

Introduction: Cruising to the Ports of Call

Though today's cruise ships are sailing to more and more places, the Caribbean is still number one, the destination most of us imagine when we think "cruise." Picture pulling up in your big white ship to a patch of sand-and-palm-tree paradise, a steel band playing as you stroll down the gangway in shorts and flip-flops. Throughout the region you're guaranteed nearly constant sunshine, plenty of beaches, and relaxation, but you're also likely to find rich culture and (depending on the island) Mayan ruins, European colonial architecture, lush rainforests, winding mountain roads, beautiful tropical flowers and marine life, and opportunities to be as active or laid-back as you want to be. And it's all so easy: Between the major Florida home ports (Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Cape Canaveral, and Tampa), the big new "alternative" home ports (New York, New Jersey, and Galveston), and a handful of others (Charleston, Jacksonville, Mobile, and New Orleans), anyone in the northeastern and southeastern U.S. can easily drive to their ship, if they want to. Once there, it's all smooth sailing.

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

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

Though they're all appealing in some way, the Caribbean islands are not all created equal. Some are better for shopping, others for beaches or scenic drives. Some are quite built up, whereas others are hardly developed at all. Some have piers that can accommodate several megaships at one time; others require that ships anchor up to a mile offshore and shuttle passengers back and forth in small, motorized launches called "tenders." Big ships tend to visit the more commercialized, developed islands, while small ships are able to access the less-developed, off-the-beaten-path islands. Typically, cruise lines divide Caribbean itineraries into eastern, western, and southern

The Gulf of Mexico & the Caribbean



ATLANTIC OCEAN



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 so they can just 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—spend up to 3 days at sea on 7-night itineraries, and 4 on 8-night itineraries. 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.

routings, but as ships become faster and able to sail greater distances between ports, more and more of those lines are blurring.

MEGASHIP ITINERARIES

EASTERN CARIBBEAN Eastern Caribbean itineraries typically sail out of Florida and from the alternate home ports up the Eastern Seaboard, and may include visits to San Juan (Puerto Rico), the U.S. Virgin Islands (particularly St. Thomas), St. Martin, and Nassau or Freeport in the Bahamas—all very popular and busy ports of call, especially St. Thomas, Nassau, and San Juan. Grand Turk, located just east of the Bahamas, is also showing up on some of these sailings.

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

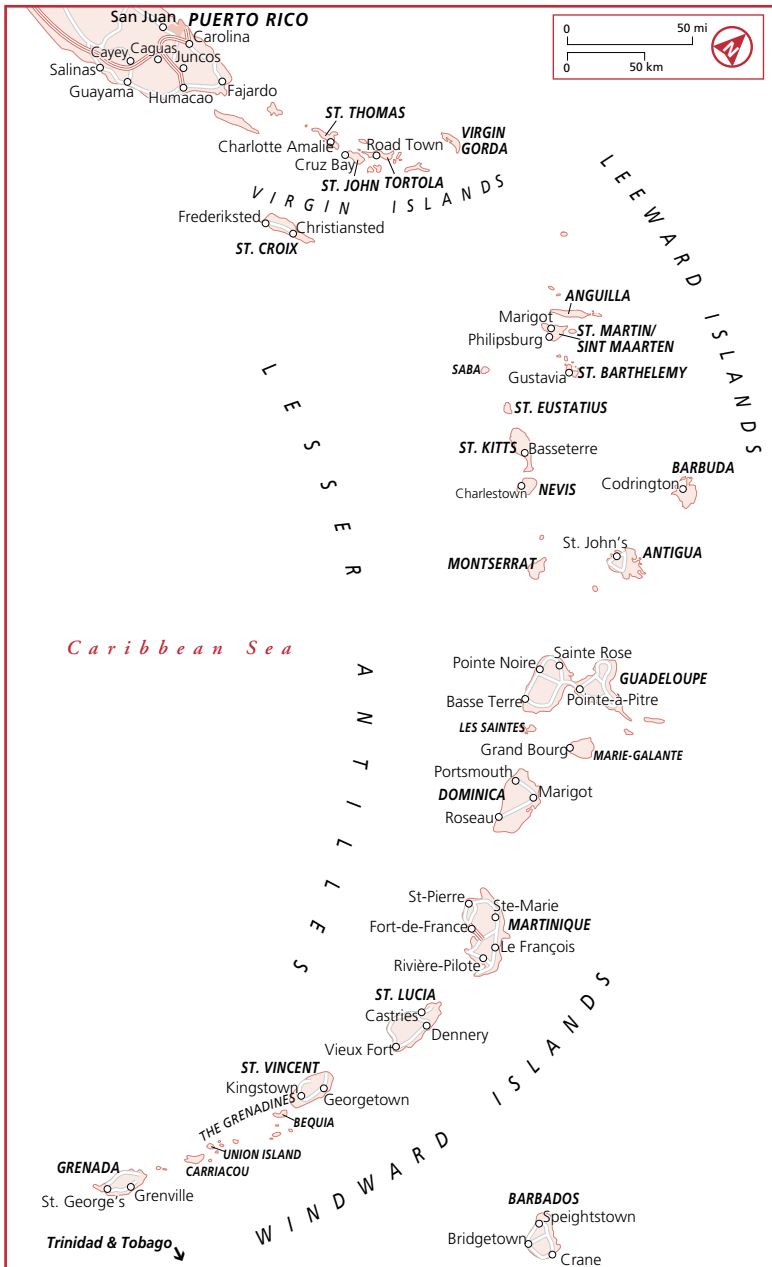
SOUTHERN CARIBBEAN Southern itineraries typically sail round-trip out of San Juan or sometimes out of Aruba or Barbados. They often overlap with eastern Caribbean itineraries and may visit St. Thomas, St. Martin, St. Lucia, Martinique, Antigua, and maybe Dominica, Guadeloupe, Aruba, and Grenada or one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

SMALL-SHIP ITINERARIES

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

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

The Eastern Caribbean



SOUTHERN CARIBBEAN Southern Caribbean cruises may visit Guadeloupe, Dominica, Les Saintes, St. Kitts, Nevis, Martinique, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada, and Bequia, and maybe the truly unspoiled and remote Palm, Canouan, Mayreau, and Carriacou islands.

SHORTER ITINERARIES

Short and affordable **2- and 3-night cruises** offer a more action-packed, nonstop party ambience than longer 7-night Caribbean itineraries. It's obvious why: These are weekend cruises, departing on Thursday or Friday afternoon, so people are ready to squeeze in as much fun, relaxation, drinking, gambling, dancing, and eating as possible before going back to work on Monday. Though you'll definitely find more 20- and 30-somethings on these shorties than on any other type of cruise, you'll still see a wide range of ages. Aside from the fun factor, short cruises are a great way for first-time cruisers to test the waters (so to speak) before committing to a full week (though, the more party-oriented vibe of a short cruise is not an accurate representation of a longer 7-nights-plus itinerary). They're also a good idea if you're short on time or moola.

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

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

MATCHING YOUR HABITS TO YOUR ITINERARY

Some ports are better for certain things than others. Here's a short rundown; see p. 104 for a comparison chart that rates shore excursions, activities, beaches, shopping, and dining for all the Caribbean ports. The island reviews in chapter 5, "Ports of Call," provide detailed information.

PORTS FOR SHOPPERS

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

PORTS FOR BEACH LOVERS

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

PORTS FOR SCUBA DIVERS & SNORKELERS

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

PORTS FOR HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY ENTHUSIASTS

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

PORTS FOR NATURE BUFFS

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

PORTS FOR FRANCOPHILES

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

SHORE EXCURSIONS: THE WHAT, WHY & HOW

Sometimes a port's real attractions may be miles (occasionally, a lot of miles) from where your ship is docked. In such cases, your options are hopping in a taxi (which may or may not be a jalopy) to head for a beach or do some touring on your own. Whether or not the taxi has seat belts and air-conditioning is a crapshoot. So, for the less adventurous out there, or for the novice cruiser/voyager, trying to go off on your own could be an inefficient use of your time, entailing lots of hassles and stress, and possibly costing more. This is when the **shore excursions** offered by the cruise lines can be a good way to go. If you are a seasoned traveler, on a tight budget, or want a more low-key experience where you can get to know the locals, then you might want to forego the shore excursions.

Shore excursions run the gamut, from snoresville bus tours and catamaran booze cruises to more stimulating options like snorkeling and rainforest walks. For those who like a little sweat in their port visit, there are more physically challenging options than ever, such as kayaking, horseback riding, mountain biking, zip lining, and river rafting. Most islands offer at least 10 to 20 different excursions, all of them operated not by the cruise line, but by land-based tour companies with which the cruise lines contract. When you receive your cruise documents and/or confirmation numbers (or, at the latest, when you board ship), you'll get a listing of the excursions offered for your itinerary. To get a jump on things, you can also glance at the shore-excursion lists on most cruise lines' websites, many of which also allow you to prebook or prereserve excursions. It's a good option if you have your heart set on a particular one, since some popular choices fill up fast.

In chapter 5, "Ports of Call," we discuss shore excursions in more depth, providing information on the best excursions and noting when you may want to skip the excursions entirely and set out on your own.

2 When to Go

The greatest number of ships sail the Caribbean from late November to mid-April, though many ships take advantage of the year-round good weather and just stay here full-time. The only trouble in paradise is **hurricane season**, which officially runs June 1 to November 30 but rarely causes cruisers any problems bigger than a few days of rain and a bit of rocking and rolling. We've taken many cruises in the Caribbean during this period and have only occasionally run into stormy weather; it's rare, but it's a risk you take. The big hurricanes of 2005, which did so much damage to New Orleans, Cozumel, and other areas, made several affected ships merely reroute around the storms; others had to alter their post-storm itineraries while islands rebuilt their infrastructure. The chance of actually getting caught in the perfect storm is next to nil, as modern communications (and generally speedy vessels) allow captains to change course and pilot their ships out of danger as soon as they get word of a storm.

Defining seasons as "low" and "high" is hardly a science, but it's generally accepted that **high season** in the Caribbean is mid-December to mid-April. During this time, weather will most likely be perfect, the islands and ships will be packed, and the prices will be higher. The **holiday weeks** of Christmas, New Year's Day, Presidents' Day, and Easter are the absolute busiest and most expensive periods, especially on the

family-oriented megaships—these are often the few times in the year when the cruise lines' brochure rates are not discounted.

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

September, October, and early November are considered **low season** (often referred to as "value season") and are the times when you'll encounter the fewest crowds onshore and on board, as well as some of the lowest rates. Sometimes there will be a lull during the first 2 weeks of January, just after the rush of the holidays, and sometimes in late April and May, so look for good prices then as well.

The **Panama Canal cruise season** generally parallels the Caribbean high season, with most cruises departing between November and April. Some ships offer only two Panama Canal cruises annually, when repositioning between their summer season in Alaska and their fall/winter season in the Caribbean. These days, many cruise lines include **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.