

First Time Cruise Tips for Planning and Booking

1. Budget properly.

“Be prepared to spend at least 200 on the ship before you get off, not counting gratuity.” - Mrharvey on [Carnival Conquest](#)

Our Take: There are some exceptions, but the vast majority of cruises are not all-inclusive. When planning your trip, be sure to [budget for extra expenses](#) like alcohol, specialty restaurants, spa treatments, and gratuities.

2. Timing is everything.

“If you are not a college student don't book over Spring Break, ask who will be cruising with you.” - pattiskar on [Carnival Imagination](#)

Our Take: The number of young children and college students onboard increases dramatically at certain times of the year, such as school breaks and holidays. If you don't want to deal with either age group, [choose another date](#).



Kids can be loud and rambunctious, and that goes for college kids as well. - Photo by Royal Caribbean

3. Keep the needs of your companions in mind.

“We were first time cruisers, and my husband is in an electric wheelchair, so we had some huge reservations. However, were blown away with the ease of accessibility, the amount of help and consideration we received from the staff & crew. Our room was ready early, and our power chair (we rented one from an accessibility company) was there when we arrived.” - revyates5 on [Carnival Breeze](#)

Our Take: Some lines are better at handling certain requests than others. Whether someone in your group has mobility limitations or food allergies, be sure to research the lines beforehand to see which are best prepared to accommodate your needs.

4. Research your ship, not just the line.

“Carnival Fascination seemed like an older boat and didn't have as many fun amenities as [we were] hoping for. There was one small pool and water slides. It would've been better with another larger pool since there were so many people around one area. There was no rock climbing wall, shuffle board, etc.” - sydneyblanch on [Carnival Fascination](#)

Our Take: Like all companies, cruise lines always advertise their newest products. Even though most ships get some kind of refurbishment every five years or so, you simply won't find towering rock-climbing walls or huge water slides on older ships. If you want the best in onboard entertainment, spring for a newer, larger vessel.



Book a newer ship if you want an endless array of onboard activities. - Photo by Royal Caribbean

5. Time flies.

“Five nights was not enough next time at least seven night stay.” - melvinyork on [Carnival Ecstasy](#)

Our Take: Shorter sailings (3-5 nights) are great for a quick getaway, but if you've never set foot on a ship before, trust us when we say you need a full week to enjoy everything a cruise has to offer.

6. Spring for a balcony if you have the cash.

"If you want privacy, but still want the ocean air and some sun, spend the extra money for a balcony!! We wish we had!!!!" - UnFascinated on [Carnival Fascination](#)

Our Take: You can get great deals on inside staterooms - we've seen some as low as \$30 per night - but unless you're certain you won't spend much time there, start with a balcony cabin. Plus, nothing beats watching the sunrise from the comfort of a private balcony while the ship pulls into port.



Couples cruising for the first time owe it to themselves to book a balcony cabin. - Photo by Celebrity Cruises

7. Cabin location is key.

"Try to avoid cabins towards the front of the ship on deck 8. It's directly under lido deck. You hear the chairs being moved at all hours." - Cruise122 on [Carnival Freedom](#)

"You would want to book your room on a high floor (like 9 and up) because then you will have easy access to everything on the boat." - NAC on [Norwegian Gem](#)

"Travelers that get sea sick do not book anything at the front of the boat!" - pinporo4 on [Navigator of the Seas](#)

Our Take: [Picking the right cabin](#) isn't just about deciding whether you can live without a balcony. Cabin location is equally important, since you don't want to get stuck underneath a dance floor or too close to the elevators. At the same time, booking a room closer to the lido deck will cut down on the time you spend going back and forth to your room. And if you're prone to seasickness, booking a cabin midship is your best bet, since the rocking caused by rough seas will be felt the least.

8. Know what to pack.

"Bring a power strip if you plan to use more than one outlet. Take your allotted 2 bottles of wine, soft drinks and water. You will need them." - KaraHershey on [Carnival Paradise](#)

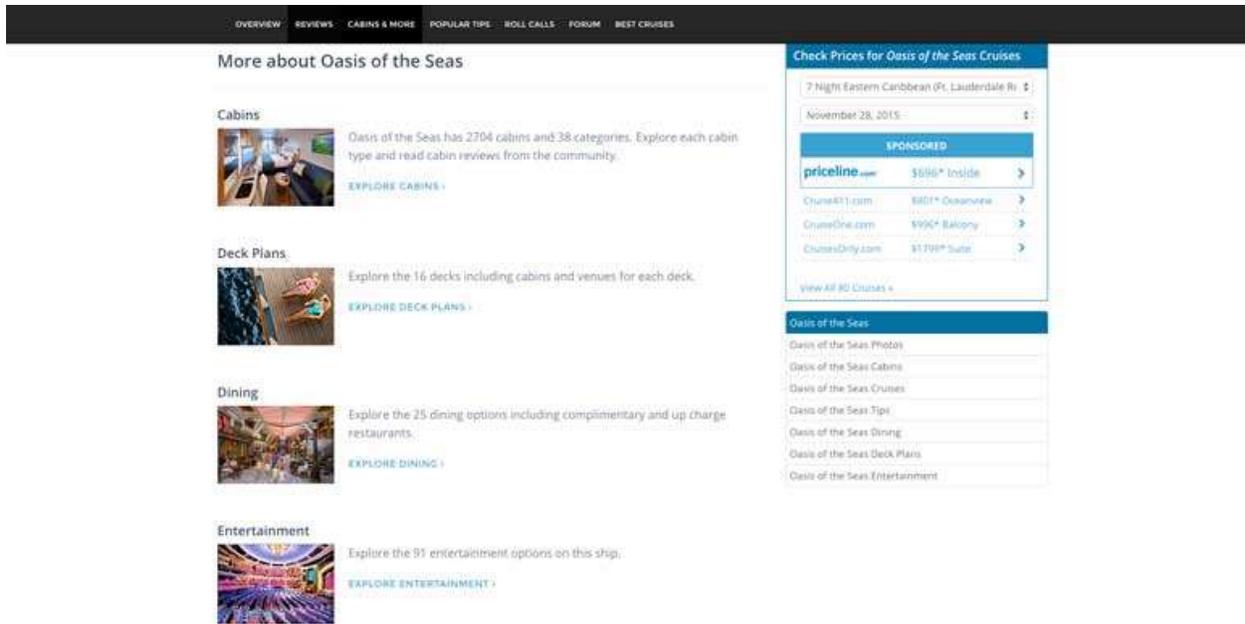
Our Take: Always pack for your sailing destination, but you should bring some small things on virtually every cruise. Also, every line has different restrictions as to what you can bring onboard - particularly regarding alcohol - so be sure to ask beforehand.

What to do on the Ship

9. Start exploring your ship before you board.

"Get a lay out of the ship ahead of time so as to minimize your hunting for the places you need to go." - Triumph on *Carnival Triumph*

Our Take: Although not all cruise ships are as large as the new floating resorts being commissioned by Royal Caribbean International, Norwegian Cruise Line, Carnival Cruise Lines, and now MSC Cruises, even a medium ship takes some time to figure out. Check out our deck plans or user photos to get a sense of where venues are in relation to your cabin.



Our ship pages have all the info you need for your upcoming cruise. - Photo by Cruiseline.com

10. Bring a carry-on for the first day.

“Pack a small bag as a carry on with swim suits, sun block, motion medicine and any other essentials as your bags may not get to your room until nearly 6pm!! We did this, but other families in our group did not and their kids could not swim until 6pm because their swim suits were in their suit cases.” - MA6 on Carnival Triumph

Our Take: The ship’s staff has to inspect and deliver the checked bags of thousands of passengers. This process can take a long time, so be sure you have everything you need for the first day in your carry-on.

11. Board early or late.

“Board the ship early the first day. Even though the cruise didn't leave Ft. Lauderdale until 5:30 we were on in time to have lunch and get a chance to explore where everything is before the actual cruise began.”- lovingthesun on [Independence of the Seas](#)

Our Take: When it comes to embarkation, it’s generally best to be among the first or last on since both groups miss the bulk of the crowds. Which you choose depends on whether you’d rather spend your day exploring the ship or the port.



At peak hours, boarding lines can get absurdly long. - Photo by Simon Duvall

12. Take inventory before you celebrate.

“Check your entire cabin for issues before you do anything else.” - herd04 on [Majesty of the Seas](#)

Our Take: Don't wait until you return to your cabin slightly tipsy after the sail-away party to realize your lamp doesn't work. Check all of the lights, appliances, and outlets before you have fun.

13. Always ask a staff member for help.

“If you need anything don't hesitate ask... They are very accommodating.” - apexpredator on [Carnival Liberty](#)

Our Take: In the thousands and thousands of reviews we receive every year, the most consistent positive feedback is about ships' staff members and crews. Not only are the workers extremely upbeat and encouraging, but they'll often go out of their way to accommodate your requests.



The staff will accommodate any (reasonable) request, so ask away - Photo by Seabourn

14. Talk to the crew.

“Engage all levels of the staff in conversations. They are from all around the world and they enjoy interaction. Hearing their stories and experiencing their humanity was a highlight of the trip.” - DaveCruiser on Celebrity Century

Our Take: The crew is fun to talk to. Bonus: Making friends with your room steward and waiters often results in even better service.

15. Planning is key.

“Plan your daily activities every morning so you don't miss anything! So much to do, so little time.” - Triumphsurvivor on Carnival Triumph

Our Take: In between meals, port stops, evening shows, and relaxing by the pool, you'll be surprised how little time you have to take advantage of everything else your ship has to offer.



Always make time for your evening entertainment. - Photo by Royal Caribbean

16. Skip the elevators when you can.

“To get around the ship use the stairs. It is much quicker as some use the elevators for one deck. At port the elevators become overcrowded and the wait can be long.” - cmarshall103 on [Norwegian Breakaway](#)

Our Take: Not only will taking the stairs save time, but it’s a good way to burn off your four-course dinner from the night before.

17. Find a quiet hideout.

“During the day, the lounging area around the bow of the ship was much quieter and relaxing than around the pool.” - jmatte on [Norwegian Dawn](#)

Our Take: If you need to escape the crowds, most ships have nooks and crannies you can flee to on sea days for some peace and quiet.



Even on crowded ships you can find a quiet nook you can use to escape from the crowds. - Photo by Celebrity Cruises

18. Know your food options.

“Get to know all the dining venues and when they are open. There is always something available, but you need to know when things open and close.”- juleeroze on [Pride of America](#)

Our Take: Different venues have different hours. Learn them quickly so you’re never stuck wandering the ship looking for a bite to eat.

“When dining, make sure you sample plates that may be new to you. Great way to try something new and it is usually delicious.” - arachubajr on Carnival Sunshine

Our Take: One of the [biggest mistakes of first-time cruisers](#) is only ordering a single item at each dinner course. Since dinner in the main dining rooms is one of the few amenities included in your cruise fare, take advantage of it by trying as many dishes as you please without worrying about the cost.

First Time Tips for Excursions and Ports

19. It doesn’t hurt to wander for a bit.

“Even if you haven't booked an excursion get off the boat. There are plenty of options for people like us who don't get around very well. We found excellent 2-3 hour van-bus trips at reasonable rates that were available right on the docks at Juneau and Sitka.” - ecstasy on [Westerdam](#)

Our Take: If the heart of the port city is easily reached from the dock without the need for shuttles or tender boats, take a stroll to stretch your legs and readjust to dry land.



In walkable ports like Venice, it's easy to step off the boat and explore. - Photo by Carnival Cruise Line

20. Disembark early or late.

"'Easy walk off' is not as easy or as walky as advertised if you want to get off the ship early. Highly recommend eating breakfast and enjoying a coffee while watching the long immovable 'easy walk-off' lines snake through deck 7." - legioncommander on [Norwegian Breakaway](#)

Our Take: Just like with boarding the ship on embarkation day, you should aim to be the first or last off the ship. If you don't have an excursion in the morning, take advantage of not having to wait in line for onboard activities or dining.

21. Take a port day off to enjoy the ship.

"Do mini-golf [on the ship] when in port, less people." - lea on [Disney Dream](#)

Our Take: The most popular onboard options are usually crowded on sea days, so if you want to do a certain activity without crowds - like trying to surf on Royal Caribbean's surf simulator without turning yourself into a public spectacle - skip a day in port and spend it onboard.



If you don't want to be rushed, wait for a port day to go mini-golfing. - Photo by Carnival Cruise Line

22. Book excursions in advance...

"Book your excursions while on board the ship as we missed an on shore whale watching tour because the people that booked onboard got head of the line, plus they had the tour buses waiting for them dock side, whereas we had to walk several blocks to catch our tour, and again missed it." - jims8az on [Carnival Miracle](#)

Our Take: Just like with boarding the ship on embarkation day, you should aim to be the first or last off the ship. If you don't have an excursion in the morning, take advantage of not having to wait in line for onboard activities or dining.

23. ...Or wait and see.

"You can get a better deal, and sometimes a better trip, if you book your off-ship excursions once you exit the ship and come face to face with the hoards of vendors waiting to make you a deal for a day trip." - SoloCruiserLou on [Norwegian Star](#)

Our Take: If there's nothing in particular you want to see, you can save money by negotiating with the vendors waiting in port.

24. Bargaining is completely acceptable.

"Don't be afraid to haggle with the jewelers on the price. Everything is negotiable!" - andrew125 on [Norwegian Breakaway](#)

Our Take: Though Americans often consider haggling a sign of being cheap, most vendors in the Caribbean and Europe rarely expect you to pay listed prices. Check out this article for some tips on how to talk sellers down to a reasonable fee.



Never pay full price for anything you buy from a vendor. - Photo by Amaly

25. Don't delay.

"Don't wait so late in life to enjoy your first cruise." - dreutlinger on [Carnival Magic](#)

Our Take: We couldn't have said it better ourselves.