



Cruises

Taking the Kids -- And the Whole Gang on a Cruise, But Not Necessarily a Big Ship

by Tribune Content Agency , Eileen Ogintz | Feb 8, 2018 3:40pm



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Who's invited?

Cruises are a great bet for extended families as everyone, if they'd like, can go in different directions and meet up for dinner.

I've met all types of families from around the world on cruises -- grandfathers and granddaughters; grandmothers and teenage grandsons; adult siblings; moms and daughters; huge multigenerational groups. Cruises are also a great bet for those with physical challenges with cruise lines offering accessible staterooms and public areas as well as inclusive kids' programs whenever possible. **Royal Caribbean**, for example, offers an "**Austism Friendly**" program with extra staff trained to care for those with developmental disabilities and a range of other amenities.

Parents like that there are excellent supervised activities for kids and teens so parents and grandparents can get some much-needed adult-time guilt free, though, according to the cruise industry's largest trade organization, **Cruise Line International Association (CLIA)**, their **2018 Cruise Travel Report** found that once they get onboard, many families don't use the programs as much as they had planned, opting instead to spend more time together with the ever-growing range of onboard entertainment.

Also, there are so many cabin options that families can choose based on their budget (suite for grandma and grandpa, perhaps; inside cabins for the teens). Everyone loves that lodging, entertainment and meals are included. On river cruises -- increasingly popular with families -- excursions are included, as they are on some upscale cruise lines. You'll also likely get a better deal when booking a group of cabins as opposed to just one. Families can score even better deals when booking during wave season, January 1 to March 31, when cruise lines and travel agents book the most cabins. These deals might include options from onboard credits, prepaid tips, drinks, specialty dining and even shore excursions.

That's why it's not surprising that CLIA found that a majority of those polled with an income of less than \$100,000 believe that cruises are a better bet in terms of value than land-based trips.

The Cruise Report also noted that travelers who take a cruise are 40 percent more likely to travel with friends, kids and family than those who opt for land-based trips. And in 2017, more travelers took vacations to spend time with family than in the previous year -- a third of cruisers travel with their kids, 17 percent with other family members and 14 percent with adult children.

So how do you choose a cruise that's right for your family? Check out the brand-new **Taking the Kids 2018 Family Cruise Guide**. A travel agent can also be a big help. CLIA can match you with an accredited cruise travel agent in your area. **Cruise Compete** is a free service that helps you get the best deal for your family by connecting you with travel agents who may have special deals available. (If you need help choosing a cruise, a Cruise Compete member-agency offers **Live Agent Help**, and **CruiseCritic** is a good bet to see what other cruisers have said about the ships and lines you are considering.)

Are you animal lovers? If so, **Alaska** is a good bet. (**Princess Cruises**, which takes the most guests to Alaska, is introducing round trips from **Los Angeles** this season and are especially known for their post- or pre-cruise tour to wilderness lodges, including the option to view **Denali**, **North America's** highest peak, from a wilderness treehouse.

If you have lots of disposable income, opt for **Antarctica** or the **Galapagos Islands**. Here's what **I wrote** about spending the holidays with penguins and whales on an **Abercrombie & Kent** family trip.

A growing number of families opt to charter a small boat, anywhere from four to 12 cabins, for trips to the Galapagos and Alaska, says **Todd Smith**, founder of **AdventureSmith Explorations**, a leader in small-ship cruises.

Are you beach-lovers? Then the **Caribbean** is for you. Kids, 11 and under, cruise free on select sailings of **MSC Cruises** when they share a cabin with two adults. In low and mid-season, kids, 12 to 17, who share a stateroom with two paying adults don't have to pay the cruise fare. Guests rave about **Disney Cruise Line's** private island, which offers watersports, separate areas for teens and adults and supervised kids' activities (think character meet and greets and "Star Wars" and **Marvel** day at sea) and offers cruises from ports, including **New York, Galveston** and **San Diego**.

Do you want to be the first on your block to experience a new ship? Some 27 new ocean, river and specialty ships will debut this year. They include the 394-passenger **Carnival Horizon**, which debuts with **Mediterranean** cruises in April and sailings to **Bermuda** and the Caribbean from New York all summer before moving to **Miami**. The ship boasts the first **Dr. Seuss WaterWorks** aqua park, IMAX theater, a **SkiRide** and onboard brewhouse, among other entertainments

Is food important? While most lines have upped their dining game (and cruises are a great bet for kids to expand their palates at no extra cost), **Norwegian** offers freestyle dining -- no fixed dining times or pre-assigned seating, as well as complimentary options that include Asian fusion, made-to-order pasta and carving stations in the buffets and a range of specialty dining options from a steakhouse to French bistro, Italian and more. (They come with an extra surcharge, but some deals include [specialty dining](#).)

Is exploring new cultures key? Then **river cruises** are for you. **CroisiEurope** and **Uniworld** are among those with special family sailings in Europe with special activities and reduced prices for kids; on some CroisiEurope cruises, kids up to 16 sail free. **AMA Waterways** has partnered with **Adventures by Disney** and for especially active families, including those with grown or nearly grown kids, there's **Backroads**. Here is what [I wrote](#) about our AMA-Backroads experience. **Tauck** also offers special Bridges family river cruises.

Many families suggest that cruising -- whatever ship you choose -- is a great way to "sample" destinations, helping you to decide where you want to spend more time next trip.

Bon voyage!

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