

Choosing Your Ideal Cruise

The common wisdom says that all cruises are the same: big, flashy ships carrying old, overfed passengers to touristy ports, then setting them free to shop. Like all clichés, this one has a grain (or maybe a boulder) of truth, but it's hardly the whole story. For that reason, we prefer to call what we write about “travel by ship” rather than “cruising”—a more comprehensive description for a travel segment that gets increasingly diverse every year. Sure, you can still do the standard Caribbean cruise on a big white megaship, but consider this: From a variety of U.S. ports, you can also sail a small ship to visit the reefs and indigenous cultures of Central America; take a floating boutique hotel to little yachting islands; bop around Hawaii in the first new U.S.-flagged cruise ship in generations; take an expedition from Alaska to Siberia; take the *Queen Mary 2* across the pond to England; or sail a century-old schooner off the Maine coast. You can also choose a cruise geared to activities like kayaking and hiking, or interests such as fine food and wine, photography, culture or history, and other specialized themes. In this chapter, we'll introduce you to the lot of 'em.

1 Homeland Cruise Regions in Brief

Whether because of convenience or an aversion to flying (that is, the cost of flying or the fear of it), the idea of cruising from a port within driving distance holds a lot of appeal for a lot of folks. And anytime a lot of folks want to do something, you can be sure the cruise lines will be right there, ready to hand them an umbrella drink. Today, you can cruise to the Caribbean from close-in ports like Miami or more distant ones like New York, New Orleans, Houston, Norfolk, and others. You can visit Bermuda on ships that depart from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Alaska, western Mexico, and Hawaii are now accessible from half a dozen embarkation ports along the U.S. and Canadian West Coast. With all of these choices, there's a good chance you can drive right up to the gangway. In this section, we'll introduce all the regions (detailed in chapters 10 through 16) to which you can cruise from 19 U.S. and Canadian home ports. (We discuss each North American home port in chapter 9.)

THE CARIBBEAN/THE BAHAMAS/CENTRAL AMERICA

When most of us think of a cruise, we think of the islands. We imagine pulling up in our big white ship to a patch of sand and palm-tree paradise, a steel band serenading us as we stroll down the gangway in our shorts and flip-flops and step into the warm sun. The good news is that this image is a pretty accurate depiction of many islands in the Caribbean and The Bahamas (a group of islands that lie outside the Caribbean basin), as well as some coastal ports in Mexico and Central America. Sure, some are jampacked with cruise ship passengers, and many are pretty weak in the palm-tree

department; however, you're guaranteed nearly **constant sunshine** and plenty of beaches. On some you'll find lush rainforests, volcanic peaks, Mayan ruins, winding mountain roads, and beautiful tropical flowers. And all of them have **great beaches** and that laid-back, don't-hurry-me seaside pace.

Most Caribbean cruises are a week long, though you'll also find sailings as short as 5 nights and as long as 14 nights. Cruises to The Bahamas are usually 3 or 4 nights, though many Caribbean routes also include a stop in Nassau or one of the cruise lines' **private Bahamian islands**. On Caribbean cruises, itineraries usually stick to one region, either **eastern** (typically calling on some combination of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, St. Martin, and The Bahamas), **western** (usually Grand Cayman, Jamaica, Key West, Cozumel or one of the other Mexican ports, and sometimes ports in Belize or Honduras), or **southern** (less defined, but often departing from San Juan and including Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Barbados, St. Lucia, Antigua, and/or Grenada). Small-ship cruises frequently visit the less developed islands, mostly in the eastern and southern Caribbean, including the beautiful British Virgin Islands and ports such as St. Barts, Dominica, Nevis, and the tiny islands of the Grenadines. **Season:** Year-round, with the greatest number of ships cruising here between October and April.

THE PANAMA CANAL

Imagine the particularly 19th-century kind of hubris it took to say, "Let's dig a huge canal all the way across a country, linking two oceans." Imagine, too, the thousands of workers who pulled it off. That's on the minds of many people today as they sail through the Panama Canal, one of the greatest engineering achievements of all time. Many ships offer only two Panama Canal cruises annually, when repositioning between their summer season in Alaska and the fall/winter season in the Caribbean. However, many cruise lines also include **partial Canal crossings** as part of extended western Caribbean itineraries from Florida, sailing through the Canal's locks west-bound to Gatun Lake, docking for a day of excursions that explore the Canal's history and Central America's rich culture, and then sailing back out in the evening. Others do **full crossings**, generally sailing between Miami or Fort Lauderdale and a port in California or the Mexican Riviera. The big draw of both full and partial crossings is the pure kick of sailing through the Canal, whose walls pinch today's megaships so tightly that there may be only a few feet of clearance on either side. The Canal's width and the length of its locks are so much on shipbuilders' minds that they coined the term *panamax* to describe the largest ships that are able to transit its length. Those measurements will soon be changing, though, because in September 2007 Panama began digging a new, 60% wider channel to parallel the existing canal along its narrowest sections, thus allowing transit by larger ships. The larger channel is scheduled to be completed sometime around 2014. **Season:** Roughly November through April.

ALASKA & BRITISH COLUMBIA

Alaska is America's frontier, a land of mountains, forests, and tundra just remote enough and harsh enough that it remains mythic, even if some of its "frontier" towns have been infiltrated by Starbucks. The main draws here are all things grand: huge glaciers flowing down from the mountains, enormous humpback whales leaping from the sea, eagles soaring overhead, and forests that seem to go on forever. Alaska Native culture figures in too, with the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian tribes all holding a considerable place in everyday life, from the arts to the business world. Most cruises concentrate on the **Southeast Alaska panhandle** (the ancestral home of those three

tribes), which stretches from Ketchikan in the south to Yakutat in the north, with British Columbia to the east and the vast reaches of interior Alaska and Canada's Yukon Territory to the north. Typical cruises sail either round-trip from Seattle or the nearby Canadian port of Vancouver, or north- or southbound between Vancouver and one of Anchorage's two main port towns, Seward and Whittier. Both options concentrate on ports and natural areas along the Southeast's **Inside Passage**, the intricate web of waterways that link the region's thousands of forested islands. Highlights of most itineraries include glaciers (those in famous Glacier Bay or several others), the old prospector town of Skagway, state capital Juneau, and boardwalked Ketchikan in the south. Cruises between Vancouver and Anchorage may also visit natural areas along the **Gulf of Alaska**, such as College Fjord and Hubbard Glacier. Small-ship cruises frequently visit much smaller towns and wilderness areas on the Inside Passage. Some avoid civilization almost entirely, and a few particularly expeditionary (and expensive) cruises sail far west and north, past the Aleutian Islands and across the Bering Sea to the Russian Far East. **Season:** Roughly mid-May through mid-September, although some smaller ships start up in late April.

THE MEXICAN RIVIERA & BAJA

The so-called Mexican Riviera is the West Coast's version of the Caribbean: a string of sunny ports within proximate sailing distance of San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. The first stop geographically is **Cabo San Lucas**, a party-oriented town at the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula, with the Pacific Ocean on one side and the Sea of Cortés on the other. Think beaches, beer, and bikinis, with thatched palapa bars providing some regional character. From there, cruises head southeast to such ports as **Puerto Vallarta**, **Mazatlán**, **Acapulco**, **Ixtapa**, and **Manzanillo**, a stretch famed for white-sand beaches, watersports, deep-sea fishing, and golf, with some history thrown in for good measure. Hernán Cortés blew through the region in the 1520s looking for treasure, and in the 1950s and 1960s, Hollywood did the same, mining the area both for locations and off-camera relaxation. Small-ship lines tend to stick to **Baja and the Sea of Cortés**, concentrating on the peninsula's small towns, natural areas, and remarkable whale-watching. These cruises typically sail from Cabo or the state capital, La Paz. **Season:** The heaviest traffic is October through April, though some ships sail year-round—especially short 3- and 4-night cruises that stop in Cabo or Ensenada, just south of the U.S./Mexico border. Small ships typically cruise Baja in the winter months only.

BERMUDA

Perhaps the one place in the world where you'll have a chance to see hundreds of British men's knees, Bermuda is a beautiful island chain known for its powdery pink-sand beaches (created by pulverized shells and coral over the eons), golf courses, and its sane and friendly manner. The locals really do wear brightly colored Bermuda shorts with jackets, ties, and knee-highs, but don't feel obligated to join them. The largest ships dock in the west end at the **Royal Naval Dockyard**, while some smaller vessels call at **Hamilton** (the capital city) and **St. George's** (Bermuda's quaint former capital). Ships pull alongside piers at all three places, and it only takes minutes to walk into town. There's plenty to do, too, from shopping in Hamilton for English wool and Irish linens to checking out the many historical sites, which range from the 300-year-old St. Peter's Church to the impressive nautical exhibits at the Dockyard's Maritime Museum. Most people, though, head for Bermuda's many dreamy beaches, which

are easily accessible by bus, taxi, or rented motor scooter. To keep things from getting too chaotic, Bermuda limits the number of ships allowed to call there, so there are generally just six ships operating 7-night cruises from New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and occasionally Norfolk. **Season:** Late April through early October.

HAWAII

If a place can simultaneously be the number-one honeymoon destination in America and one of the few places to which the Brady Bunch schlepped Alice and the kids, it must have something going for it, right? Think gorgeousness, with an almost embarrassing richness of stunning beaches, hula girls, and hunky Polynesian men, plus perfect weather almost all the time, so both locals and visitors stay in a friendly, mellow mood. Learn to surf, go to a luau, snooze on the sand, enjoy the local coffee, or check out the native Hawaiian culture, of which the locals are fiercely proud. The past survives alongside the modern world in a vibrant arts scene, from traditional Polynesian dance and music to painting, sculpture, and crafts. Each island is different, whether it has a fuming volcano or lush jungles and tropical flowers, though crashing surf and serene beaches are everywhere.

Though its presence has lessened over the past 2 years, **Norwegian Cruise Line** still dominates the Hawaii cruise market, with year-round inter-island service aboard *Pride of America*. Other lines typically visit the islands in April, May, September, and October, on their way between seasons in Alaska and the Caribbean. The four main port calls are to **Oahu**, with its famous Waikiki beach; **Maui**, home of historic Lahaina town; the **Big Island**, where the state's famous volcanoes reside (including Mauna Kea and the still-active Kilauea); and **Kauai**, the most natural and undeveloped of the four. **Season:** Year-round.

NEW ENGLAND & EASTERN CANADA

Lobster pots, whales, Victorian mansions, lighthouses on windswept bluffs—where else but New England, right? And what a place to visit by boat: In sailing-ship days, New England was the undisputed capital of U.S. shipbuilding, and the nearby Canadian provinces are known as the Maritimes. This is a seriously coastal place.

Both America and Canada were born in these parts, so you'll be in for lots of **historical sites** along the way, from Boston's Paul Revere House to Halifax, which received (and in many cases buried) victims of the *Titanic* disaster in 1912. Itineraries may include passing through **Nantucket Sound**, around **Cape Cod**, and into the **Bay of Fundy** or **Gulf of St. Lawrence**. Some ships traverse the St. Lawrence Seaway or the smaller Saguenay River. Big 2,000-passenger-plus ships cruise here, as well as much smaller vessels carrying 100 passengers or less. Most sail to or from New York, Boston, and Montréal. **Season:** The classic time to cruise here is in autumn (Sept–Oct), when a brilliant sea of **fall foliage** blankets the region. As the route becomes more and more popular, though, cruise lines are also scheduling 4- to 12-night trips in spring and summer.

U.S. RIVER CRUISES

So who needs the ocean? If your interests run toward history, nature, and U.S. regional culture, a river cruise is a fantastic option. River cruises generally operate seasonally, following Lewis and Clark down the Pacific Northwest's **Columbia and Snake rivers**, or following the fall foliage up the **Hudson River** and **Erie Canal**. At press time, those routes comprise the main river sailings offered in the U.S., following the demise of

Majestic America Line and RiverBarge Excursions and with them all regularly scheduled overnight sailings on the **Mississippi River**. Similarly, no lines are currently offering cruises in the **California wine country**, though we'd bet some will in the near future. **Season:** Columbia/Snake and Hudson/Erie Canal cruises usually run September to November.

2 Itineraries: The Long & the Short of It

Once you've decided where you want to go, you have to examine the available itineraries. Do you just want to get away for a few days or a few weeks? Do you want an itinerary that assigns a different stop to each day, or are you looking forward to just relaxing on the ship? And, if you're flying or driving a long way to the cruise's home port, do you want to spend a few days seeing that part of the country before or after your cruise? Options are what you have; choices are what you need to make.

LONG CRUISE OR SHORT?

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

On the one hand, shorter cruises make sense if you're not sure you'll like the cruise experience. On the other hand, they also tend to be the rowdiest cruises, geared to people who want to pack as much partying into as short a time as possible. This is especially true of the 3-night weekend cruises offered by Carnival and Royal Caribbean. Also, be aware that cruise lines tend to put their oldest, most well-worn ships on short-cruise schedules, saving their new ships for their bread-and-butter weeklong itineraries.

Longer cruises, ranging from **9, 10, and 12 nights** to multiweek voyages, provide the chance to really get away and settle into the community aboard your ship. Longer cruises tend to be relaxed and steady, and are popular with older folks who have the time and money to travel. You'll find longer sailings in Alaska, the Caribbean, New England/Canada, and the Panama Canal, and also many long **repositioning cruises** when ships leave one cruise region and sail to another (for instance, heading from Alaska to the Caribbean in stages). These are often deeply discounted and sometimes visit unusual ports, but they also tend to spend more days at sea than they do in port—a plus or a minus, depending on your perspective.

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 spend 1 or 2 days at sea—either because they have to sail a long way between ports, or just to give passengers a chance to rest (and spend some money on board while they're at it). Many cruises these days—especially ones that sail from more northerly home ports to Caribbean destinations—are spending up to 3 days at sea on a 7-night itinerary and 4 days on an 8-night itinerary. That's not a bad thing if your main vacation goal is to

decompress, but if your goal is to see a lot of different ports, this is not an ideal situation. Ditto if you think you'll get that "are we there yet?" feeling between ports.

CRUISE TOURS & ADD-ONS

Cruise lines offer various options for extending your vacation on land, either before or after your cruise. These range from simple 1- and 2-night add-on **hotel packages** to longer resort stays and full-blown land tours of a week or longer. The latter, known as **cruisetours**, are offered mostly in Alaska, where Holland America, Princess, Royal Caribbean, and Celebrity all have elaborate hotel and transportation infrastructure. Many parts of inland Alaska can be accessed this way, including Denali National Park, Fairbanks, Wrangell–St. Elias National Park, and the Kenai Peninsula. If you're so inclined, you can even go all the way to the oil fields of the North Slope of Prudhoe Bay, hundreds of miles north of the Arctic Circle. Many tours also head east into Canada, spending time in the starkly beautiful Yukon Territory or heading to Banff, Lake Louise, and Jasper National Park in the Canadian Rockies.

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

3 Different Boats for Different Folks

Different cruise lines present different kinds of experiences, but physical factors such as the size and age of the ship also play a part when choosing your ideal cruise. 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 market, carrying upward of 1,800 passengers and offering an onboard experience any big-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, squeeze, or friend(s), you may roam the decks for hours looking for them. (Luckily, most megaships are wired for cellphone service now, so you can call your travel companion if you can't find him or her.) The megas have as many as 15 passenger decks full of restaurants, bars, lounges, and shops, plus cabins of all shapes and sizes. Most have a grand atrium lobby, three or four swimming pools and hot tubs, theaters, a pizzeria, a specialty coffee shop, and one or more reservations-only restaurants. Mammoth gyms and spas boast dozens of exercise machines and treatment rooms, and vast children's areas include splash pools, playrooms, computer rooms, and video arcades. Activities go on 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 that put on big glitzy shows.

But even the megas aren't all alike. **Carnival's** and **Costa's** ships are the most theme-park-like, with their over-the-top decor and ambience. **NCL's** are probably the most whimsical, with an overall design sense tuned to "fun," and a dollop of elegance in some rooms. **Royal Caribbean's** megas blend 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** and **Disney** blend tradition with some bright, modern spaces; and **Celebrity** is all about chic modernity.

As a general rule, these ships are so large that they're limited as to where they can go. Ships in the 100,000-ton range are currently too big to fit through the Panama Canal, and so operate from the same coast year-round—West Coast ships doing Mexico itineraries in winter and Alaska in summer, say; East Coast ships either staying in the Caribbean year-round or spending the summers sailing in Europe or New England/Canada. (Note that this may change in 2014, when the Canal's planned expansion is complete.) Some ports also lack docking facilities to accommodate these huge ships, meaning you either won't visit them at all or you'll have to be tendered ashore in shuttle boats.

SUPERMEGASHIPS (3,600–5,400 PASSENGERS)

As if megaships weren't big enough, in the past few years cruise lines have been introducing vessels so large that they need their own supersized category. The trend sort of began with the introduction of *Queen Mary 2* in 2004, though that enormous vessel—at 150,000 gross tons and 1,132 feet in length—actually carries "only" 2,592 passengers, double occupancy (about the same number Carnival crams into vessels only two-thirds her size). The real monsters first hit the seas in 2006, when Royal Caribbean introduced the 160,000-ton, 3,634-passenger *Freedom of the Seas* (and later, sister ships *Liberty* and *Independence*). In *Freedom's* wake, Royal Caribbean upped itself with the over-the-top *Oasis of the Seas*, a 220,000-ton, 5,400-passenger leviathan that will debut in late 2009, after this book goes to press, and Norwegian Cruise Line began planning the 153,000-ton, 4,200-passenger *Norwegian Epic*, which debuts in May 2010. All these ships offer everything you find on a normal megaship and then some, with innovations only their enormo-size makes possible. See individual ship reviews in chapter 6 for details.

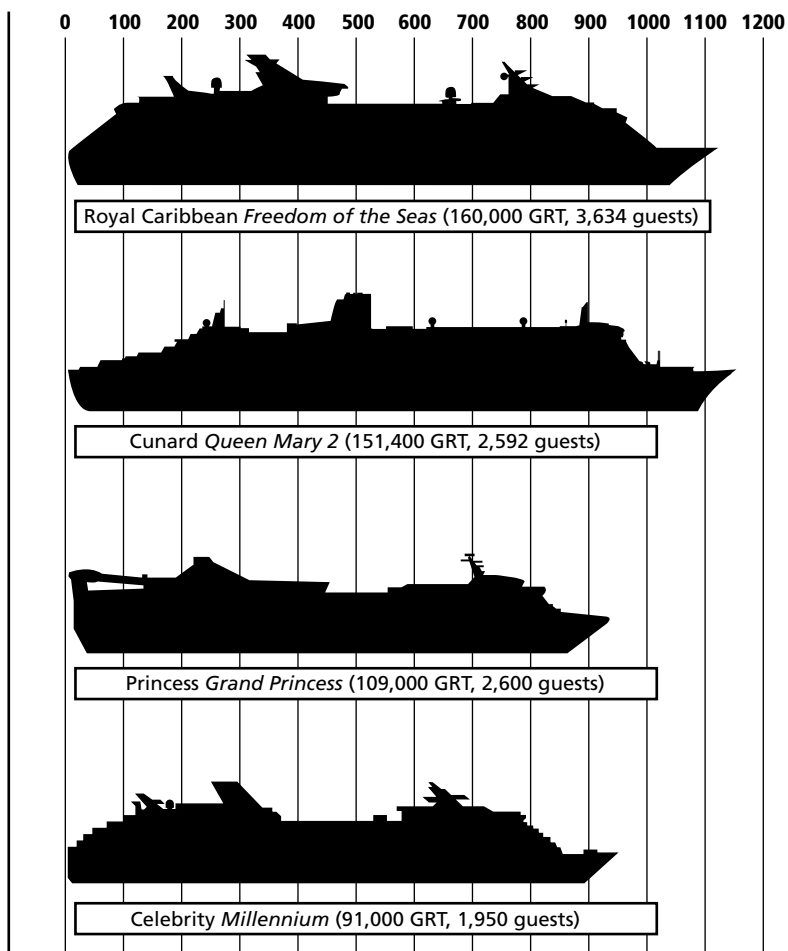
MIDSIZE SHIPS (600–1,800 PASSENGERS)

For a while it looked as if midsize vessels were going the way of the dodo, but the past few years have seen a small resurgence in their fortunes.

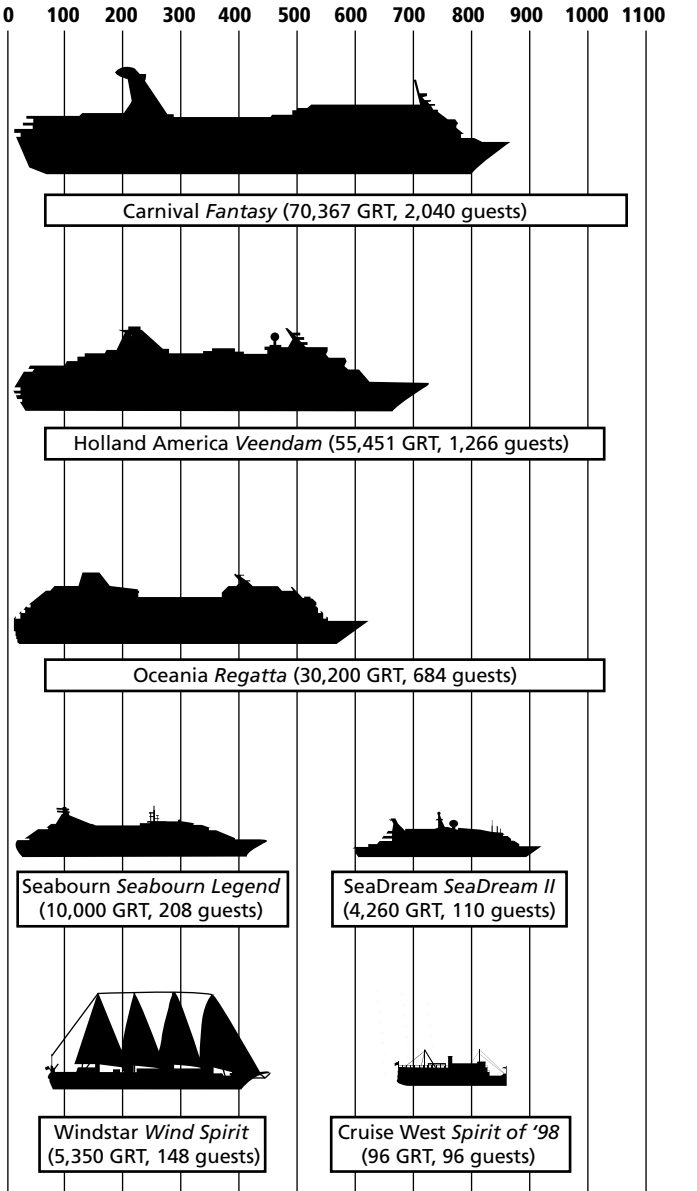
The term *midsize* is, of course, relative. Weighing in at between 20,000 and 60,000 gross tons, most of these ships are still larger than some of the great old ocean liners. (*Titanic*, for instance, was only 46,000 tons.) They're plenty big and spacious enough to provide a diverse cruise experience, 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. **Oceania** and **Azamara** both operate three vessels carrying about 700 passengers apiece, with a country-club-type setting. Though somewhat larger, most of **Holland America's** fleet and part of **MSC Cruises's** fleet also fit the midsize description, aside from their newest classes of ships.

Among the true ultraluxury lines, midsize is about as big as it gets. **Crystal** and **Regent Seven Seas** both operate ships in the 50,000-ton range, carrying 700 to 940

SHIP SIZE COMPARISONS



Ships in this chart represent the range of sizes in the current cruise market. See reviews in chapters 6 through 8 for sizes of ships not shown here, then compare. Note that GRT = gross register tons, the standard measure of vessel size. Rather than representing weight, it indicates the amount of interior, revenue-producing space on a vessel. One GRT = 100 cubic feet of enclosed, revenue-generating space.



Homeboat Security

For better or worse, we're currently living in a security-obsessed world. People have to show ID to get into office buildings and take off their shoes to go through airport X-rays, so you'd better believe security measures are in place on cruise ships, too—some of them having been in place for years, others instituted relatively recently.

All the major cruise lines have their own **dedicated onboard security forces** who monitor people coming aboard (passengers, crew, delivery people, and contractors) and keep an eye out during the cruise, and we're not just talking about the kind of rent-a-cops you see at your local convenience store. Some lines have even hired Gurkhas, the famed Nepalese fighters, as onboard security personnel; hired former Navy SEALs as top-level security consultants; and held training for deck officers in how to react to takeover attempts. Other security measures are also in place, but the cruise lines prefer to keep them under their hats.

On a day-to-day basis, passengers will mostly notice ship security when boarding, both initially and at the ports of call. Most cruise lines photograph passengers digitally at embarkation, keying the photos to passengers' onboard IDs so that they can match face to picture every time they get back aboard thereafter. The system also allows the ship's staff to tell instantly who's aboard at any given time. Other security processes include **screening and X-raying of all hand-carried and checked bags**, the use of sniffer dogs in port, and maintenance of a security zone around cruise ships while they're in port. Ships must also submit a complete list of passengers and crew to the Coast Guard 96 hours before arriving at a U.S. port. Internationally, regulations issued by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 2004 require all ports around the world to operate within a consistent framework to address security issues.

passengers—a telling figure when you consider that MSC's similarly sized ships pack in twice as many guests. Along with high-toned service, cuisine, and amenities, personal space is a major difference between the mainstream and luxe lines.

SMALL SHIPS (12–312 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, because you'll see the same faces at meals and on deck throughout the week.

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

Sailing ships, obviously, have sails. But what's not necessarily obvious is how much—or how little—those sails are used to actually propel the ship. On Maine's coast, the independently owned schooners of the **Maine Windjammer Association** are honest-to-God sail-powered vessels, most without engines of any kind. If the wind

stops blowing, their only option is to let down their motorized yawl boat and push the ship until it catches a breeze. The ships of **Star Clippers**, **Sea Cloud**, and **Windstar**, on the other hand, usually operate under wind power for a part of each cruise, but they have engines to do most of the pushing. All these vessels tend to attract as many passengers in their 30s as in their 70s, all of them looking for something a little different from a regular cruise.

Most of the other small ships in this book are **coastal and river cruisers**—small vessels designed to sail in protected coastal waters and rivers. Very casual (and for the most part relatively plain), these ships provide cruises oriented heavily toward nature, wildlife-watching, culture, and history, with onboard naturalists to help interpret what you see. In addition to coastal cruisers, **Cruise West** and **Lindblad** also operate tougher **expedition ships** able to sail in the open ocean.

See “Active Travel & Adventure Cruises,” later in this chapter, and chapter 8, “Small Ships, Sailing Ships & Adventure Cruises,” for more details on all these options.

The **small luxury ships** of high-end lines such as **Seabourn**, **Silversea**, and **Sea-Dream** have a refined, ultra-elegant ambience. Cabins are spacious, service is gracious, gourmet meals are served on fine china, and guests dress the part. These ships have few activities besides watersports, putting more emphasis on quiet relaxation and visits to high-end ports such as St. Barts. **American Safari Cruises** operates truly tiny 12- and 22-passenger yachts. Service oriented like the luxe ships, they also have an adventure-travel vibe, with lots of built-in active excursions.

4 Cruises for Families

While cruises might not be adventurous or exotic, they sure are a convenient way for families to vacation. If you’ve got kids, you’ll agree that preserving your sanity is a priority, and a cruise fits the bill. They’re easy, safe, fun 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. In fact, since 2000, Royal Caribbean, among the most family-friendly lines, has seen a more than 50% increase in the number of families cruising with kids under the age of 3. Same story with Carnival, which now carries 300% more children 17 and under than it did in 1995. During school holidays, there can be so many kids on board that playrooms get jam-packed and you’ll have to wait in line to sign in. Toddlers and teens are taken care of too: Royal Caribbean, for instance, has daily play groups for parents and toddlers (6 months–3 years), while elaborate teen facilities are all the rage across the industry.

The megaships cater most to families and attract the largest numbers of them, with playrooms, video arcades, and complimentary **supervised activities** usually provided for children ages 2 or 3 to 17 (generally, young children must be potty-trained to participate), and programs broken down into several age categories. Some lines set a **minimum age** for children to sail aboard (usually 6–12 months), but Disney provides a supervised nursery for ages 3 months and up, and Carnival accepts kids as young as 4 months in its group babysitting program. See the individual cruise line reviews for details.

Disney has the most family-friendly ships at sea today, followed by **Royal Caribbean**, whose ships (especially the Freedom-, Voyager-, and Radiance-class vessels) have huge play areas. The **Carnival** ships do a pretty good job, too (especially the Conquest class), as do the **Norwegian**, **Princess**, and **Celebrity** megaships. Even lines traditionally geared to older folks are getting in on the kid craze. Holland America has

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 minifridge/minibar, which is standard on most new ships. (Ships more than 5 or 10 years old may provide 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.** After boarding a big ship, it may take a few hours before your luggage gets delivered to your cabin, so be sure to hand-carry a tote filled with whatever you'll need for the afternoon: diapers, baby food, a change of clothes, bathing suits, and so on.
- **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.

renovated all of its ships' kids' facilities over the past few years, and the kids' facilities and programs on **Cunard's QM2** are phenomenal.

See the section "Best Cruises for Families with Kids," on p. 6, for more info.

BABYSITTING After the complimentary daylong roster of supervised activities wraps up between about 7 and 10pm, most mainstream lines provide slumber-party-style **group babysitting** in the playground. Services are usually from about 10pm until 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: Disney's nurseries take children as young as 3 months, and Carnival includes kids as young as 4 months. The counselors will even change diapers. **Private in-cabin babysitting** by a crewmember is also provided by Celebrity, 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 this book's co-author Heidi went this route when her boys were babies and swears by it—how else to dine and have cocktails in peace after a long, kid-centric day? Try to get them tucked in and asleep before the sitter arrives so that they won't have to deal with a new face just before bedtime.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY CABINS If your travel budget is tight, a family of four can share a cabin and get a good deal in return for all that togetherness: 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 1 and under 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) and MSC Cruises often offers a “kids sail free” promotion for the under-17 set if occupying the same cabin as two parents or adults. Crystal has offered free passage for all children 11 and under for summer sailings in Alaska. **Note:** Because prices are based on double adult occupancy of cabins, single parents sailing with children usually have to pay adult prices for their kids, though deals for single parents are available every once in awhile.

As for how you'll all fit, think **bunk-style third and fourth berths** that 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 are 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 do take this option. The line that offers the best digs for families is definitely **Disney**, where the majority of cabins aboard *Magic* and *Wonder* boast two bathrooms (one with a bathtub), a minifridge, and a sitting area with a sofa bed. (While minifridges or minibars are fairly standard these days, tubs are a rarity unless you're splurging on a suite.) The cabins are almost as big as most ships' minisuites and comfortably sleep families of three or four—but, of course, Disney's rates are generally higher than those of their mainstream competitors. The ships' bona fide suites accommodate families of five to seven.

In general, whatever line you choose, 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 just be cheaper to book **connecting cabins**—two separate standard cabins with interconnecting doors. Almost every ship reviewed in this book has connecting cabins, with the exception of most small ships and a small handful of midsize vessels and megaships.

TAKING THE KIDS ON SMALL SHIPS For the most part, small-ship cruises are not kid-friendly, because usually there are no kids' facilities or other kids on board, and the pace is slow and the clientele older. Some possible exceptions include sailing ships like Star Clippers' *Royal Clipper*, some of the Maine Windjammer vessels, and Cruise West, which can be both fun and educational if your kids are older than about 12 and are well behaved.

5 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 present 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. And some of the small-ship lines are like staying at a Vermont B&B (though others are more like a Motel 6

Getting Married on Board or in Port

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

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

If you want nonsailing family and friends to attend, you can hold the ceremony and reception at your port of embarkation, before the ship leaves. Guests will be on a special list with port security, and they'll have to bring the requisite ID to board. Ceremonies can also be arranged at various ports of call. On Caribbean routes, you can tie the knot in ports such as Aruba, Barbados, Grand Cayman, St. Thomas, Sint Maarten, San Juan (Puerto Rico), Ocho Rios and Montego Bay (Jamaica), Cozumel (Mexico), Nassau (The Bahamas), and Key West (Florida). Other options include Bermuda and the Alaskan ports of Ketchikan and Juneau (at the latter, you can get married atop Mendenhall Glacier, flying in by helicopter). If contemplating marriage in a port of call, remember that your cruise itinerary limits how far afield you can go, because ships generally stay in port only a limited number of hours.

Wedding packages generally start around \$850 for intimate shipboard ceremonies for the bride and groom only. That price usually includes the services of an officiant (though you can bring your own if you prefer), a bouquet and boutonniere, champagne and keepsake glasses, a wedding cake, and the services of a photographer, but not the photos themselves—those will cost extra, should you choose to buy them. Adding a reception for

with a view). Beyond the ships themselves are the ports of call, providing experiences that are variously exotic, charming, exciting, and sybaritic.

HONEYMOON & ANNIVERSARY PACKAGES

Besides their inherent romantic qualities, cruises are a good practical honeymoon choice because many depart on Sundays, and couples who marry on Saturday can leave the next day. Some lines provide honeymooner freebies, such as a special cake in the dining room one night, or an invitation to a private cocktail party. Couples celebrating anniversaries are often invited as well. To get your share of freebies, be sure to tell your travel agent or the cruise line reservation agent that you'll be celebrating on

eight guests will bring the price up. The basic wedding/reception package offered by Carnival is \$1,125. Prices go up from there based on the complexity and size of your reception (from a simple open bar and hors d'oeuvres to a formal meal in the ship's restaurant) and by port. Additional guests can be accommodated for an additional per-person charge. Ceremonies can also be performed off-ship in port, at higher prices.

THE LEGAL DETAILS No matter where you choose to wed, you must arrange for a marriage license from the U.S. or foreign port far in advance of your cruise. Policies vary from country to country, so you'll save a lot of headaches by having the cruise line's wedding department or consultant help you with the details. Be sure to check with these folks before booking your cruise to be sure wedding space is available on the date you have in mind.

HAVING THE CAPTAIN OFFICIATE Among all the lines in this book, only Princess, Celebrity, and Azamara allow you to get married by the captain. At Princess, the Grand-, Diamond-, and Coral-class ships all offer charming wedding chapels that seat about three dozen and are adorned with stained glass and fresh flower arrangements. Assistant pursers in dress-blue uniforms are available to escort a bride down the 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. Onboard receptions can be custom-tailored with various options—hors d'oeuvres, champagne, wedding cake, and so on. Friends and relatives who aren't sailing can even monitor the wedding courtesy of the ships' chapel Web cams, which broadcast an updated photo every minute or so. (Look at the very bottom of the Princess website home page for "Bridge Cams." Pick a ship from the "Wedding Cams" drop-down menu.) At **Celebrity** and **Azamara**, weddings are performed in one of the ship's public rooms. A variety of packages are available that mix and match everything from cake and champagne to private receptions in the ship's specialty restaurant. Basic captain-performed wedding packages at both lines begin around \$2,500.

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. The \$229 Deluxe Package adds breakfast in bed one day and two 25-minute massages at the spa. All the mainstream lines have similar deals, with packages in the \$300 to \$500 range generally piling on more spa treatments,

champagne, shore excursions, canapés, chocolate-covered strawberries, and the like. These packages must be ordered before the cruise.

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

VOW-RENEWAL & "ROMANCE" PACKAGES

Some lines have 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. Visitors can attend the ceremony, but they have to pay: \$13 per adult, \$6.25 for kids 2 to 12. Princess has 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, and a commemorative certificate signed by the captain; 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 packages are fairly representative of what's provided by the other mainstream lines.

6 Cruises for Gay Men & Lesbians

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

- **Atlantis Events Inc.**, 9200 Sunset Blvd., Ste. 500, West Hollywood, CA 90069 (☎ 800/628-5268 or 310/859-8800; www.atlantisevents.com), provides all-gay charters with lines such as Celebrity, Azamara, Holland America, and Royal Caribbean. 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., Ste. 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.
- **Olivia Cruises and Resorts**, 434 Brannan St., San Francisco, CA 94107 (☎ 800/631-6277 or 415/962-5700; www.olivia.com), provides full-ship charters targeted specifically to the lesbian community, mostly aboard Holland America's ships. Guest performers in recent years have included k.d. lang, Margaret Cho, Heart, the Indigo Girls, Wynonna Judd, Shawn Colvin, and Melissa Etheridge.

- **Pied Piper Travel**, 330 W. 42nd St., Ste. 1804, New York, NY 10036 (☎ **800/874-7312** or 212/239-2412; www.piedpipertravel.com), offers hosted gay cruises with various onboard parties and activities and arranged visits with the gay community at various ports of call.
- **R Family Vacations**, 1500 Broadway, Ste. 1710, New York, NY 10036 (☎ **866/732-6822**; www.rfamilyvacations.com), was founded by Rosie O'Donnell's partner, Kelli O'Donnell, along with gay travel veteran Gregg Kaminsky. Trips to (so far) the Caribbean and Alaska are targeted to the gay and lesbian family market.
- **RSVP Vacations**, 2535 25th Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55406 (☎ **800/328-7787** or 612/729-1113; www.rsvpvacations.com), provides full-ship charters on lines such as NCL and Holland America. 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; locate one by calling the 800 number or checking the website above.

7 Active Travel & Adventure Cruises

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

ADVENTURE & EXPEDITIONARY CRUISES

A few years ago, we met this great Australian couple in Alaska. They'd wanted to see the state for years, to really get into its forests and see its wildlife, but they didn't have time for a 3-week wilderness trek. Their solution? They booked a small-ship cruise that split its sailing week between exploring wilderness areas and visiting tiny fishing towns. It was a perfect choice.

These types of trips (offered by Lindblad Expeditions and Cruise West in Alaska, Baja, the Pacific Northwest, and Central America, and by American Safari Cruises in Alaska and Baja) include few of the usual activity options, but that's by design: Their focus is on what's outside the vessel, not inside, and some are more active than others. Lindblad, for instance, builds activities such as hiking, kayaking, and exploring by inflatable launch into its adventure itineraries. On Star Clippers' sailing ships, those inflatable launches might be used to take passengers water-skiing or on banana-boat rides. See "Different Boats for Different Folks," earlier in this chapter, for more about the different kinds of small-ship experiences.

KEEPING ACTIVE ON THE MAINSTREAM & LUXE SHIPS

Ships started becoming more active in the 1990s, and today a new megaship doesn't launch without a huge gym, jogging track, and sports decks that may have basketball courts, golf nets, and marquee activities like rock-climbing walls, bungee trampolines, or surfing simulators (the latter three associated with Royal Caribbean). A handful of smaller and mostly high-end ships concentrate on watersports, with retractable or floating watersports platforms to allow easy swimming, water-skiing, and windsurfing right from the ship. See "Keeping Fit: Gyms, Spas & Sports," in chapter 4, for an overview, and the "Pool, Fitness, Spa & Sports Facilities" heading of each ship review section in Part 2 for a rundown on which ship has what.

ACTIVE SHORE EXCURSIONS

On shore, the cruise lines are providing more and more active excursions. No need to sit on a bus for 3 hours if you'd rather be feeling the burn. Along with snorkeling and diving, options such as biking, hiking, kayaking, horseback riding, zipline canopy tours, and river rafting are enjoyed in many ports in the Caribbean, Alaska, Mexico, and Central America. For more details, see the port reviews in Part 3.

8 Cruises for the Young & Old

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

The **youngest crowds**, in the 20s-to-40s range, are typically found on 2-, 3-, and 4-night warm-weather cruises (and next on the 7-night cruises) offered by mainstream lines such as Carnival, Royal Caribbean, and NCL. Young-at-heart types, who may be 54 or 72, but wear bikinis and short-shorts and drink piña coladas for lunch, will also be attracted to those lines. Young families make up the majority of passengers on Disney Cruise Line.

The **oldest folks**, upward of 60, will be the vast majority on luxury lines such as Seabourn, Silversea, and Regent. Cunard and Holland America have also traditionally attracted a mature crowd, though both are trying hard to broaden their demographic. Among the small-ship lines, you'll find a generally older crowd aboard American Canadian Caribbean, American Cruise Lines, and Cruise West.

9 Ships for Nonsmokers & Smokers

Once upon a time, all the cool kids smoked—Sinatra, JFK, even Joe DiMaggio. It was an era when life was seen through a swirling bluish haze, and, at least in the movies, nobody ever coughed. Today? Not so much. Around the world, cities, states, and even whole countries are banning smoking in many public places, even bars. It's enough to make a smoker want to run away to sea . . . except that doesn't really work anymore either.

As goes public opinion, so go the cruise lines, which generally prohibit smoking now in all restaurants, theaters, corridors, elevators, and many other public areas, too. Policies vary by line, with most allowing smoking in designated smoking sections of bars and lounges and on most open decks. Lines vary as to whether they allow smoking in cabins. Among those that do, none has specifically designated smoking and nonsmoking cabins—you just get what you get, though the cruise lines do scrub their cabins well between cruises, if necessary by shampooing the rug and using air purifiers. In our hundreds of cruises, we've never found a cabin that reeked from last week's Marlboro Man.

Norovirus: Montezuma's Revenge at Sea

Unless you've been living under a rock, you've seen, heard, or read news reports over the past few years detailing outbreaks of norovirus (aka Norwalk-like virus) aboard cruise ships. But what is it exactly, and how worried should you be?

Answer: It's a stomach bug that causes nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. And really, there's not much to worry about. Norovirus is an extremely common bug that hits some 23 million Americans a year, mostly on land—and the reason you don't hear about those cases is they don't happen in a proscribed (and newsworthy) environment like a cruise ship. A hundred people might pick up a bug at the local mall, but what's the chance they'd all remember they caught it at the food court?

What makes Norovirus such a pain for cruise ships is that it's incredibly contagious: According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), people infected with the virus can pass it on from the moment they begin feeling ill to between 3 days and 2 weeks after they recover—meaning that cruise ship outbreaks are almost certainly the result of contagious passengers bringing the infection aboard, rather than of unsanitary practices on the ships themselves. Face it, cruise ships are a lot like kindergarten: When one kid shows up sick, everybody gets sick.

In any case, don't worry too much. It's no fun to have your vacation spoiled by rampant puking, but norovirus causes no long-term health effects for most people. Persons unable to replace liquids quickly enough—generally the very young, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems—may become dehydrated and require special medical attention, but that's about the worst of it. More good news: Outbreaks have been on the downswing since they were first reported. Cruise lines are keeping a close eye on boarding passengers for signs of illness, and have further stepped up their already vigilant sanitation routines to reduce the chance of transmission. A small outbreak on one of our cruises in 2006 was contained immediately after the first sick passengers were identified, and it did not spread any further among passengers and crew.

The **best lines for nonsmokers** are Azamara Cruises, Oceania Cruises, and small-ship line American Cruise Lines. Both Azamara and Oceania allow smoking only in two small areas: one indoors, in a small section of one top-deck lounge, and the other outdoors, in a corner of the Pool Deck. Azamara also follows a no-smoking policy on all land components of its cruisetours. American Cruise Lines is the most stringent of all, operating entirely smoke-free vessels. Many of the Maine Windjammer schooners are also smoke-free, though some allow smoking in a small section of the outside deck.

Lines that prohibit smoking in staterooms, private balconies, and most public areas include Celebrity, MSC, and Regent Seven Seas. On Disney and Royal Caribbean, smoking on sea-facing private balconies is allowed.

Lines that allow smoking only on designated outside decks include American Canadian Caribbean, American Safari, Cruise West, Lindblad, Sea Cloud, SeaDream Yacht Club, Star Clippers, and Windstar.

For a detailed, **line-by-line summary of smoking regulations** on these and all other lines in this book, click over to www.frommers.com/articles/5872.html.

10 Cruises for People with Disabilities & Health Issues

Though most of the cruise industry's ships are foreign-flagged and are not required to comply with the **Americans with Disabilities Act**, ships built over the past 15 years are almost universally accessible, and some older ships have been retrofitted to offer access. Most ships that can accommodate wheelchair-bound passengers require that they be accompanied by a fully mobile companion. The ship reviews in chapters 6 through 8 include information about access and facilities in the "Cabins" sections, but be sure to discuss your needs fully with your travel agent prior to booking.

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

ACCESSIBLE CABINS & PUBLIC ROOMS Most ships have a handful of cabins specifically designed for travelers with disabilities, with 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 beginning on p. 80 identifies ships with accessible cabins, and the "Cabins" section in each of the ship reviews in chapters 6 through 8 indicates how many. The vast majority of the ships reviewed in the **mainstream** and **luxury** categories (chapters 6 and 7) have accessible cabins, but of the **adventure ships** in chapter 8, only the American Cruise Lines ships and Cruise West's *Spirit of '98* and *Spirit of Oceanus* are either fully or partially wheelchair-friendly. Most public rooms on newer vessels have ramps, and some also have lifts to help passengers with disabilities into the pools.

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

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 strikes a ship every once in awhile (see "Norovirus: Montezuma's Revenge at Sea," earlier).

All large ships have **staffed infirmaries**, but if you have special needs, check with the line to find out 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 because they deal with such a huge number of passengers and crew. A few years ago, 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 its 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.

Small ships (those discussed in chapter 8) generally don't carry onboard medical staff because 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.

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 (☎ 877/451-5006 or 507/451-5005; www.flyingwheelstravel.com), is another option.