



## The world's best cruises, period

Travel pros pick the top in each class

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If you haven't taken a cruise in 30 years, you're in for a big surprise.

Gone are the days of blue-haired grandmas crowding the bingo hall and creaky-hipped grandfathers struggling to stay upright on shuffleboard courts. These days, every cruise line worth its sea salt features fine dining, Las Vegas-style stage shows and wet-and-wild theme park thrills. If your idea of great cruising is an all-you-can-eat buffet and a dessert bar that stretches from bow to stern, you may be disappointed by the industry's latest developments.

More than ever, choosing the right cruise line — and sometimes even a specific ship — depends as much upon your budget as your expectations. And these days, cruising may be exceptionally kind to your budget: The capsized economy has produced bargains for even the highest-end cruises, especially if you sign up at the last minute.

How, then, to pick the right one?

Knowing that one size does not fit all, the editors of Forbes Traveler convened a panel of cruise experts and asked them to identify the best cruises in 12 different categories. Panelists were pulled from travel agencies, publications and websites that review cruises and from within the cruise industry itself. Some of their answers may surprise you.

Where to go is typically the first question cruisers ask themselves, so it's no surprise that Best Ports of Call drew the most "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" responses from our panelists. One passenger's exotic Caribbean seaside town is another's overcrowded tourist trap. But overall, says Jason Colman, an elite cruise counselor scholar certified by the Cruise Lines Industry Association (CLIA), Oceania Cruises offer "the most intensive look at some of the world's greatest cities — with most sailings including an overnight or two in port." Maria Saenz, senior travel counselor at Montrose Travel, agreed. "Oceania's customer base is well-traveled and they do hit the best ports in any given itinerary. They know when and where to stay overnight."

There are two schools of thought when it comes to choosing your cabin. Some say, spend as little time in your room as possible. There are excursions to be enjoyed (or, lounge chairs to be sat upon). On the other hand, being comfortable during your "off hours" means more rest and relaxation — and a better overall cruise experience. Either way, according to nearly half of our experts, the Best Rooms are found aboard Regent Seven Seas ships. Lori Herzog, a senior cruise consultant at CruiseCenter.com, describes all-suite staterooms that feature "residential-style décor, flat-panel televisions, large living areas for entertaining and in-room dining." And, they average 350 square feet.

Even on the best cruise, you should get off the boat at least once. Every cruise company is eager to arrange shore excursions that range from simple shopping trips in nearby towns to heart-pounding helicopter tours. When it comes to offering the Best Excursions, food and travel writer Janice Wald Henderson, among others, says Crystal Cruises leaves "its competitors in the dust." Before and during the cruise, Crystal's agents can arrange trips for passengers of every persuasion — from sedentary voyagers who want simple walking tours to more adventurous travelers who may want to "overnight on a glacier" or go "windsurfing in Turkey."

Indeed, adventure cruises are gaining in popularity, and may range from highly technical deep-sea diving trips in the Caribbean, to swimming with sharks in South Africa, to retracing Darwin's steps in the Galapagos. According to our panel, the Best Adventure Cruises are offered by Lindblad Special Expeditions. This collection of small expedition ships travels to far-and-away destinations, including Antarctica, the Arctic, Africa and the Indian Ocean — in comfort. Like many other cruise lines, they offer trips to the Galapagos Islands, but theirs are conducted in cooperation with the National Geographic Society — which drew particular praise from Stuart MacDonald, CEO of Tripharbor.com and former CMO of Expedia.com.

There's a reason that cruises are popular among families: It's easy to keep the kids busy, and toddlers can't get lost. (At least not for long.) But which cruise is best for families? The traditional response is Disney Cruise Line, which operates two nearly identical liners, Disney Magic and Disney Wonder. According to Bob Mick, aka Dr. Kruz Nutty, Disney is great for families with younger children because "they really know how to make magical vacations for families" — but they can fall short when it comes to older kids.

In the survey's closest race, Disney Cruise Line actually failed to take the title for Best Family Cruise. Instead, Royal Caribbean International squeaked ahead of the mouse with 45 percent of the vote (compared to Disney's 42 percent). According to CruiseCenter.com's Lori Herzog, "Royal Caribbean offers a fantastic program for families since their ships are large and have multi-faceted venues to entertain kids and families of all ages." She cites an extensive Adventure Youth program for the younger set as well as a "Just For Teens" Center. Other panelists describe kid-oriented ice-skating, full-court basketball, miniature golf, rock-climbing, movie theaters and stage shows.

"Nobody else can touch Royal Caribbean's world-class and extensive family-based product," says Herzog. What's more, Tom Coiro, vice president of Direct Line Cruises, predicts that Royal Caribbean's new Oasis of the Seas, to be launched in December 2009, will offer "the most astounding array of family activities imaginable."

But the cruise industry is an ever-evolving business. The Avid Cruiser's Ralph Grizzle recommends family cruisers stay tuned for industry developments. "Disney has a trick or two up its sleeves with its two new ships, the first coming in 2010."

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