



Norwegian Gem anchored off Bar Harbor ME Sept 2016

Kids are everywhere today, whether you are in the Caribbean, Europe, Alaska or far-flung destinations like the Galapagos Islands, and even the Arctic. According to the MMGYGlobal 2017 Portrait of American Travelers, 75 percent of millennial families say they're interested in taking a cruise within the next two years, and believe that cruises provide the security comfort level to travel internationally with their kids. Given that the industry projects 27.2 million passengers worldwide in 2018, kids will indeed be everywhere.

More than 87 percent of families surveyed say their favorite part of cruising is being able to visit new places without the hassles of packing, unpacking and getting lost. While cruise ships feature digitally innovative hangouts, camps that are often better equipped than preschools, and supervised nurseries at sea, the trade association CLIA reports that only 13 percent of family passengers report using them. That's why 2018 promises a focus on learning together, wellness and fitness on board, with more memorable cultural and adventure excursions, including volunteer opportunities, on shore.

Cruise options are becoming year round too, with growing interest in Alaska and the disappearing polar regions; fall foliage trips; and river cruises welcoming extended families on the perennially popular European Christmas Market cruise itineraries. If this is your year to see Alaska, pick up Eileen Ogintz' **The Kid's Guide to Cruising Alaska (Kid's Guides Series)** to make the most of it!

Parents love cruising because they get a lot of bang for their vacation buck: activities, meals and lodging all for one price, including supervised morning-till-night programming for kids, at considerably less than many resorts charge. With more than one-third of all cruises taken in 2017 in the budget category, and 27 new ships on order, families should see a surge in value pricing, especially on longer cruises and newer routes.

What's been called Skip-Gen Travel — grandparents taking cruises with grandkids and leaving the parents behind — is a surging trend in our time-constrained society. Cruises prove an easy way to get the whole gang on vacation (especially in Alaska and Europe), get qualified assistance with the kids, and reduce the stress of group travel.

Routes are more exciting than ever. Major cruise lines are operating at new ports of call in Asia to meet the needs of the fastest growing market, China; and the punishing 2017 hurricane season in the Caribbean has opened unexpected ports to families who may have sailed the region before. Having said that, experienced cruisers never leave shore unless they're protected by cruise travel insurance because when something goes wrong, insurance can help make things right. If the ship sails without you because your flight to Miami was delayed, cruise insurance can help you catch up. If you break your leg and have to cancel your trip, the cruise line won't reimburse you — but travel insurance can. And if any of your loved ones suffer a medical crisis, cruise insurance can cover evacuation and emergency medical care. Cruise travel insurance from **Allianz Global Assistance** includes many other benefits, such as lost/delayed baggage coverage, trip delay coverage, trip interruption coverage and more, affordably priced.

Another cruise plus: there are nearly two dozen U.S. home ports, from Boston to Seattle, eliminating the need for many families to fly to the port of embarkation.

HOW TO PICK THE RIGHT CRUISE

Advances in always-connected technology for passengers at sea mean you won't want to unplug on the major cruise lines. Fortunately, there are cruise options for families who want to do just that; that's why it's so important to choose carefully.

Cruise options can be complicated, and having a travel agent who not only is an expert on cruising, but can get you the right price and perhaps even some extras like an on-board credit or better cabins, will be invaluable. That's where **CruiseCompete.com** comes in. Lauded by top travel publications, the site doesn't sell travel but helps cruisers find the best values for where and when they want to travel. Use their free, robust search tools to sort the options by cruise lines, dates, destinations and more. As soon as you know the cruise line and where and when you want to travel, just submit a ship name and sail date (with some other relevant information), and top cruise travel agents will then craft custom responses with bids that meet your family's needs. Cruisers communicate anonymously through the **CruiseCompete.com** inmail system to avoid unsolicited bids and spam. You're in charge: you'll review all the options, decide which are of interest, then contact the preferred agencies directly to book your trip. There is no cost to you for the service, which has connected travelers with an expert travel agent offering deals you wouldn't have found on your own, since 2003. Trust us, this reduces the hassle factor enormously and eliminates the possibility of #vacationfail.

So what are you waiting for? In this guide, we are featuring some of our favorite cruise lines plus great information from the our partners at **The Family Travel Forum** to help you plan an adventure at sea, so set your sails.

CRUISE REVIEWS OF MAJOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY CRUISES

Here are some great options to consider:

CROISIEUROPE

This is one of the world's largest river cruise companies operating more than 40 river cruises and barges with the added bonus of being very French — service and food are excellent. There's a friendly, multilingual staff, and shore excursions (included in rates) emphasize expert guided tours of local arts and history. CroisiEurope, while new to Americans, is very popular among European families because it's the only river cruise where children under 2 travel free and children under 10 travel at a discount.

What's New: Special Family Cruises in the summer months sail in Portugal, Italy, and Croatia, where children 16 and under travel free or half-priced. Multigenerational groups and groups of friends may prefer the privacy of one of their elegant, crewed barges which ply the canals through the gorgeous French countryside. Both options are very good value and you can see in our review of a **CroisiEurope cruise**.

For Kids: CroisiEurope features river cruises with cycling shore excursions for families who like to actively explore together and, with such superb cuisine, you won't have to feel guilty about sampling everything.

For Teens: Tweens and teens with a cultural bent or an interest in practicing their French will love this river cruise. Look for itineraries offering hiking, biking and other off-beat shore tours for more adventurous travelers.

Around the Ship: CroisiEurope is the global leader in river cruiser building, so their vessels are extremely comfortable and able to navigate in unusual waters. There's always a main restaurant, bar, lounges, library and roof deck space for sightseeing. Each ship is unique and designed for the smallest harbors at the destination, with easy access that's ideal for family elders. Don't expect constant activities or kids clubs because the focus is on the destinations and local culture.