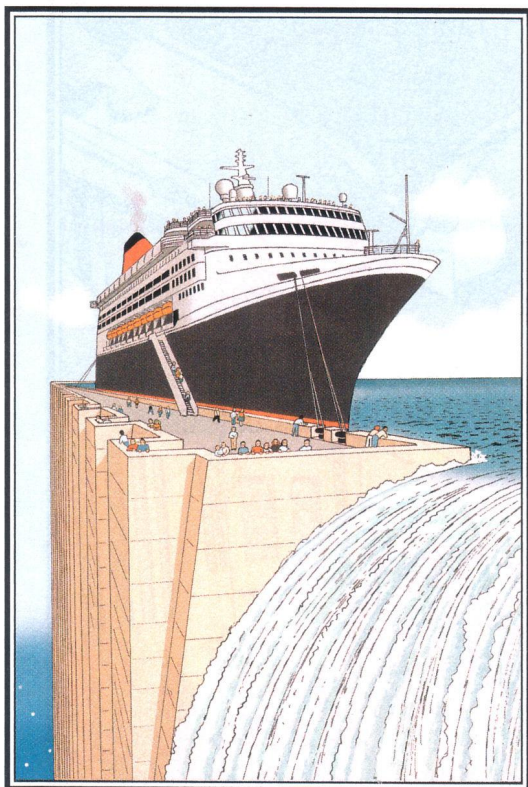


How to Choose Your Cruise

Follow these 10 steps to ensure smooth sailing. *By* DAWN REISS



THERE ARE MORE THAN 160 SHIPS in the fleets of the 24 major cruise lines—and more than 7,500 itineraries, from Alaska to Zanzibar. So how do you decide which one most suits your style? Evaluate your options using these simple guidelines:

1 WHERE TO GO Decide on the destination first, the ship second. Alaskan and Caribbean cruises have long been mainstays, but cruise lines are adding itineraries to unexpected places: Asia, the Indian Ocean, South America. “South America is a big player this year,” says Anne Morgan Scully, of McCabe World Travel in McLean, Virginia. “But Dubai is off the charts.”

Next, look at the specifics—with Alaskan cruises, for example, ships tend to follow two routes. Inside Passage itineraries run round-trip from Seattle

or Vancouver and call in southern Alaskan ports like Juneau and Skagway; Gulf of Alaska itineraries, which sail farther north, are typically one-way trips from Vancouver to Whittier or Seward, or the reverse.

2 WHEN TO GO Shoulder seasons can offer bargains, and may be even more appealing than high season: a mild fall day can be more enjoyable than baking under the August sun in the Mediterranean. Alaska’s popularity with families means that going in May and September (when children are in school) often translates into fewer visitors—and better deals. Fewer people can also mean more chances to see black bears and humpback whales up close.

3 WHICH LINE TO BOOK Select the cruise line, and the fellow passengers, that best match your personality. “This is crucial for the first time,” advises Anne Halsey-Smith of Gayle Gillies Travel in Rancho Santa Fe, California. “It will make or break your experience. If you aren’t matched to the line, you probably won’t cruise again.” Some have dress codes and assigned seating times for meals. Some, like Princess Cruises, are more kid-friendly. Norwegian Cruise Line is more casual than other lines and doesn’t »

*** FAST FACT** Some 38,644 towels are laundered aboard a typical seven-day Holland America cruise...

ASK THE EXPERT

*Josef Widmar,
maitre d’ of
Crystal
Symphony*



Q: ASSIGNED DINING TIMES AND TABLES DON’T ALWAYS MAKE FOR THE BEST COMPANY. WHAT’S YOUR ADVICE FOR BOOKING ON BOARD, AND HOW DO YOU KEEP EVERYONE HAPPY?

A: In a restaurant, you’re only there for lunch or dinner, but you may be on a ship for a week or two—or even three months—and dining is a central part of the experience. Passengers should make requests when they book. Guests on the *Symphony* can ask for a table that seats two, four, six, or eight seats and request a location or specific age group. More and more we have requests for tables for two—people want privacy. We never seem to have enough tables for two by the window, of course! You have to be a diplomat sometimes and make people feel like they do have the best table.

Josef Widmar has worked for Crystal for 17 years.



ONLINE EXTRA

Look for T+L’s exclusive guides to 40 popular ports of call on travelandleisure.com beginning in January.

have assigned dining times. Holland America's offerings are more traditionally geared toward baby boomers. Finally, lines like Crystal and Regent are more upscale and, in turn, more expensive. A travel agent can help you make sense of the different options, and on the message boards of CruiseCritic.com you can hear directly from passengers.

4 WHAT IT COSTS Don't look at the daily rate for a stateroom and then simply multiply by the number of nights you'll be at sea. Remember to factor in airfare to and from the originating port, the costs of incidentals such as alcohol (unless the ship is all-inclusive), and shore excursions. A helicopter ride over the glaciers of Alaska can be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but it can also add as much as \$1,000 to your final bill.

5 BEAT THE RUSH Many cruise lines give discounts for booking far in advance. "It's an issue of supply and demand," Scully says. "As bookings come in, cruise fares go up in the most popular regions, like Alaska, the Caribbean, and the Mediterranean." It's never too soon to start planning your cruise.

6 SHIP TIPS Size matters. The size of the ship can dictate the itinerary. Smaller ships, like those operated by Cruise West (the largest of which carries only 138 passengers) and SeaDream Yachts, can dock at smaller ports and offer a more personalized experience. They are often best suited for nature-oriented cruises to Antarctica, the Galápagos, and the Sea of Cortés. The downside: entertainment and dining options are often more limited.

7 CABIN SPLURGE Consider your itinerary when deciding whether to reserve a balcony stateroom. For a repositioning cruise across the Atlantic, when there will be nothing to see from your balcony but the open ocean for days, it may not matter. But on Alaskan and Mediterranean cruises, it's all about the views. And in Alaska, remember to book a cabin on the starboard (right) side of the ship on a northbound cruise and on the port (left) side of the ship on southbound itineraries so you'll have a view of the coastline.



MORE SHIP TIPS

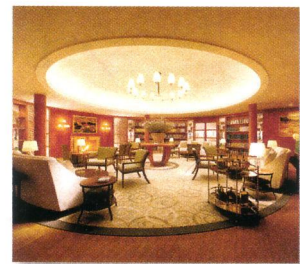
Smaller is sometimes better. Visit travandleisure.com for our exclusive online feature about the best small-ship cruises, as well as barges, feluccas, yachts, and more.

8 ARRIVE EARLY-AND STAY ON AFTER YOUR CRUISE First, if you don't book your flight through the cruise line, your ship won't wait if it's delayed. As canceled and delayed flights have become commonplace, it's wise to arrive at your starting port at least a day before you are scheduled to set sail. Second, cruise extensions are an increasingly popular option. You can cap off a Crystal sailing, for example, with a safari organized by the line—with fewer hassles and less expenses than on a separate tour. Holland America and Princess Cruises offer luxury railway and lodge trips for passengers in Alaska.

9 BEFORE YOU BOARD Don't waste time waiting in line after you've pulled out of port. There are enough activities to make the most adventurous cruiser happy,

but popular shore excursions often sell out. Be sure to plan your onboard activities early. Spas on ships have a limited number of treatment rooms; book your massages and facials in advance, if possible. Also, ask if there are discounts for booking treatments on days in port.

10 TURN TO AN EXPERT When it comes to cruises, some professional advice is often indispensable (and it's the main reason most cruises are still booked through travel agents). For our picks of the best agents who specialize in cruises, go to travandleisure.com/alist. For a broader list of nearly 16,000 agents in the United States and Canada who have been accredited by the Cruise Line Industry Association, searchable by ZIP code, go to cruising.org.



HAUTE HOUSE BOAT

Ever wanted to travel the world without leaving home? **FOUR SEASONS OCEAN RESIDENCES** (oceanresidences.com) is the hotel company's first venture into real estate on the high seas. The 719-foot, 112-unit ocean liner is scheduled to set sail in 2010 with staterooms and suites priced from \$3.75 to \$39 million (the largest is nearly 8,000 square feet). All will be sold as furnished whole-ownership units, with interiors by Tillberg Design, the firm responsible for the look of the *Queen Mary 2*. The *Four Seasons* promises the best of both yachts and cruise ships: ownership rights, low passenger counts, and the flexibility of a yacht, with the operational expertise, amenities, and oceangoing capabilities of a cruise ship. What this will mean is that you can traverse narrow Norwegian fjords, sail up the Amazon, or circumnavigate Australia—as well as take cooking classes, enjoy spa treatments, and tee off with simulated golf. — *Jean Tang*

*** FAST FACT** Oceania ships use an average of 6,500 pieces of china, 5,500 pieces of silverware, and 2,500 glasses during one evening's dinner service...