



Protecting Our Oceans: Clean Water Cruise Ship Practices

By Aaron Saunders

Member cruise lines of Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) are leading the way when it comes to reducing and eliminating waste at sea. They are meeting or exceeding strict compliance requirements under international conventions, as well as regional and national regulations. CLIA is also actively contributing to the review and revision of applicable international conventions regulating the management and treatment of numerous waste streams.

Advanced wastewater technologies

As of October 2025, 82.4% of CLIA member's global cruise fleet – or 234 ships – are fitted with Advanced Wastewater Treatment Systems (AWTS). These systems offer tertiary levels of treatment to convert blackwater (such as water and waste from toilets and medical areas) into treated effluent that meets or exceeds even the most stringent discharge standards. CLIA members do not discharge untreated sewage anywhere at sea globally during normal operations.

With each passing year, advanced waste treatment technologies become even more advanced and capable. More than one-third of the CLIA member global cruise fleet now meets or exceeds the more stringent wastewater standards of the Baltic Sea Special Area, which are some of the strictest regulations in the world.

Advanced wastewater treatment systems and other waste management technologies and practices continue to drive innovation in the cruise industry, resulting in ships that are greener than ever before – including being able to treat and reuse their own by-products for power, to reduce waste, and to protect our oceans at the same time.

Onboard practices include the management of bilge water, ballast water, and graywater. Though not regulated under international conventions, CLIA member cruise lines agree, as a condition of membership, to only discharge these when the ship is underway and at a distance not less than four nautical miles from the nearest land.

Water conservation

CLIA member ships are also focused on water conservation. Measures onboard cruise ships include minimizing water use and reclaiming and reusing of water for non-potable (nondrinking) purposes, using water saving equipment and devices, implementing water recovery systems and processes, and training and educating crew to conserve water – for instance turning off faucets and closing valves when not in use.

Cruise ships are designed to make full use of all water that is taken in. Things that don't require potable water onboard, like toilets and hoses for washing the decks, use repurposed condensation from the ship's air conditioning and chiller units. Low-flow showerheads and vacuum toilets help cut down on demand for water, and, subsequently, wastewater.

Most ships in the CLIA member global fleet – 98.2 % of ships – can produce the majority of their freshwater needs onboard, reducing any burden on the ports of call they visit to provide fresh drinking water. Nearly every ship, for instance, can make its own freshwater via onboard desalinators. These systems draw in sea water and convert it into drinking water via reverse osmosis, aeration, or steam evaporation.

Through onboard technologies and practices, cruise ships efficiently and effectively manage and treat water from many sources – as cruise continues to lead the way in travel and tourism sustainability around the world. To learn more about CLIA's commitment to waste management technologies and practices and global environmental stewardship, visit: [Environmental Protection and Stewardship | Cruise Lines International Association](#).

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