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When planning a family vacation, parents come back to cruise vacation idea again and again. That's because cruises continue to be one of the all-time best values for families—and they provide a low-stress way to unpack once but travel to several different ports of call.

Cruise lines are generally family friendly, and offer amenities that earn the respect of children everywhere—but not all cruises are created equal. From rock-climbing walls to cupcake bakeries to off-boat adventures, here are the best itineraries for cruising with kids.



1. ALASKA'S INSIDE PASSAGE

What Kids Love: Your reluctant students may complain about school from time to time, but the fact remains that kids are inquisitive; they enjoy learning from someone who's passionate about the topic. Most cruise lines sailing Alaska hire naturalists to give lectures and lead hikes on land and skiff explorations on the water. Special kid-focused itineraries customize the experience for the younger set. Kids come away from their Alaska adventure having seen whales (orca, humpback, gray, beluga), sea lions, walrus, seals, otters, eagles and other native birds, bears, and so much more.

What Parents Appreciate: Alaska is ideal for first-time cruisers. Ships travel along the calm, narrow waters of the Inside Passage and visit places like Juneau, Wrangell, Ketchikan, Tongass National Forest, Frederick Sound, Tracy Arm, and Endicott Arm. You would be hard-pressed to get seasick on one of these voyages.

Who to Sail: [Un-Cruise Adventures](#) offers a variety of [Inside Passage and Glacier Bay voyages](#) on ships that accommodate 36 to 86 travelers. Itineraries are available in two flavors: "Adventure" and "Luxury." Un-Cruise is perfect for multi-generational trips to Alaska, so bring the whole extended family!



2. COSTA RICA

What Kids Love: Costa Rica offers a plethora of activities that kids love, from swimming and snorkeling (while parents relax on the shores of gorgeous palm-fringed beaches) to exploring the rainforest (home to mischievous capuchin and spider monkeys, as well as tiny frogs and brightly colored wild birds) to getting close to a real volcano (Masaya). Sailing from port to port also offers amazing whale-watching opportunities, and it's not uncommon for kids to see humpback whales breach.

What Parents Appreciate: Costa Rica is ideal for families that want a mix of active adventures (think ziplining or swimming with sea turtles) as well as more sedate activities (like onboard spa treatments and a restful day at sea).

Who to Sail: Book the 148-passenger [Wind Spirit](#) masted sailing ship from [Windstar Cruises](#). The 7-night [Naturally Costa Rica](#) roundtrip voyage out of Puerto Caldera calls on San Juan Del Sur, Nicaragua; Playas Del Coco, Quepos, Bahia Drake, Curu, and Tortuga Island, Costa Rica.



3. GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

What Kids Love: In the Galapagos, your kids will hike, swim, kayak, snorkel, and take part in expeditions via skiff. Children are always enamored by the amazing—and unusual—wildlife like marine and land iguanas, reef sharks, rays, eels, tortoises, cormorants, and more. Environmentalists fiercely protect the Galapagos Islands, so the animals here do no fear people. You and your children will be able to view and photograph animals from close range.

What Parents Appreciate: While your kids are learning about Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, you'll be documenting the vacation with pictures of them petting seal pups on the beach, approaching huge sea iguanas sunning themselves on the rocks, laughing at blue-footed boobies, and marveling at the wise, old tortoises of the Galapagos.

Who to Sail: One of the best ships for families in the Galapagos Islands is the 90-passenger [Celebrity Xpedition](#) from [Celebrity Cruises](#). [Xpedition](#) offers 7-night roundtrip sailings out of Baltra.



4. HAWAII

What Kids Love: Hawaii enchants kids with its cool native language (only 13 letters), active volcanoes, sandy white powder beaches mixed with gold and black grains, and exotic luau-style foods like kalua pig (cooked in an underground pit) and haupia (coconut pudding). Kids who love animals will be on the lookout for endangered monk seals as well as dolphins and a variety of whales (seasonal).

What Parents Appreciate: Hawaii is an incredibly romantic place to visit—even when you've got kids in tow. Tropical drinks, walks on the beach, and sunset sails will be the highlights of this Hawaiian Islands sampler.

Who to Sail: The cruise line of choice in Hawaii is [Norwegian Cruise Line](#). The 2,138-passenger [Pride of America](#) offers 7-night roundtrip voyages out of Honolulu (Oahu) with calls on Kahului in Maui, Kauai, and both Hilo and Kona on the Big Island. NCL is investing \$30 million in April 2013 to renovate and refresh [Pride of America](#), so now's a good time to plan a trip to this island chain.



5. MEXICO'S BAJA CALIFORNIA

What Kids Love: Lots of families swim with dolphins in highly controlled programs at resorts around the world, but a trip to Mexico's Sea of Cortez means your kids might have the chance to frolic in the waves with wild dolphins. This is especially true when sailing smaller ships that offer onboard aft marinas. On certain ships, like [National Geographic Sea Bird](#), kids will get to play with underwater cameras, hydrophones, and Splash-Cams.

What Parents Appreciate: Mom and Dad like the small size of the ship. It's easy to keep an eye on the kids while enjoying the covered sun deck or chatting with the captain on the open bridge.

Who to Sail: [Lindblad Expeditions](#) offers 7- and 14-night roundtrip voyages out of La Paz/San Carlos aboard the 62-passenger [National Geographic Sea Bird](#).



6. THE SHIP AS THE DESTINATION: DISNEY CRUISE LINE

What Kids Love: You can't exclude Disney Cruise Line when talking kid-approved cruises. The important thing to know about DCL is that your child will enjoy *any* voyage. The ports of call will be secondary, in their opinion. What they will love are the encounters with Mickey, Minnie, and all the characters; fun onboard activities like the Sail-Away Celebration on embarkation day and Pirate Night; and amazing pools and "water coasters" (on [Disney Dream](#) and [Disney Fantasy](#)).

What Parents Appreciate: Parents are fond of Disney's supervised kids clubs so they can be sure their kids will enjoy their time spent meeting new friends in a safe environment. Mom and Dad can make appointments at the spa, dine out at the adults-only Palo restaurant, or enjoy the nightclub while the kids play at the youth club.

More About the Options: Disney Cruise Line operates four ships — [Disney Dream](#), [Disney Fantasy](#), [Disney Magic](#), and [Disney Wonder](#). The vessels cruise throughout the world, including Alaska, Bahamas, California Coast, Caribbean, the Panama Canal, and Europe. Bahamas voyages call on Disney's own private island, Castaway Cay.

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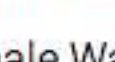
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