



New Ship in 2026: Emerald Kaia

By Chrissie McClatchie

On an Emerald Kaia sailing from Athens, Joerg Grossmann, hotel director on the new 64-suite small ship, stepped on shore in the small port of Katakolon, Greece, and, at a red light, spotted a truck stacked with boxes of freshly picked strawberries.

Neither the driver nor Grossman spoke the other's language, so Grossmann pulled out his phone calculator, and a price was agreed on for the entire lot. That evening, and for the days following, passengers on the Emerald Cruises & Tours ship enjoyed strawberry creations in cocktails in the ship's lounge bar, in their suites at turndown, and on the menu in La Cucina, the main dining room. "It was so much fun," says Grossmann.

As the ship pulled back into Athens eight days later, guests were still talking about the delicious strawberries. "They were the best I have ever had," says Jason Poole, ap passenger and franchise owner with Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) member agency Cruise Planners.

Other local treats picked up en route – such as olive oil in the Peloponnese port of Gythio and Turkish delights and Turkish teas in Kuşadası, Turkey – were also a "neat touch," says Poole. In addition to delighting guests, the purchases supported local businesses.

A major milestone

Travelers are increasingly seeking out smaller, more exclusive ships with experiences that feel personal, not heavily programmed. According to CLIA's 2026 State of the Cruise Industry Report, travel professionals report Luxury, Premium, and Expedition as their highest growth areas in 2025, compared to the previous year.

"Emerald Kaia represents a major milestone in the continued evolution of our yacht portfolio and arrives at a time when demand for smaller, more immersive luxury cruising experiences has never been stronger," says Ken Muskat, president of Scenic Group (USA & Latin America), parent company the Scenic and Emerald cruise brands.

Refining its fleet

Following the launches of the Vietnam-built Emerald Azzurra in 2022 and sister ship Emerald Sakara in 2023, Emerald Kaia marks what the cruise line describes as a "refinement" of its fleet based on guest feedback. While the vessel has the same silhouette as its siblings, it is slightly

longer in length and accommodates more guests (128 vs. 120). A fourth ship, Emerald Raiya, is under construction in Vietnam for a 2027 launch.

Wellness is a headline upgrade. With Emerald Kaia, the spa and gym have been enlarged and new amenities include a dedicated salt therapy lounge and a cold plunge pool, while the exterior wall of the gym now opens to create an indoor-outdoor workout platform. The wellness zone connects directly to the extended marina lounge and platform, where guests access the ship's collection of aqua toys and inflatables.

Night Market Grill, an experiential dining venue, is another new addition. An intimate chef's table for just eight people, the eight-course tasting menu switches between Asian, Middle Eastern and Indian cuisine, with dishes prepared live in front of diners. The experience is one of the few add-ons to the base fare (certain shore excursions and spa treatments are the others). Reservations fill up early in the sailing.

Other notable upgrades include eight interconnecting suites to create additional privacy for families and groups and resort-style cabanas available on the top two decks.

The sweet spot

Travel advisor Poole sees the ship, with its program of itineraries across the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and the Red Sea/Seychelles, as being of particular interest to a relaxed, warm weather-seeking clientele that are looking for fun in the sun and a laid-back onboard environment. "For someone who loves the Caribbean, in particular, this is an amazing product for them to go and see some of the smaller islands that the big ships cannot visit," he says.

Since Scenic Group is Australian, it's no surprise that the guest demographic skews Australian, too. For Poole, that plays into how he would sell the experience. "I would never put on a client who only wanted to travel with Americans," he says. For the right cruiser, however, that combination of small ship cruising and international flavor is the sweet spot.

"A smaller boat is more our speed as we like getting to know people from other countries," says Canadian guest Shay Sommerfield, on the sailing with his mother. As regulars on Emerald River, Sommerfield says they appreciate the camaraderie of small ships.

Intimacy and destination exploration are both central to the growing appeal of luxury cruising. Guests want to "feel far more connected to the destination itself," says Scenic's Muskat, "Emerald Kaia reflects where the future of luxury cruising is headed."

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