

Choosing Your Ideal Cruise

There are many things you should consider before plunking down big bucks for the perfect European cruise. What kind of itinerary are you looking for and when do you want to go? What size ship will make you most comfortable, and will its age matter? What special things should you know if you are a family traveler, a

honeymooner, or a person with disabilities? European cruises come in styles to suit all tastes, so your first step in ensuring that your vacation will be the best possible is to match your expectations with the appropriate itinerary and ship. In this chapter, we'll explore your European cruise options.

1 The European Cruise Season

The European cruise season is generally considered to be April to November, although some lines operate into December, and even year-round in the Mediterranean (Italian line Costa is among those in this category). April, early May, and November/December are considered shoulder season, and lower fares are usually offered during these months. High season is the summer months.

If you are considering travel in the shoulder season, keep in mind that some visitor facilities will operate during more limited hours, and some—say, in the Greek Isles—may not be open at all. The least expensive cruises are typically the first and last runs of the season, though these have their own charm: Specifically, you'll avoid the big tourist crush, which can really make a difference in some port towns. During the high season in Venice, for instance, you can't swing a stick without hitting a family from Duluth.

WEATHER

Europe is a continent of distinct seasons but, just as in the U.S., there can be great variations in temperature from one part to another. The warmest months are July and August. August is the month when many Europeans go on vacation, and when beaches and other resort facilities will be particularly packed.

Here's the typical summer weather you can expect to encounter by region:

- **Britain & Ireland** Average temperatures in the low- to mid-60s (high teens Celsius), although weather may be milder in Ireland. August, September, and October tend to be the sunniest months.
- **Scandinavia** Average temperatures above the Arctic Circle in the mid-50s (13°C); in the south, in the 70s (low 20s Celsius), with Denmark tending to be the mildest. It may be rainy in the fjords.
- **Holland & Belgium** Average temperatures in the high 60s (about 20°C) in Holland and Germany, with possible rain in May; in the low 70s (low 20s Celsius) in Belgium, with the sunniest weather in July and August.

What Time Is It?

Want to know what time it is at home? Based on U.S. Eastern Standard Time, Britain, Ireland, and Portugal are 5 hours ahead, Greece and Estonia are 7 hours ahead, and western Russia is 8 hours ahead. The rest of the countries in this book are 6 hours ahead. The European countries observe daylight saving time, but not necessarily starting or ending on the same day or in the same month as in the U.S. (and when the U.S. moves to its new daylight saving plan in 2007—it will push clocks ahead in Mar and won't move back to standard time until Nov—the situation will become even messier).

- **France** Average temperatures in the mid-70s (mid-20s Celsius) in Paris; can be in high 80s or above (30s Celsius) on the Riviera.
- **The Baltics** Average temperatures in the 70s (20s Celsius), with the best weather in late summer.
- **Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal & Turkey** Temperatures in the high 80s or higher (30s Celsius), but there may be nice breezes along the coast. Portugal tends to be cooler, more like the mid-70s (20s Celsius), but also rainier. Greece and Turkey are the hottest, and if you're not a hot-weather lover, you're better off visiting these countries mid-April to June or mid-September to the end of October.

2 European Cruise Itineraries

There's really no such thing as a standard European itinerary. Instead, the cruises focus on specific regions and sometimes more than one region. And there are many variations on each theme. A cruise of the Norwegian fjords, for instance, may depart from Bergen, Norway. Or it may depart from London or Copenhagen.

TYPICAL CRUISE ITINERARIES

The Greek Isles/Eastern Mediterranean The Aegean Sea and sometimes the Adriatic as well, with port calls in the Greek islands (Rhodes, Santorini, Mykonos, and so on), Athens, Kusadasi, Turkey, and sometimes Istanbul. Some of the cruises also visit Dubrovnik or other ports in Croatia.

Western Mediterranean The area from Barcelona or Lisbon to Rome, and including port calls in Spain, France, and Italy.

Spain & France Spain and France, and some departures from ports in England.

The Rivieras The French Riviera (with ports such as St-Tropez), Monte Carlo, and small Italian Riviera ports (such as Portofino). May include Rome.

Scandinavia & Russia The Baltic Sea; Copenhagen, Denmark; Stockholm, Sweden; Helsinki, Finland; Tallinn, Estonia; and St. Petersburg, Russia. May include Oslo, Norway, or Gdansk in Poland; or a stop in Germany with bus trips offered to Berlin (obviously, you won't travel on water for the latter).

The British Isles England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, and sometimes France; sailing in the North Sea, Irish Sea, and English Channel.

Norway & the Fjords Norway from Bergen up to Honningsvåg and the North Cape.

The Black Sea/Middle East The area from Athens or Istanbul to Yalta, with port calls in Bulgaria, Romania, and the Ukraine. European cruise regions may be combined with the Red Sea (Egypt and Israel).

SPECIAL ITINERARIES

THE BEST OF EUROPE One of the best ways to see Europe if you've never been here before is on a 2-week cruise that visits the Continent's major cities. These cruises tend to combine aspects of the above itineraries to give passengers a comprehensive (albeit quick) look at Europe. An example is Holland America's 14-night **European Tapestry cruise** from Rotterdam (the Netherlands) to Piraeus/Athens (Greece) by way of Le Havre/Paris (France), Cadiz/Seville and Barcelona (Spain), Monte Carlo and Rome (Italy), Tarabulus (Tripoli), and Kusadasi (Turkey). And there are Grand Mediterranean cruises that combine visits to the Eastern and Western Mediterranean, such as Princess's 12-night **Grand Mediterranean** from Venice to Barcelona, calling at Athens and Mykonos (Greece); Kusadasi and Istanbul (Turkey); Civitavecchia [Rome], Naples, and Livorno (Italy); and Marseille (France). You can lengthen your travel experience with overnight stays in Venice and Barcelona.

RIVER CRUISES Europe's inland waterways offer a wealth of cruise opportunities on smaller vessels specifically designed for river and canal travel, including luxurious barges that ply the waterways of inland France, Holland, Ireland, Belgium, and England, offering close-up views of the local culture.

There are also larger river ships in France, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Austria, and the former Soviet countries, as well as in Italy and Portugal.

COMPARING ITINERARIES

LENGTH OF CRUISE

In choosing a region or regions to visit, you will obviously have to consider the length of the cruise you want to take. Itineraries in Europe range from a few days to several weeks. The shortest cruises, **3- and 4-day** offerings, can be found mostly in the Greek Isles and on inland waterways. Norwegian Coastal Voyages also does 5- and 6-day cruises in Norway. **One-week** cruises are regularly offered in the Greek Isles/Eastern Mediterranean, in the Western Mediterranean, in the British Isles, in Norway, in the French and Italian Rivas, and on Europe's inland waterways. There are also **1-week** sailings in the Baltics and other regions. But more common in most parts of Europe are **10- and 12-day** cruises. The longest cruise itineraries include several regions.

TIME IN PORT & TIME AT SEA

It's important when comparing itineraries to make sure you will have enough time in port for what you came to see and do. Some ships even overnight in key ports such as Venice, Monte Carlo, or Istanbul to give you time to both explore the area and enjoy the local nightlife. Alternative ships may spend most evenings in port.

Keep in mind that visiting a port a day in an exciting region like Greece, where there are so many ancient sites to see, can be exhausting. And some ships make more than one port call a day. Experienced cruisers will know that among the most relaxing times on ships are lazy days at sea, and consequently they will often choose an itinerary that spends a day or two without a port call.

MATCHING YOUR HABITS TO YOUR DESTINATION

Some ports are better for certain things than others. Here's a short rundown (see part 3, "Ports of Call," for detailed information).

PORTS FOR SHOPPERS

London, Paris, Rome, and all the other major cities; Nice and Cannes, France; Venice, Italy.

PORTS FOR BEACH LOVERS

Cannes and St-Tropez, France; Mykonos and Rhodes, Greece; Málaga and Palma, Spain.

PORTS FOR ANTIQUITIES

Kusadasi (Turkey [Ephesus]), Sorrento (Pompeii), Athens (the Parthenon), Rome (the Colosseum, and so on).

PORTS FOR NATURE BUFFS

Norway (especially above the Arctic Circle); British coastal areas.

SHORE EXCURSIONS: THE WHAT, WHY & HOW

No matter what size ship you're on or what its itinerary is, you can choose from a variety of shore excursions at any given port, ranging in price from around \$42 to more than \$200 per person (and sometimes, if flights are involved, such as flying from St. Petersburg to Moscow, more than \$1,000). The most popular are city tours, which typically highlight the historic and scenic attractions in each port city. Other, pricier tours take you beyond the port city to inland attractions.

We enjoy exploring port cities on our own and take only those tours that go farther inland, but that's our personal choice.

On the big ships, excursions can sell out quickly, so don't dawdle if you know what you want; sign up before the trip (if the cruise line allows you to do so) or on the first or second day of the cruise. Because of the large numbers of passengers on big ships, be prepared to wait as each jumbo-size tour group is herded from the ship to the waiting fleet of buses or minivans.

On smaller ships, there's usually room on the excursions to accommodate all passengers on board, and the excursions may even be included in your cruise fare (in which case 100% attendance is not uncommon). The whole process is saner, and group sizes are most likely smaller.

Indulging Your Obsessions at Sea

Cruise lines are always looking for more ways to attract passengers with unique onboard activities. Hence, the creation of theme cruises. **Crystal**, for instance, features an annual series of food and wine cruises in which well-known chefs and sommeliers conduct demonstrations and tastings on board. **Holland America** does an annual big-band cruise on a transatlantic sailing from Europe. **Radisson Seven Seas** has cruises themed on antiques and the arts, as well as cruises on which Le Cordon Bleu chefs offer workshops. **Silversea** has designated sailings with visiting chefs on board, as well as special wine sailings that include lectures, tastings, and guided tours of wineries. Silversea also offers golf cruises with play at notable courses. While **Cunard** no longer offers the full roster of theme cruises it once did, the *Queen Mary 2* does feature an extensive educational program that includes workshops led by graduates of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (a little Shakespeare, anyone?).

Whatever the size of the ship, the attraction itself, quality of the tour guide, and execution of the tour will determine whether you have an enjoyable time.

In chapter 2, we list the pros and cons of taking shore excursions. In chapters 12 and 13, we list both the best shore excursions and the top sights you can see on your own.

3 Choosing Your Ship

After choosing your itinerary, picking the right ship is the number-one factor ensuring you get the vacation you're looking for. As we've said, cruise ships operating in Europe range from **small alternative-type vessels** to **resortlike megaships**, with the cruise experience varying widely depending on the type of ship you select. There are casual cruises and luxury cruises; educational cruises where you attend lectures; soft-adventure cruises that explore remote areas and offer watersports opportunities; and resortlike cruises where massages and Las Vegas-style shows are the order of the day.

You'll need to decide what overall cruise experience you want. Type of cruise is even more important than price. After all, what kind of bargain is a party cruise if what you're looking for is a quiet time? Your fantasy vacation may be someone else's nightmare, and vice versa.

BIG SHIP OR SMALL?

When comparing ship sizes, think of the difference between a small New England inn and a big resort hotel in Miami. A ship's size, like that of a hotel, greatly determines its personality and the kind of vacation you'll have. Big ships tend to be busy, exciting affairs, while the smaller ships are most often low-key retreats with distinct personalities.

THE BIG SHIPS

Big ships operating in Europe vary in size and scope, and include everything from classic cruise ships to massive new megaships. They all offer comfortable cruising experiences, with virtual armies of service employees overseeing your well-being. Ship stabilizers assure smooth sailing, and all have plenty of deck space from which you can take in the coastal sights.

Due to their deeper drafts (the amount of ship below the waterline), the biggest of the big ships can't get to some of the islands and small ports that smaller ships may visit. The more powerful engines on these ships, however, allow them to visit more ports during each trip, and shore excursions allow you to explore aspects of the port's history and culture. (A downside, however, is that disembarkation at ports can be a lengthy process because there are so many passengers wanting to visit the ports.)

The itineraries of these ships tend to be the tried-and-true routes sailed by many other vessels.

The classic-style ships (some of which are really midsize in today's market) embrace their nautical history and don't look as much like floating Hyatt hotels as the bigger megaships (see below). Classic-style ships may be older vessels (and some tattered ones at that); or they may be modern ships designed to appeal to those who don't want everything quite so big and glitzy. On the more expensive of these ships, the crowd will be older and more refined, and will take formal nights seriously. On the more moderately priced ships in Europe, you'll find lots of middle-class Europeans and family travelers (as well as value-conscious Americans), in a generally more casual atmosphere.

Megaships are newer, are bigger (the biggest ship in Europe holds nearly 3,000 passengers), and offer the latest and greatest. They're glitzy American-style floating resorts and, with the exception of those operated by Costa, attract more Americans than

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.

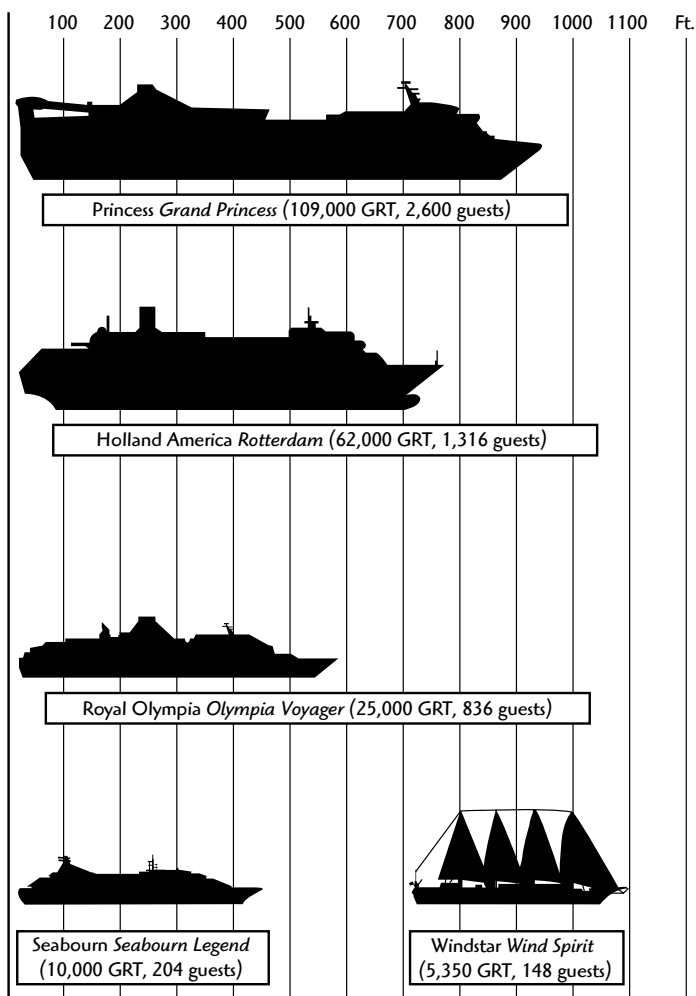
All large ships have **staffed infirmaries**, but if you have special needs, check with the line to see exactly what medical services are provided. The quality of ships' staffs and facilities can definitely vary. Generally, big ships have the best-equipped facilities and largest staff since they're dealing 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* also has 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 and alternative ships (those discussed in chapter 9) 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.

Europeans. The atmosphere is casual during the day, with a few formal nights so you can really put on the ritz.

Both the classic-style ships and the megaships have all the facilities you can imagine on a cruise ship. There are swimming pools, health clubs, spas (of various sizes), nightclubs, movie theaters, shops, casinos, bars, and children's playrooms. In some cases—especially on the megaships—you'll find sports decks, virtual golf, computer

SHIP COMPARISON CHARTS



Ships selected for this chart are representative of the various size vessels sailing in Europe for 2005. See the specifications tables accompanying every ship review in chapters 6 to 9 to see the approximate comparative size of all the ships not shown here. (GRT = gross register tons, a measure that takes into account interior space used to produce revenue on a vessel. One GRT = 100 cubic feet of enclosed, revenue-generating space.)

Leading Websites for Cruise Planning

Check out the cruise line sites for tons of information on their products. Some are amazing, giving you everything from their ships' itineraries and prices to virtual tours. Be aware, though, that not all cruise lines accept bookings on their sites, preferring that you make your actual reservation through a travel agent (see more in chapter 2).

This aside, the cruise line sites (listed in chapters 6–10 in the individual cruise line reviews) will give you great visual reference points. The following independent sites can provide other valuable information as you plan your cruise.

- **www.cruising.org** Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), the U.S. cruise industry's marketing arm, maintains a website that lists CLIA-affiliated travel agencies, links to the member cruise lines, and more.
- **www.cdc.gov/travel/cruiships.htm** Twice each year, the Centers for Disease Control's Vessel Sanitation Program rates sanitary conditions aboard all ships that have foreign itineraries and carry 13 or more passengers. Access this link for the latest test results. (**Note:** Because the CDC is a U.S. agency, some ships in this book won't be rated in their listings.) You can also find general travel health information for the destinations you are visiting at the CDC travel website, **www.cdc.gov/travel**.
- Online cruise magazines **Cruisecritic.com** (AOL keyword "Cruise Critic") and **Cruisemates.com** both offer ship reviews, updated cruise news, useful tips, chat opportunities, message boards, and postings of cruise bargains. A good website with links to all things travel-related, including cruise sites, is **www.johnnyjet.com**.

rooms, and cigar clubs, as well as quiet spaces where you can get away from it all. There are so many rooms that you're not likely to feel claustrophobic.

These ships have big dining rooms and buffet areas serving more food with more variety and at more times (including midnight) than you can consider, much less take advantage of. Additional eating venues might be pizzerias, hamburger grills, ice-cream parlors, alternative restaurants, wine bars, champagne bars, caviar bars, and patisseries.

In most cases, these ships have lots of onboard activities to keep you occupied when you're not in port, including games and contests, classes, children's programs, and lectures (possibly by archaeologists and historians). The activities are somewhat lower key than they would be in, say, the Caribbean, where the crowd is more party-hearty. These ships also offer entertainment options that might include celebrity headliners. Usually featured are stage-show productions, some quite sophisticated (particularly on ships run by American companies).

Cabins, in many cases, offer modern comforts such as TVs and telephones, and some have personal safes and minibars. The cabins themselves might be cubbyholes or large suites, depending on the ship and the cabin level you book. On most of these ships, options will include picture windows and private verandas.

These ships carry a lot of people, and as such can at times feel crowded—with occasional lines at the buffets and in other public areas. On the other hand, you aren't stuck with seeing the same faces for your whole cruise.

THE SMALL & ALTERNATIVE SHIPS

Just as big cruise ships are mostly for people who want every resort amenity, small or alternative ships are best suited for people who prefer a casual, crowd-free cruise experience that gives them a chance to get up-close-and-personal with Europe's coastal offerings.

Thanks to their smaller size, these ships can offer a yachtlike experience (some of them even have sails) and can go places that larger ships can't, such as islands and smaller ports that cater mostly to yachts and small fishing vessels. The decks on these ships are closer to the waterline, too, giving passengers a more intimate view than from the high decks of the large cruise ships. These ships tend to hug the coast, and in Europe they usually visit a port a day (although some spend a day or two at sea exploring areas of natural beauty).

The alternative ship experience comes with a sense of adventure, although it's usually adventure of a soft rather than rugged sort, and offers a generally casual cruise experience: There are usually no dress-up nights, and the food may be simply prepared (although on Windstar it's more gourmet contemporary). Because there are so few public areas to choose from—usually only one or two small lounges—camaraderie tends to develop more quickly between passengers on these ships than aboard larger vessels, which can be as anonymous as a big city.

Cabins may not offer TVs or telephones and tend to be very small—in some cases downright spartan. Meals are generally served in a single, open seating, and dress codes are usually nonexistent.

Instead of aerobics and pool games (featured on the big ships), these ships may offer brisk walks around the decks or sometimes opportunities to enjoy watersports from the boats themselves. The alternative ships more frequently feature expert lectures on archaeology, history, and other intellectual topics.

There are no stabilizers on most of these smaller ships, and the ride can be bumpy in open water. There are often no elevators, making cruises on most of these ships a bit difficult for travelers with disabilities. And the alternative ship lines do not offer specific activities or facilities for children, although you still may find a few families on some of these vessels.

4 Matching the Cruise to Your Needs

CRUISES FOR FAMILIES

European cruises have become increasingly popular with families, including intergenerational gatherings: parents traveling with kids and grandparents. The lines are responding with youth counselors and supervised programs, fancy playrooms, and even video game rooms to keep the kids entertained while their parents relax. At night, most ships offer babysitting (for an extra charge). Some lines offer reduced rates for kids, though it's important to note that most lines discourage passengers from bringing infants.

ACTIVITIES Ask whether a supervised children's program will be offered when you plan to cruise; sometimes such programs are only operated if there are a certain number of kids on board. Depending on the program, the youngest children may frolic in toy- and game-stocked playrooms, listen to stories, and go on treasure hunts; older

Family Cruising

Here are suggestions for smoother sailing on your family cruise.

- **Ask about children's amenities.** Check in advance with the cruise line to make sure the ship on which you'll sail can provide for your child's needs. Are cribs available? Children's menus?
- **Pack basic first-aid supplies plus any medications your doctor may suggest, as well as a thermometer.** Cruise lines have limited supplies of these items (and charge for them, too); they can quickly run out if the ship has many families aboard. If an onboard accident should occur, virtually every ship afloat has its own infirmary staffed by doctors and/or nurses. Keep in mind that first aid can usually be summoned more readily on the ship than in port. Be aware that most ships do not supply either baby food or diapers (bring your own).
- **Warn younger children about the danger of falling overboard and make sure they know not to play on the railings.**
- **When in port, prearrange a meeting spot.** If your child is old enough to go off on his or her own, pick a meeting spot either on board or on land, and meet there well before the ship is scheduled to depart to make sure no one is still ashore.
- **Make sure your kids know their cabin number and what deck it's on.** The endless corridors and doors on the megas look exactly alike.
- **Prepare kids for TV letdown.** If your kids are TV addicts, you might want to make sure your cabin will have a TV and VCR. And even if it does, they should be prepared for a little bit of withdrawal because televisions on ships just don't have 200 channels of cable—you'll be lucky to get 5 or 8 channels. On the bright side, big ships are likely to have nightly movies and a video arcade.
- **Dress your kids appropriately.** It's annoying when you're in an evening gown for a formal night and you bump into a kid in shorts.

kids have options like arts and crafts, computer games, lip-synch competitions, pool games, and volleyball; and teenagers can mingle at teen parties or hang out at the video arcade. The megas have large playrooms with computer stations and video games as well as shelves of toys. There's usually a TV showing movies throughout the day and, for the younger ones, there are ball bins and plastic jungle gyms. Many megaships have shallow kiddie pools, sometimes sequestered on an isolated patch of deck.

BABYSITTING Babysitting is offered on most large cruise ships from around 8pm to 2am. Private in-cabin babysitting by a crew member is a steep \$10 per hour for two kids (and there may be a 4-hr. minimum). There may also be a group babysitting option.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY CABINS 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 (some even have a fifth berth), but there's no two ways to slice it: A standard cabin with four people in it will be cramped. When you consider, however, how little time you'll spend in the cabin, it's doable. The obvious incentive to share one cabin is

the price: Whether children or adults, the rates for third and fourth persons sharing a cabin with two full-fare (or even discounted) passengers are usually about half the lowest regular rates. On occasion there are special deals and further discounts. If you can afford it, and if space equals sanity in your book, consider booking a suite, many of which have a pullout couch in the living room. Families with older kids can always consider booking two separate cabins with connecting doors. Lots of ships, big and small, have them. **Tip:** If you need a crib, book one when you book your cruise.

TAKING THE KIDS ON SMALL SHIPS The big new ships are certainly most prepared for families, but if your children are at least age 10 or 12, some of the casual, alternative cruises can be loads of fun and educational to boot. While you won't find a kids' playroom stuffed with toys, the experience of visiting a culturally rich port of call every day or learning (on sailing vessels) about nautical knots and winches will help keep you and the kids from going stir-crazy on board.

CRUISES FOR SINGLE TRAVELERS

For singles, a nice thing about cruises is that you needn't worry about dining alone, since you'll be seated with other guests (if you don't want to be, seek a ship with alternatives). You also needn't worry much about finding people to talk to, since the general atmosphere on nearly all ships is very congenial and allows you to easily find conversation, especially during group activities. And the ship may even host a party to give singles a chance to get to know one another and/or offer social hosts as dance partners.

The downside is that singles may have to pay more for the cruise experience than those sharing a room. Because cruise line rates are based on two people per cabin, some lines charge a "single supplement" rate (which sounds like a deal, but it's you who pays the supplement) that ranges from 110% to an outrageous 200% of the per-person, double-occupancy fare. As a single person, you have two choices: Find a line with a reasonable single supplement rate, or ask if the line has a cabin-share program, in which the line will pair you with another single so you can get a lower fare. You may not be able to get much information about your roommate before the sailing, although all lines match gender and most also try to match age. Some lines offer a single guarantee program, which means if they can't find you a roommate, they'll book you in a cabin alone but honor the shared rate. On some older ships (including the *QE2*) and a few small ships, special cabins are designated for single travelers, in some cases at no additional charge. But keep in mind that these cabins, originally designed on the older ships for nannies or maids accompanying passengers, are really, really small, and that they tend to sell out fast.

To increase your chances of meeting other singles, book a cruise through a travel company that specializes in bringing singles together. These companies include **Cruiseman** (☎ 800/805-0053; www.cruiseman.com) and **Discount Travel Club** (☎ 800/393-5000; www.singlecruise.com). Such firms coordinate groups of as few as 30 or as many as 300 singles on specific sailings, and typically have a tour coordinator on board to organize mixers and make sure people get a chance to meet. Singles in these groups tend to be in their 30s to 50s. Recently, we've seen matchmaking websites, such as **Jdate.com**, matching singles to cruise together.

CRUISES FOR TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Cruise lines, due in no small part to public pressure, have made an effort in recent years to make their ships more accessible to travelers with disabilities. It is not uncommon on the newest ships to find two dozen or more wheelchair-accessible cabins with

Weddings at Sea

Cruise ship captains generally conduct marriage ceremonies only in movies and on television. The exceptions are some of Princess's ships, including the *Grand Princess* and *Star Princess*. Each has its own wedding chapel and a captain who is willing and able to lead the proceedings. And your friends back home can watch the ceremony via the Internet thanks to the line's special Wedding Cam. Princess offers wedding packages that include a ceremony, flowers, music, cake, champagne, and other niceties, priced from \$1,800 (plus your cruise fare). Keep in mind that you will need to make the ceremony and party arrangements and get a license in advance (a spur-of-the-moment wedding at sea is another thing that exists only in movies and on TV). For Princess's wedding coordinators, call ☎ **866/444-8820**.

Already married? Check out the line's romantic "Vow-Renewal-at-Sea" packages.

such features as wide doors, handrails, and low sinks. Other additions include Braille on handrails and in elevators, and cabin alarms designed for the hearing impaired.

On older ships, however, the shipboard experience remains a struggle. You may encounter doors that are too narrow and other frustrations such as entraceways with lips (to prevent flooding). You may even find that some public rooms are simply not accessible. And smaller ships might not have elevators, much less accessible cabins.

If you are a traveler with a disability, it is important to let the cruise line know your special needs when you make your booking. If you use a wheelchair, you'll need to know if wheelchair-accessible cabins are available (and how they're equipped), as well as whether public rooms are accessible and can be reached by elevator; we've noted this information in the cabin sections of the ship reviews in chapters 6 to 10. Be aware that the cruise line may have special policies regarding travelers with disabilities—for instance, some require that you be accompanied by an able-bodied companion.

Travelers with disabilities should also inquire when they're booking whether the ship docks at ports or uses tenders (small boats) to go ashore. Tenders cannot always accommodate wheelchairs. Once on board, travelers with disabilities will want the tour staff's advice before choosing shore excursions, as not all will be wheelchair-friendly.

If you have a chronic health problem, we advise you to check with your doctor before booking the cruise and, if you have any specific needs, to notify the cruise line in advance. This will ensure that the medical team on the ship is properly prepared to offer assistance.

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**; www.disabilitytravel.com), publishes a newsletter and can even provide licensed healthcare professionals to accompany those who require aid.

CRUISES FOR GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

There are a number of gay-friendly cruises and special charter sailings for gay men and lesbians in Europe. For details, contact these specialists:

- **RSVP Cruises**, 2800 University Ave. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414 (☎ **800/328-7787**; www.rsvp.net), offers full ship charters on lines such as 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 toll-free phone number or checking the website above.

- **Olivia Cruises and Resorts**, 4400 Market St., Oakland, CA 94608 (☎ **800/631-6277**; www.oliviacruz.com), caters specifically to lesbians, mostly aboard Holland America's ships.
- **Friends of Dorothy Travel**, 1177 California St., Suite B, San Francisco, CA 94108-2231 (☎ **800/640-4918** or 415/864-1600; 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.
- **Pied Piper Travel**, 330 W. 42nd St., Suite 1804, New York, NY 10036 (☎ **800/874-7312** or 212/239-2412; www.piedpipertravel.com), offers hosted gay cruises that include onboard parties and activities and arranged visits with the gay community at various ports of call.

You can also contact the **International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association**, 52 W. Oakland Park Blvd., no. 237, Wilton Manors, FL 33311 (☎ **800/448-8550**; www.iglt.org), which has more than 1,000 travel industry members. Or check out *Frommer's Gay & Lesbian Europe*.

HONEYMOON CRUISES

Most 1-week cruises depart on either Saturday or Sunday, although there are exceptions. You'll want to look carefully at sailing times as you plan your wedding weekend. You will also want to make sure that the ship offers double, queen-, or king-size beds, and you may want to book a cabin with a tub or Jacuzzi. Rooms with private verandas are particularly romantic. You can take in the sights in privacy, and even enjoy a private meal, assuming the veranda is big enough for a table and chairs (some are not) and that the weather doesn't turn chilly. If you want to dine alone each night, make sure that the dining room offers tables for two and/or that the ship offers room service (your travel agent can fill you in on these matters). You may also want to inquire as to the likelihood that there will be other honeymooners your age on the ship. Some ships—among them those of Princess, Royal Caribbean, Costa, Celebrity, and Holland America—offer add-on honeymoon packages that provide champagne, a fruit basket, and the like. Most lines will offer special perks, such as an invitation to a private honeymooners' cocktail party, if you let them know in advance that you will be celebrating your special event on the ship.

High-end lines, such as Windstar, Radisson Seven Seas, Seabourn, Silversea, Cunard, and Crystal, don't offer special cocktail parties, but their ultradeluxe amenities are especially pleasing to honeymooners. From terry-cloth bathrobes and slippers that await you in walk-in closets to whirlpool bathtubs, five-course dinners served in your cabin, stocked minibars, and high crew-to-passenger ratios (meaning more personalized service), extra-special touches are business as usual on these upscale lines.