



How to Make Your First Cruise the Best Vacation Ever

By Erica Silverstein

With all the buzz around action-packed megaships, visits to idyllic private cruise line beaches, expedition cruises to the far-reaches of the earth, and new ultra-luxury yachts, it's no surprise the cruise industry is attracting an increasing number of first-time cruisers. The number of travelers open to taking their first cruise increased from 55.3% in 2020 to 75.6% in 2025 according to Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA).

Travelers considering their first cruise vacation are not all Baby Boomers, or couples for that matter. The average age of a cruiser is 46.7 years, with Gen-X and Millennials the most enthusiastic cruisers, according to CLIA's [2026 State of the Industry Report](#). About 75% of cruisers are sailing with one or more generations and 34% with three to five generations of family, attracted by cruise activities for guests of all ages – including complimentary supervised children's programs.

Cruises have a high satisfaction rate compared to other vacation types, so it's not surprising that about 90% of those who have cruised will cruise again. Recent first-time cruiser Blythe Wilson, who sailed to the Bahamas with her spouse and three other couples, is among new fans. "I didn't really understand until I was there," she says. "Cruising is an amazing experience, and it makes you want to take more cruises in the future."

Here are some top tips for guests considering their first cruise vacation.

Pack for the activities you prefer

A great thing about cruising is you unpack once and get whisked to exciting destinations. Still, for some first-time cruisers, packing can be stressful. It doesn't have to. During the day on a warm-weather cruise, you'll spend most of your time in swimsuits, cover-ups, shorts, and tees. For colder-weather itineraries, pack layers to go over or under your sweatshirt and jeans.

First-timers may be surprised that many cruises still include dressy evenings when you need a nicer outfit to eat in the main dining room (though not usually a tuxedo). No stress here, either. Pack some nice duds or opt to eat in the buffet, which is always casual. Some cruise lines offer optional themed events where you are encouraged to dress accordingly, such as '80s night or a white party. On board evening attire can vary by cruise line –and some do still offer a formal night should you choose to partake -- so be sure to find out what's standard for your cruise.

Advance planning can help you save

You might love to be spontaneous in life and travel, but your cruise will benefit from some advance planning. Book shore excursions, drink packages and Wi-Fi plans online before you sail, and you'll often find prices that are discounted from the onboard rates.

If you have your heart set on a particular tour, reserve your spot when bookings open because popular tours may sell out quickly.

Use the cruise line app to plan your day

Your days at sea will be a mix of taking advantage of cruise ship amenities (pools, the spa, waterslides) and attending crew-led programs (such as trivia games, dance classes, and guest lectures). You will not be bored, but you might be overwhelmed by choice.

Download your cruise line's app to see hourly activity schedules. You may even be able to highlight your favorites for a personalized schedule. The app will also show you dining times and daily menus, deck plans, and your onboard bill. Some cruise lines will publish schedules to the app before you sail, so you can start planning your vacation activities early, while others have an app you access once onboard.

Sample the dining variety

Most cruise ships offer a mix of included and extra-fee restaurants, with dining rooms you can walk into at any time and others that require reservations. You'll find casual and upscale options, healthy dishes, and decadent vacation splurges. Cruise lines can cater to dietary restrictions such as lactose-free or gluten-free with advance notice. Your cruise will be more fun if you sample a variety of dining venues.

Large ships typically offer a choice of an assigned table, early or late seating in a main dining room, or you can opt for an anytime, walk-in option – with reservations required for specialty venues such as the steakhouse (reserve early to assure your preferred dining time). On smaller ships, dining is typically anytime within set hours, with reservations required only at specialty venues.

For specifics on onboard features and what to pack, visit the websites of CLIA member cruise lines [here](#).

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