cold hors d'oeuvres; the \$129 package includes a floral arrangement in your cabin, a photo and photo album, a certificate presented by the captain, and dinner for two at the Pinnacle alternative restaurant. Princess offers souped-up vow-renewal packages for \$205 and \$485 per couple. The former includes the ceremony, an orchid bouquet and boutonniere, a bottle of champagne and souvenir champagne glasses, a framed formal portrait of the ceremony, a commemorative certificate signed by the captain, and a framed photo of the ceremony; the latter adds a champagne breakfast in bed, two terry-cloth robes, a visit to the spa for half-hour massages or facials, canapés or petit fours in your stateroom every evening, and a personalized invitation from the captain to visit the bridge while in port. These are fairly representative of what's offered by the other mainstream lines.

## 6 Cruises for Gay Men & Lesbians

A number of specialized travel agencies offer cruises for gay men and/or lesbians, either chartering a full ship outright or reserving blocks of cabins with cruise lines that are known to be particularly gay-friendly. Full-charters typically bring aboard their own entertainers (as well as the ship's usual entertainment staff) and program many of their own activities. Hosted group trips typically have cocktail parties for group members and specially programmed activities on board and in port.

- **Atlantis Events Inc.**, 9200 Sunset Blvd., Suite 500, West Hollywood, CA 90069 (☎ 800/628-5268 or 310/859-8800; [www.atlantisevents.com](http://www.atlantisevents.com)), offers all-gay charters with lines such as Celebrity, Royal Caribbean, and NCL. In addition to



the lines' own entertainment, Atlantis brings aboard its own featured performers. Past guests have included Patti LuPone, Cybill Shepherd, and Chaka Khan.

- **Friends of Dorothy Travel**, 1177 California St. Suite B, San Francisco, CA 94108-2231 (☎ 800/640-4918 or 415/864-1600; [www.fodtravel.com](http://www.fodtravel.com)), offers many full-gay charters with lines such as Celebrity, NCL, and the ultraluxe SeaDream Yachts, as well as hosted tours on *Queen Mary 2* and other ships.
- **Olivia Cruises and Resorts**, 4400 Market St., Oakland, CA 94608 (☎ 800/631-6277 or 415/962-5700; [www.olivia.com](http://www.olivia.com)), offers full-ship charters targeted specifically to the lesbian community, mostly aboard Holland America's ships. Guest performers for 2004 and 2005 included k. d. lang, the Indigo Girls, Wynonna Judd, Shawn Colvin, and Melissa Etheridge, plus the cast of Showtime's *The L Word*.
- **Pied Piper Travel**, 330 W. 42nd St., Suite 1804, New York, NY 10036 (☎ 800/874-7312 or 212/239-2412; [www.piedpipertravel.com](http://www.piedpipertravel.com)), offers hosted gay cruises that include various onboard parties and activities and arranged visits with the gay community at the various ports of call.
- **R Family Vacations**, 2 Washington Ave., Nyack, NY 10960 (☎ 866/732-6822; [www.rfamilyvacations.com](http://www.rfamilyvacations.com)), was founded by Rosie O'Donnell's partner Kelli O'Donnell, along with gay travel veteran Gregg Kaminsky. Trips are targeted to the gay and lesbian family market.
- **RSVP Vacations** (☎ 800/328-7787; [www.rsvpvacations.com](http://www.rsvpvacations.com)) offers full ship charters on lines like Holland America and Star Clippers. All sailings are targeted to both gay men and lesbians, and bring aboard their own guest performers. RSVP works through more than 10,000 different travel agencies, which can be located by calling the 800 number or checking the website above.

## 7 Active Travel & Adventure Cruises

It's true: Cruises *can* be active and adventurous, whether you want to really get off the beaten track on an expeditionary small ship or just keep your heart-rate elevated a few hours a day on a megaship.

### ADVENTURE & EXPEDITIONARY CRUISES

A few years ago we met this great Australian couple in Alaska. They'd wanted to see the state for years, and wanted to really get into its forests and see its wildlife, but they didn't have time to do a 3-week wilderness trek. Their solution? They booked aboard one of Glacier Bay Cruiseline's ships, where every day was spent hiking, kayaking, or visiting tiny fishing towns. It was a perfect choice for them. Glacier Bay is one of the most physically active cruise lines in this book, but almost all the small-ship lines offer the ability to go "off-road," far from the usual ports of call.

Vessels that offer nature-oriented cruises basically break down into three types. **Coastal and river cruisers** are built to take people into narrow, shallow waters where you'd never find a big ship. Small (generally carrying fewer than 150 people) and usually pretty plain, these ships offer a casual cruise oriented heavily toward nature, wildlife watching, culture, and history, with onboard naturalists to help interpret what you see. **Expedition ships** are similar in size and character to the coastal cruisers, but they're built tougher and have stabilizers, allowing them to sail in open ocean—often as far as Asia, Europe, Antarctica, South America, and the Russian Far East. **Sailing ships** put a classic twist on the cruise experience. Some are classic or re-created rigged vessels that rely on wind for all or most of their propulsion. Others are rigged for show only, and have engines to do the real work.

Aboard all these ships there are few of the usual activity options, but that's by design: Their focus is on what's outside the vessel, not inside. Most offer itineraries that mix visits to large and small ports with days spent steering through natural areas in search of wildlife, but some are more active than others. Lindblad Expeditions, Glacier Bay, and American Safari Cruises, for instance, build activities such as hiking, kayaking, and exploring by inflatable launch into their adventure itineraries. Ditto for some of the more expeditionary trips offered by Cruise West and Clipper. On Star Clippers' sailing ships, those inflatable launches might be used to take passengers water-skiing or on banana-boat rides.

## KEEPING ACTIVE ON THE MAINSTREAM & LUXE SHIPS

Ships started becoming more active around the dawn of the 1990s, and today it's unheard of for a new megaship to launch without a huge gym (the biggest exceeding 10,000 sq. ft., with dozens of exercise machines), jogging tracks, and sports decks that may have basketball courts, golf nets, and rock-climbing walls (the latter a hallmark of Royal Caribbean). A handful of smaller and mostly high-end ships concentrate on watersports, with retractable or floating watersports platforms to allow easy swimming, water-skiing, and windsurfing right from the ship. See "Keeping Fit: Gyms, Spas & Sports," in chapter 4, for an overview, and the "Pool, Fitness, Spa & Sports Facilities" section of each ship review in part 2 for a rundown on which ship has what.

## ACTIVE SHORE EXCURSIONS

On shore, the cruise lines are offering more and more active excursions. No need to sit on a bus for 3 hours sweating if you'd rather be feeling the burn. Along with snorkeling and diving, options such as biking, hiking, kayaking, horseback riding, and river rafting are offered in many ports from the Caribbean to Alaska and beyond. For more details, see the port reviews in part 3.

## 8 Cruises for Young People

"So which are the ships for young people?" We get this question all the time, and the answer is, there aren't any. That is, there aren't any that attract *only* young people, just like there aren't many hotels or resorts that do. Most ships are a mixed bag of ages, with couples in their 40s, 50s, and 60-plus making up the majority, along with a growing percentage of younger couples, often with kids. Destination plays into the balance, with the Caribbean and Mexican Riviera attracting a sizable young crowd as well as lots of retirees. Alaska, Europe, New England/Canada, and Asia itineraries, on the other hand, draw mostly an older, 50-plus crowd (though you will see families with young kids in Alaska and Europe during the summer). That said, here are some general guidelines about ships and the ages of the people you'll find on them.

The **youngest crowds**, in the 20s-to-40s range, are typically found on 2-, 3-, and 4-night warm-weather cruises (and next on the 7-night cruises) on mainstream lines such as Carnival, Royal Caribbean, and NCL. Young-at-heart types, who may be 54 or 67 or 72 but who wear bikinis and short-shorts and drink piña colodas for lunch, will also be attracted to those lines, as well as to smaller fun-loving lines such as Windjammer and Star Clippers.

The **oldest folks**, upward of 60, will be the vast majority on luxury lines such as Seabourn, Silversea, Cunard, and Radisson. Holland America, a mainstream line, has also traditionally attracted a mature crowd, though they're trying hard to broaden their demographic, particularly on their newer megaships. Among the small-ship

lines, you'll find a generally older crowd aboard American Canadian Caribbean, American Cruise Lines, American West, Delta Queen, and RiverBarge Excursions, as well as on port-to-port itineraries offered by Cruise West and Clipper.

## 9 Cruises for People with Disabilities & Health Issues

Though most of the cruise industry's ships are foreign-flagged and are not required to comply with the **Americans with Disabilities Act**, the newest ships have all been built with accessibility in mind, and some older ships have been retrofitted to offer access. Most ships that can accommodate wheelchair-bound passengers require that they be accompanied by a fully mobile companion. The ship reviews in chapters 6 through 8 include information about access and facilities in the "Cabins" sections, but be sure to discuss your needs fully with your travel agent prior to booking.

See the "Onboard Medical Care" box below for information on medical facilities aboard ship.

**ACCESSIBLE CABINS & PUBLIC ROOMS** Most ships have a handful of cabins specifically designed for travelers with disabilities, with extra-wide doorways, large bathrooms with grab bars and roll-in showers, closets with pull-down racks, and furniture built to a lower height. The "Ships at a Glance" chart on p. 98 identifies ships with accessible cabins, and the "Cabins" section in each of the ship reviews in chapters 6 through 8 indicates how many. The vast majority of the ships reviewed in the **mainstream** and **luxury** categories (chapters 6 and 7) have accessible cabins, but of the **adventure ships** in chapter 8, only Delta Queen's *American* and *Mississippi Queen*, Cruise West's *Spirit of '98* and *Spirit of Oceanus*, and Clipper's *Clipper Odyssey* are even moderately wheelchair-friendly.

Most public rooms on newer vessels have ramps, and some also have lifts to help passengers with disabilities into the pools. A few older ships still have small sills or lips in cabin and bathroom doorways, originally created to contain water, which may rise as high as 6 to 8 inches. Those that do may be able to install temporary ramps to accommodate wheelchair users. This must be arranged in advance.

**ELEVATORS** Most elevators aboard today's megaships are wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs, but make sure before booking. Sailing ships and most small vessels do not have elevators. Due to the size of the megaships (where it can sometimes be a long way from place to place), cabins designed for wheelchair users are intentionally located near elevators. If you don't use a wheelchair but have trouble walking, you'll want to choose a cabin close to an elevator to avoid a long hike.

**TENDERING INTO PORT** If your ship is too large to dock or if a port's docks are already taken by other vessels, your ship may anchor offshore and shuttle passengers to land via small boats known as *tenders*. Some tenders are large and stable and others are not, but the chopiness of the water can be a factor when boarding either way, so if you use a wheelchair or have trouble walking, it may be difficult or impossible to get aboard. For liability reasons, many lines forbid wheelchairs to be carried onto tenders, meaning you may have to forgo a trip ashore and stay on board when in these ports. An exception to this is Holland America, which has a wheelchair-to-tender transport system aboard all of their ships except *Prinsendam*. The system works by locking a wheelchair on a lift, which transports it safely between the gangway and the tender.

Check with your travel agent to find out if itineraries you're interested in allow your ship to dock at a pier. Note that weather conditions and heavy traffic may occasionally affect the way your ship reaches a port.

## Onboard Medical Care

The vast majority of ships have a nurse and sometimes a doctor aboard to provide medical services for a fee. Most of their cases involve seasickness, sunburn, and the like, but they may also be required to stabilize a patient with a more serious ailment until he or she can be brought to a hospital at the next port of call (or, in extreme cases, be evacuated by helicopter). If they're very unlucky, the medical staff may also have to deal with an outbreak of **norovirus**, the flulike gastrointestinal bug that's hit a few ships in the past 3 years. More common than the common cold, the virus causes vomiting, stomach cramps, diarrhea, and general nausea for a few days, and is caused by simple contagion: One infected passenger comes aboard, leaves his germs on a handrail, and all of a sudden everyone's sick—just like kindergarten. Though outbreaks are rare, cruise lines have stepped up their already vigilant sanitation routines to further reduce the chance of transmission.

All large ships have **staffed infirmaries**, but if you have special needs, check with the line to see exactly what medical services are provided. The quality of ships' staffs and facilities can definitely vary. Generally, big ships have the best-equipped facilities and largest staff since they're dealing with such a huge number of passengers and crew. In 2003, the author of an extensive *New York Times* article concluded that **Holland America** and **Princess** had the best onboard medical facilities, as well as the most generous pay packages for their doctors. Princess's Grand- and Coral-class ships, for instance, carry at least one and sometimes two doctors as well as two to five nurses, and are linked via a live video and camera system with U.S.-based medical centers. All Holland America ships can consult 24 hours a day (via phone or e-mail) with the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, and their Vista-class ships have a teleradiology system that allows X-rays to be transmitted to a shoreside medical facility. (Princess's *Sea Princess* and Carnival's Spirit- and Conquest-class ships also have this system.) HAL's *Amsterdam* has the capability to do live television telemedicine conferencing and transmit X-rays to shoreside medical facilities. Note that shipboard doctors are not necessarily certified in the United States, and aren't always experts in important areas such as cardiology.

Small ships (those discussed in chapter 8) generally don't carry onboard medical staff since they sail close to shore and can evacuate sick passengers quickly. Usually, some crewmembers have nursing or first-aid experience. Small ships always carry doctors when sailing more far-flung international itineraries.

**TRAVEL-AGENT SPECIALISTS** A handful of experienced travel agencies specialize in booking cruises and tours for travelers with disabilities. **Accessible Journeys**, 35 W. Sellers Ave., Ridley Park, PA 19078 (☎ 800/846-4537 or 610/521-0339; www.disabilitytravel.com), organizes both group and individual cruises on accessible ships, with accessible airport transfers and shore excursions, as well as an escort on group tours. **Flying Wheels Travel**, 143 W. Bridge St., Owatonna, MN 55060 (☎ 507/451-5005; www.flyingwheelstravel.com), is another option.