

Fantastic Voyage



Considering a cruise vacation for the holidays, but don't know where to start? With so many fleets, exotic island-hopping itineraries and onboard amenities (think spas, swim-up bars, concerts and waterslides), you might feel like you're drowning in a sea of choices. But don't abandon ship. These five cruise holidays cater to a variety of tastes and budgets.

BY DOUG O'NEILL



European Riverboat Cruise

If you want a relaxed small (182-person) cruise that allows you to visit multiple European cities

BOOK Emerald Waterways' eight-day Jewels of the Rhine cruise from Amsterdam to Basel, Switzerland

WHERE The voyage starts in Amsterdam, where you can get your fill of Van Gogh and Gouda cheese. Then, it's on to Cologne, Germany, and down through the Rhine Gorge to the wine-making town of Rudesheim, as well as historic Mannheim, the Black Forest and Basel.



HIGHLIGHTS You get to customize your trip. If you want to shop, explore urban Europe and admire modern design, you'll be delighted by the ports of call in Cologne and Amsterdam, where you can visit the Anne Frank house. You can also visit Germany's largest cuckoo clock, enjoy lunch in a traditional family-run *gasthaus* in the middle of the Black Forest, tour the medieval town of Heidelberg by foot or nosh on cake and tea in the 2,000-year-old town of Koblenz. Disembark to visit the famous Pfalzgrafenstein Castle, built on an island in the middle of the Rhine, or stay on board for the day—the heated swimming pool and rooftop deck with bar service will be all yours.

➤ Visit emeraldwaterways.ca.



Cuba Cruise

If you want a smaller cruise holiday and the chance to see the real Cuba (before Americans start visiting in droves)

BOOK the seven-day Cuba cruise aboard the *Celestyal Crystal*, which runs from December to April

WHERE This voyage circumnavigates Cuba, starting with two days to explore historic Havana, followed by stops in Maria la Gorda, UNESCO World Heritage Site Cienfuegos, Jamaica's Montego Bay, and Santiago de Cuba.



HIGHLIGHTS Snorkelers and divers will love Maria la Gorda, a remote spot known for its huge coral reefs. (It's also popular with bird-watchers.) One of the best onshore excursions is offered in Cienfuegos, where passengers can visit the village of Trinidad, with its colonial buildings and cobblestone streets. Back on board, the *Celestyal Crystal* accommodates 1,200 passengers in its 480 staterooms. Expect lots of Cuban music, ubiquitous rum and dancing. And the food? Indulge in Canadian beef (excellent steak), local fish and lobster and a smattering of Jamaican dishes.

➤ Visit yourcubacruise.com.



Vancouver to Alaska

If you want a northern cruise from Vancouver to Alaska that offers a taste of aboriginal culture and views of fiords, glaciers and snow-capped mountains

BOOK Royal Caribbean's seven-night northbound Alaska and Hubbard Glacier cruise on the *Radiance of the Seas*

WHERE Upon departing Vancouver, the *Radiance of the Seas* (which can accommodate more than 2,100 passengers) navigates the picturesque Inside Passage along the coast of British Columbia, all the way up to Alaska. Ports of call include Ketchikan (the gateway to Misty Fjords National Monument wilderness area) and Skagway, followed by a visit to Hubbard Glacier. You can opt for a return passage or a flight back to Vancouver.



HIGHLIGHTS With natural beauty—in the form of mountains, whales and coastal rainforests—everywhere, this cruise is an Instagrammer's dream. But you'll want to close your eyes for another unforgettable experience: the first time you hear "white thunder," the sound of huge chunks of ice crashing into the water at Hubbard Glacier. Passengers also rave about the Day 4 port of call in Icy Strait Point, where the local Huna Tlingit tribe welcomes visitors to Chichagof Island. Other onshore excursions run the gamut from dogsledding to lumberjack shows and rainforest hiking. (Bring your passport on all onshore excursions that take you onto American soil.)

➤ Visit royalcaribbean.com.



Standard Caribbean Option

If you want an amenity-packed big-ship holiday that appeals to family and intergenerational travellers

BOOK Princess Cruises' seven-night Western Caribbean round-trip from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on the *Royal Princess*

WHERE Beginning and ending in Fort Lauderdale, the voyage takes passengers to Princess Cays, Bahamas; Falmouth, Jamaica; the Cayman Islands; and Cozumel, Mexico.



HIGHLIGHTS Christened by Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, in 2013, this large ship (with a 3,560 passenger capacity) has everything a vacationer could ask for: a wine cellar, an oyster bar, a fine Italian restaurant, 24-hour room service, a jogging track, a spa, a theatre, a TV studio, a nightclub, a wedding chapel and an art gallery. Child-friendly options include movie nights by the pool, a sprawling entertainment complex and separate kids' and teens' centres. Onshore excursions—exploring the Mayan ruins near Cozumel, rafting on the Martha Brae River in Falmouth and snorkeling in the coral reefs at Princess Cruises' exclusive port of call on the island of Eleuthera, called Princess Cays—will keep you busy.

➤ Visit princess.com.



Luxury Cruise

If you want luxe amenities, pampering and round-the-clock indulgences—including a personalized butler service—for a special anniversary or a high-end getaway with your girlfriends

BOOK Silversea Cruises' seven-night Caribbean and Central American cruise on the *Silver Spirit*

WHERE Embarking at Bridgetown, Barbados, the *Silver Spirit* (which has 376 crew members for 540 guests) stops in Roseau, Dominica; Gustavia, Saint Barthélemy; Turks and Caicos; and Florida's Key West and Fort Lauderdale.



HIGHLIGHTS Silversea, an Italian family-owned company, woos passengers with a fleet of refined, intimate vessels. Most ocean-view suites are decked out with terraces, and marble-tiled bathrooms are stocked with Bulgari and Ferragamo toiletries, as well as a formidable supply of Champagne. Perhaps most thrillingly, each passenger is assigned a personal butler upon check-in. Among the ports of call is Dominica, a fantasia known as Nature Island, which beguiles as much with what it has (waterfalls, oceanic rainforests, mountains, coral gardens) as with what it doesn't (sprawling resorts and crowds of tourists). Sign up for the Accessible Dominica and Rainforest Drive excursion to visit Morne Bruce lookout, enjoy the botanical gardens and finish with a refreshment at Hibiscus Falls. In Saint Barthélemy, where the ship moors in Port de Gustavia, wildlife spotting is replaced with people-watching. The capital is packed with good-looking French families wandering the café- and boutique-lined ruelles. — *Olivia Stren*

➤ Visit silversea.com.

TIPS FOR FIRST-TIME CRUISERS



Don't miss the boat You can book your own flight to the embarkation port, which is sometimes less expensive than booking through the cruise line but also more risky. The cruise line will ensure you get to your ship, but the boat might leave without you if your flight is late. Consider flying in a day early rather than arriving on departure day.



Tour the ship Take advantage of a free tour on arrival day—especially if it's a large vessel (more than 2,500 passengers). This will save time when you need to find services, such as the medical centre or the ship's boutique.



Avoid double-tipping Check to see if the ship's gratuity is built into your tab.



Check in online This makes embarkation day less stressful and saves time.



Pack a carry-on for Day 1 It's unlikely your luggage will be brought to your room right away, so pack a carry-on with a swimsuit, sandals and anything you might need on your first day.



Be patient about room access Cruise staff is efficient, but if 2,500 people just left the ship a few hours ago, those rooms need to be cleaned. You may not get into your stateroom until 2 p.m.



Remember visas and passports Double-check requirements for all ports of call and shore excursions.



Pack a power strip It will be easier to recharge your electronics. (Staterooms are notorious for having limited electrical outlets.)



Plan excursions wisely Book excursions in advance to avoid standing in line the day of. Or, simply explore on your own. Just be back on time—the ship won't wait!



BYOB The tab for wine and other alcoholic drinks adds up fast. Check your ship's policy for bringing alcohol on board.



Have the place to yourself Most ships empty out during ports of call. Stay on board to enjoy the boat, quiet and line-up-free.



Get ready to roam Buy an international roaming package for your cellphone—the ship's telephone fees will be expensive.