

Choosing Your Ideal Cruise

Forget the “overfed, newlywed, nearly dead” stereotype. Today’s cruises are tailored for your tastes, whether you’re a traveling family, a swinging single, a granddad, a wheelchair user, or a swinging, wheelchair-using granddad. You can sail on a floating country club around the Riviera, take a sailing ship among the Greek Isles, do the grand Mediterranean tour aboard a huge megaship, sail the Balkans on a midsize boutique vessel, or go expeditionary on a cruise to the Scandinavian Arctic. Which is for you? That’s

one question we address in this chapter, along with explaining the types of itineraries, types of ships, and types of onboard experiences from which you can choose. When do you want to go? What size ship will make you most comfortable? Do you want to sail with mostly English-speakers or with a more international mix? What special things should you know if you are a family traveler, a honeymooner, or a person with disabilities? In this chapter, we’ll deal with all these nuts-and-bolts questions to get your planning in gear.

1 The European Cruise Season

The European cruise season is generally considered to be **April to November**, although some lines operate into December, and a few (notably Italian lines Costa and MSC Cruises) even sail the Mediterranean year-round. April, early May, and November/December are considered **shoulder season**, when lower fares are usually available. **High season** is the summer months.

If you are considering travel in the shoulder season, keep in mind that some visitor facilities will operate on more limited hours, and some 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 cat without hitting five families from Duluth.

WEATHER

Europe is a continent of distinct seasons, but, just as in North America, 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 Fahrenheit (high teens Celsius), although weather may be warmer in Ireland. August, September, and October tend to be the sunniest months.
- **Scandinavia:** Average temperatures in the south tend to stay in the 70s (low 20s Celsius), with Denmark tending to be the mildest. You may see some rain in the

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, Estonia, and Ukraine 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 it does not necessarily start or end on the same day or in the same month as in the U.S.

fjords, and if you venture above the Arctic Circle you'll feel temperatures in the mid-50s (13°C).

- **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.
- **France:** In Paris, temperatures average in the mid-70s (mid-20s Celsius), while temperatures in the Riviera can be in the high 80s or above (30s Celsius).
- **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, cruises focus on specific regions (and sometimes more than one region), mixing and matching among scores of ports in a part of the world that's been defined by sea travel for well over 2,000 years. Each region offers dozens of different variations, following different routes and taking in different ports.

The range of **home ports** is also more diverse than in other popular cruising regions such as the Caribbean and Alaska. In Europe, cruises can begin and end in dozens of port cities, though Barcelona, Rome, Athens, and Venice are the clear favorites in the Mediterranean, and Copenhagen, Stockholm, and London stand out in northern Europe.

TYPICAL CRUISE ITINERARIES

- **The Grand Tour:** A typically 2-week version of the old Victorian Grand Tour concentrates on the Continent's major cities, providing a great overview for people who've never been to Europe before. Some cruises concentrate on the Mediterranean, Adriatic, and Aegean seas, visiting such cities as Rome, Venice, Naples, and Florence (Italy); Barcelona (Spain); Athens and Mykonos (Greece); Dubrovnik (Croatia); Marseille (France); and Istanbul and Kusadasi (Turkey). Others mix the Mediterranean with ports in the Baltic and along Europe's Atlantic coast—for example, sailing from Rotterdam (Netherlands) to Athens (Greece) by way of Le Havre (France, for access to Paris), Cadiz and Barcelona (Spain), Monte Carlo (Monaco), Rome (Italy), and Kusadasi (Turkey).

- **The Greek Isles/Eastern Mediterranean:** These cruises sail in the Aegean and Mediterranean seas and often the Adriatic as well, with port calls in Athens and the Greek islands (Rhodes, Santorini, Mykonos, and others), Kusadasi and sometimes Istanbul (Turkey), and Dubrovnik or other ports in Croatia.
- **Western Mediterranean:** The area from Barcelona (or Lisbon, on the Atlantic side of the Iberian Peninsula) to Rome. Ships may call at any of the dozens of ports in Spain, France, and Italy.
- **Spain & France:** A more Iberian version of the western Mediterranean cruise may concentrate on ports in Spain (such as Barcelona, Malaga, Cadiz, and the island ports of Ibiza and Palma de Mallorca) and France (typically Marseille), and may also dip down to Morocco, visit Gibraltar, or scoot into the Atlantic for a call in Lisbon (Portugal).
- **The Riviera:** Riviera cruises typically call in St-Tropez, Nice, Cannes, and Villefranche (French Riviera); Monte Carlo (Monaco); and small Italian Riviera ports such as Portofino. Some cruises also include Rome.
- **Scandinavia, the Baltics & Russia:** Cruises in northern Europe sail principally in the Baltic Sea, visiting ports such as Copenhagen (Denmark), Stockholm (Sweden), Helsinki (Finland), Tallinn (Estonia), and St. Petersburg (Russia). Less common stops include Oslo (Norway), Gdansk (Poland), and Hamburg, Warnemunde, or Rostock (Germany). The German ports all offer excursions to Berlin.
- **The British Isles:** Cruises here visit such ports as London, Portsmouth, and the Channel Islands (England); Dublin, Cork/Waterford, and Belfast (Ireland); Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Inverness/Loch Ness (Scotland); and Holyhead (Wales). Some also hop across the English Channel to the French port of Le Havre, for access to Paris and Normandy.
- **The Norwegian Fjords:** Cruises here follow the Norwegian coast from Bergen up to Honningsvåg and the North Cape, sometimes penetrating high into the Arctic.
- **The Black Sea/Middle East:** The area from Athens or Istanbul to Yalta, with port calls in Bulgaria, Romania, and the Ukraine. Some cruises on these routes also visit ports in Egypt and Israel.

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. (See chapter 9.)

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, lasting **3 and 4 nights**, can be found mostly in the Greek Isles and on inland waterways. Hurtigruten also does 5- and 6-day cruises along the Norwegian coast. **One-week** cruises are regularly offered throughout Europe: in the Greek Isles/eastern Mediterranean, the western Mediterranean, the British Isles, the Baltics, Scandinavia, and the Riviera, and on Europe's inland waterways. Even more common are **10- and 12-night** cruises. Cruises of 2 weeks or more are also available.

DAYS IN PORT VS. DAYS AT SEA It's important when comparing itineraries to note the number of days a ship is actually in port. Almost every cruise contains at least 1 or 2 **days at sea**, sometimes for practical reasons (the ship needs time to get to its next destination) and sometimes for relaxation. The ratio of sea days to port days should suit your temperament. If you're looking to pack in as much sightseeing as possible, be sure to book a cruise that emphasizes port days over sea days. If you're looking to relax (or if you think you'll need downtime between ports), opt for one that balances the two.

Some ships **overnight in key ports** such as Venice, Monte Carlo, and Istanbul, giving you time to explore the area by day and enjoy the local nightlife, too. Some small ships may spend most evenings in port.

PRE- & POST-CRUISE 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**, add an escorted land package of 4 to 6 nights or more onto your cruise, with the price of hotels, transportation, tours, and some meals bundled together.

3 Choosing Your Ship

Different cruise lines offer different kinds of experiences, but physical factors such as the size and age of a ship also figure into the kind of trip you'll have. What kind of ship floats your boat?

MEGASHIPS (1,800–3,600 PASSENGERS)

For the past dozen years, the so-called “megaships” have dominated the cruise market, carrying upward 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 15 passenger decks full of shops, restaurants, bars, and lounges, plus a huge range of cabins, from windowless insides to palatial suites. Most have a grand multistory atrium lobby; three or four swimming pools and hot tubs; a large theater and several small nightclubs; a huge spa and gym; an Internet center; a pizzeria and specialty coffee shop; one or more reservations-only restaurants in addition to their main dining rooms; and vast children's areas that often include splash pools, playrooms, computer rooms, and video arcades. Countless activities are offered all day long, including wine tastings, fashion shows, dance lessons, art auctions, aerobics classes, bingo, bridge, lectures, 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 big glitzy showrooms.

But even the megas aren't all alike. **Carnival's** ships (along with **Costa's** newer megaships) are the most theme-park-like, with their over-the-top decor and ambience. **Royal Caribbean's** and **NCL's** megas 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; **Holland America** blends tradition with some bright, modern spaces; **MSC's** new megaships are bright and modern but not too over-the-top; and **Celebrity** is all about chic modernity.

These ships are so large that they're sometimes limited as to where they can go, as some ports lack large enough docking facilities and some waterways are just too shallow or narrow.

MIDSIZE SHIPS (500–1,800 PASSENGERS)

For a while it looked as if midsize vessels were going the way of the dodo, but the past few years have seen a small resurgence in their fortunes. A number of older but still not *old-old* midsize ships continue to soldier on, and a few new midsize vessels are even on the drawing board.

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 and attractions 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 the midsize description, aside from its megasize Vista-class ships. Ditto for the fleets of **Oceania Cruises** and Celebrity subbrand **Azamar Cruises**, plus two of the ships **Princess** has positioned in Europe this year, all of which carry only about 700 passengers apiece, with a country-club-type ambience. Oceania is currently building a new, larger class of vessels, but they're still on the small size, measuring in at 65,000 gross tons and carrying 1,260 passengers. In Europe, the **Costa** and **MSC Cruises** fleets are split between big new megaships and several midsize vessels that carry between 560 and 1,500 passengers. The newest vessels of **Hurtigruten** are in the 670-passenger range, offering more public rooms and better accommodations than the line's older, smaller vessels.

Among the true ultraluxury lines, midsize is about as big as it gets, excluding Cunard's megaliners. **Crystal** and **Regent Seven Seas** both operate ships in the 50,000-ton range, carrying 700 to 940 passengers—a telling figure when you consider that MSC's 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. **Peter Deilmann Cruises'** 22,400-ton, 513-passenger *Deutschland* is not quite as superspacious but is superbeautiful, with an old-world decor that harkens back to the grand liners of the early 20th century.

SMALL SHIPS (100–500 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, as 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 main groups: small luxury ships, sailing ships, expedition ships, and river ships.

The **small luxury ships** of high-end lines such as **Seabourn**, **Silversea**, and **SeaDream** offer a refined, ultraelegant ambience. Cabins are spacious, service is gracious, gourmet meals are served on fine china, and guests dress to impress. These ships offer few activities besides watersports, putting more emphasis on quiet relaxation. Itineraries

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 been striking ships for the past several years. More common than the common cold, the virus causes vomiting, stomach cramps, diarrhea, and general nausea for a few days, and is brought on 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. Outbreaks are relatively rare but make for really bad media, so 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-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 shore-side 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 shore-side 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.

tend to be split between Europe's great cities and smaller ports that aren't congested with passengers from the big megaships.

Sailing ships, obviously, have sails, but (sorry to spoil the romance) the ones in this book also have engines, which are a necessity if they're going to keep to their scheduled itineraries—not to mention keep the lights on. **Star Clippers** and **Sea Cloud Cruises** both operate truly extraordinary vessels based on classic sailing ship designs (except for Sea Cloud's namesake *Sea Cloud*, which actually is a classic sailing ship, built in the early 1930s). The three **Windstar Cruises** ships are much more of a hybrid: huge by sailing ship standards (though tiny compared to megaships), with sails that are furled and unfurled by computer control.

Expedition ships are represented in this book by Lindblad and Hurtigruten. **Lindblad Expeditions'** *National Geographic Endeavour* is one of the most expeditionary vessels in the world, with itineraries that range from pole to pole, taking in Scandinavia and western Europe along the way. Lindblad also operates the tiny river ship *Lord of the Glens* in Scotland and sometimes charts Sea Cloud's *Sea Cloud II* for the Mediterranean. **Hurtigruten** is mostly about exploring Norway's long, fjord-pocked coast, all the way up to the Arctic. The bulk of its fleet is made up of ships carrying fewer than 500 passengers. Its newest vessel, the 12,700-ton, 318-passenger *Fram*, is the only ship ever designed specifically to sail Arctic Greenland.

Two small and smallish ships in Europe fit none of these categories—no surprise, as they're operated by **easyCruise**, a newish company that offers ultraflexible and casual itineraries in the Riviera and Greek Isles, aboard vessels that carry about 232 and 500 passengers apiece.

OLD SHIP OR NEW?

Ship age is a funny thing. For some people, the older the better: Age implies classic nautical lines, old-time luxury, and a smaller, more human-scaled feel. On the other hand, it's a fact that ships age about as fast as dogs: Get up around age 15 and they start to look a little long in the tooth, not to mention being increasingly expensive for cruise lines to maintain.

Of the world's five major cruise regions (the Caribbean, Europe, Alaska, the Mexican Riviera, and Hawaii, in that order), Europe is the place where you're most likely to find older ships still chugging happily along. And doesn't that make sense? After all, when you're visiting cities that have stood for millennia or more, it seems pretty silly to quibble about a few years of ship age.

Among the ships reviewed in these pages, only **Costa** and **MSC Cruises** maintain older ships as significant chunks of their fleets, all left over from the days before both lines began building their new megaship fleets. Today these ships are mostly marketed to European passengers.

4 Cruises for Families

European cruises have become increasingly popular with families, for a variety of reasons: They're easy (or at least as easy as traveling with kids ever is), safe, fun, and educational for the kids, 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.

The megaships cater most to families and attract the largest numbers of them, offering playrooms, video arcades, and complimentary **supervised activities** for children ages 2 or 3 to 17, broken down into several age categories. Some lines set a minimum age for children to sail aboard (usually 6–12 months), and young children must usually be potty trained to participate in group activities.

Royal Caribbean, **Carnival**, **Norwegian**, **Princess**, and **Celebrity** offer the most family-friendly ships in the European market for 2008–2009, but even lines traditionally geared to older folks are getting in on the kid craze. Holland America has renovated all of its ships' kids' facilities over the past few years, and the kids' facilities and programs on Cunard's **QM2** are one of the best-kept kid secrets at sea.

See the section "Best Cruises for Families with Kids," on p. 7, for more info.

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.
- **Bring baby food and diapers.** If your infant is still on jar food, you'll have to bring your own. You can store milk and snacks in your cabin's minifridges/minibar, which comes standard on most new ships. (Ships more than 5 or 10 years old may offer them only in suites.) If yours is pre-stocked with beer and peanuts, you can ask your steward to clear it out.
- **Keep a tote with you on embarkation day.** Fill it with diapers, baby food, a change of clothes, bathing suits, and 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.

BABYSITTING After the complimentary daylong roster of supervised activities wraps up somewhere between about 7 and 10pm, most mainstream lines offer slumber-party-style **group babysitting** in the playroom. Services are usually from about 10pm until about 1 to 3am and are for ages 3 to 12, costing about \$4 to \$6 per hour per child. Some lines do accommodate younger kids, with toys, cribs, and nap areas geared to infants and toddlers: Carnival, for instance, includes kids as young as 4 months. The counselors will even change diapers. **Private in-cabin babysitting** by a crewmember is also offered by Celebrity, MSC, Royal Caribbean, and most high-end lines at a steeper \$8 to \$10 per hour (and sometimes a few bucks more for additional siblings). Using a private babysitter every night isn't cheap, but Heidi's gone this route when her boys were babies, and she swears by it—how else to dine and have a cocktail or two in peace after a long kid-centric day? Try to get them tucked in and asleep before the sitter arrives so they won't have to deal with a new face just before bedtime.

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

On the low end, a family of four can share a cabin that has bunk-style third and fourth berths, which fold out of the walls just above the regular beds. A few lines, such as Carnival and NCL, will even accommodate a fifth person on a rollaway bed on certain ships, if space permits, and a **baby crib** can be brought in if requested in advance. There's no two ways about it, though: 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 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 run about \$100–\$200 per person). **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.

Families who can afford it should **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.

If you have older kids, it may be cheaper to book **connecting cabins**—two separate standard cabins with interconnecting doors. 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.

The handful of **sailing ships** and small **expedition ships** covered in this book tend not to cater to kids.

5 Cruises for Solo Travelers

Cruising solo has its upsides and its downsides. On the up, you needn't worry about dining alone (as you'll be seated with other guests), touring alone (you can take group shore excursions), and having people to talk to aboard ship (as things are pretty congenial, with onboard activities to encourage mixing). Your 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**, which means solo travelers pay from 110% to an outrageous 200% of the per-person, double-occupancy fare. As cruise lines sometimes reduce their single supplements to help fill up underselling cruises, ask your travel agent to keep an eye out for deals as they come up. If you're sociable, you could also sail with Holland America, which is currently the only line still offering a **cabin-share service**, in which they pair you with another single so you can pay the usual double-occupancy 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.

To increase your chances of meeting other singles, you can book an escorted group tour for singles through **Vacations To Go** (☎ 800/419-5179; www.singlecruise.com), which offers a cabin-share program as well as onboard singles cocktail parties and

mixers, games, group excursions, and “single-mingle” dining. Pre-cruise, you can even log on to their singles chat site to get to know the people you’ll be cruising with. Singles in these groups tend to be in their 30s to 50s.

6 Cruises for Honeymooners & Anniversary Couples

Practically all cruises have what it takes to make your honeymoon or anniversary memorable: moonlight and stars, the undulating sea all around, dimly lit restaurants, and the pure romance of travel. Of course, different ships are romantic to different kinds of people. The megaships offer a big, flashy experience, 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. The sailing ships are like . . . sailing ships—and what’s more romantic than that? Beyond the ships themselves are the ports of call, offering experiences that are variously exotic, charming, exciting, and sybaritic.

HONEYMOON & ANNIVERSARY PACKAGES

“Honeymoon” and “cruises” go together like “weddings” and “Vegas,” and cruise lines offer a variety of incentives to help keep it that way. Some lines offer **honeymooner freebies** such as a special cake in the dining room one night, or an invitation to a private cocktail party to which couples celebrating anniversaries are also invited. 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 mainstream 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.

The ultraluxe lines (Silversea, Seabourn, Regent Seven Seas, SeaDream, and Crystal) are less involved in these kinds of promotions, but that’s because free champagne and canapés, en suite whirlpool tubs, and five-course dinners served in your cabin are all a matter of course on these lines.

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 \$149 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

Getting Married On Board or in Port

Shipboard and destination weddings are more difficult to arrange in Europe than they are in the Caribbean and other Western Hemisphere areas, due to typically long residency requirements. Italy, Greece, and Malta have less stringent requirements, and therefore tend to be the most popular sites for legal destination weddings. Many lines also offer symbolic ceremonies in countries such as Spain, France, and the UK, meaning you get all the hoopla of a wedding but no actual legal certificate. For that, you have to pay a visit to your justice of the peace when you get home. Packages tend to start around \$2,500 for onboard ceremonies and around \$3,500 for destination weddings, plus a license fee of around \$500.

Practically all the mainstream lines offer wedding packages, but **Princess Cruises** has the edge in Europe because it's currently the only line where the captain himself does the onboard honors. Ceremonies take place in the wedding chapels on many of the line's megaships, with assistant pursers in dress-blue uniforms available to escort the bride down a short aisle. Three different ceremony packages are offered, starting at \$1,800 per couple (plus \$450 for licensing fees). Depending on which you choose, they can 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. There's often a waiting list for Princess's onboard weddings, so don't wait till the last minute if you're considering this option.

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 petits 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.

7 Cruises for Gays & Lesbians

A number of specialized travel agencies offer cruises for gays 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-charter cruises 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 special 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), 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), offers many full-gay charters and hosted tours with lines such as Celebrity, NCL, Cunard, and the ultraluxe SeaDream Yachts, as well as small European river ships.
- **Olivia Cruises and Resorts**, 434 Brannan St., San Francisco, CA 94107 (☎ **800/631-6277** or 415/962-5700; www.olivia.com), offers full-ship charters targeted specifically at the lesbian community; guest performers in recent years have included k. d. lang, the Indigo Girls, Wynonna Judd, Shawn Colvin, and Melissa Etheridge. In Europe, the company also offers cruises on small river vessels.
- **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 various onboard parties and activities, and arranged visits with the gay community at the various ports of call.
- **RSVP Vacations**, 2535 25th Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55406 (☎ **800/328-7787** or 612/729-1113; www.rsvpvacations.com), offers full-ship charters on lines such as Holland America, Star Clippers, and river cruise line Uniworld. All sailings are targeted to both gays and lesbians, and bring aboard their own guest performers. RSVP works through more than 10,000 different travel agencies; locate one by calling the 800 number or checking the website above.

8 Cruises for People with Health Issues & Disabilities

Most cruise ships built in the past 15 years were designed 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 above 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 extrawide 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. 64 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 small ships, sailing ships, and river ships reviewed in chapters 8 and 9, only easyCruise’s *easyCruiseOne* is even moderately wheelchair friendly.

Most newer vessels have ramps to allow access to all levels of the public rooms, 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 that may rise as high as 6 to 8 inches (and were originally created to contain water). Those that do may be able to install temporary ramps to accommodate wheelchair users. This must be arranged in advance.

ELEVATORS Most shipboard elevators (particularly aboard today’s megaships) are wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs, but make sure before booking. 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. The vast majority of small vessels and sailing ships do not have elevators.

TENDERING INTO PORT If your ship is too large for a particular port's dock, or if a port's docks are reserved for 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 choppiness of the water can be a factor when boarding either way. 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 visiting these ports. An exception to this is **Holland America**, which has a wheelchair-to-tender transport system aboard all of its 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.

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.