



Sustainable Shore Excursions Are a Win for Cruise Passengers and the Communities They Visit

By Erica Silverstein

Sustainable travel has grown from a trend into a way of life. Cruise travelers are among those invested in responsible, sustainable, eco-friendly travel, and shore excursions are a direct way guests can have a positive impact on local communities.

“We are seeing a growing trend of travelers desiring sustainable shore excursions and authentic experiences as people are looking to travel with purpose and leave a positive impact on the destinations they visit,” says Linden Coppell, MSC Cruises’ Vice President of Sustainability & ESG.

Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) and several of its member lines partner with global organizations, such as the United Nations World Travel Organization, World Travel & Tourism Council, and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), to develop and promote sustainable tourism initiatives.

Member cruise lines are doing their part to create shore excursions that align with the GSTC goals of effective sustainability planning, maximizing social and economic benefits for local communities, enhancing cultural heritage, and reducing negative impacts on the environment.

Sustainable shore excursions

A growing number of cruise guests are seeking shore excursions that go deep.

“Our guests are increasingly drawn to experiences that foster authentic connections with local communities and craftspeople, including First Nations artisans, oyster cultivators, distillers, and vintners,” says Jessica Ashe, Senior Director of Shore Excursions and Future Cruises for Holland America Line. The line’s new sustainable tour offerings, such as a visit to a banana farm in St. Lucia and a walk with an Aboriginal guide on Kangaroo Island, Australia, revolve around community interactions.

Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings (NCLH) brands have tours focused on local conservation efforts, such as Regent Seven Seas Cruises' Eco-Connect tours and Norwegian Cruise Line's Go Green tours. Examples include exploring a sloth habitat in Puntarenas, Costa Rica, or planting a tree at the Sierra Espuña regional park in Cartagena, Spain, while learning about reforestation efforts.

MSC Cruises' Protectours shore excursions aim to have lower environmental impact, whether employing zero-emission electric tour buses, focusing on human-powered activities like cycling or kayaking, or involving guests in volunteer efforts, such as beach cleanups or planting trees.

Certifications and partnerships

CLIA and its member cruise lines partner with destinations, communities, and with leading organizations in delivering guests sustainable experiences ashore.

Royal Caribbean, for instance, has pledged that 60% of its tours will be certified to GSTC's standards by 2026; as of 2024, 36% of its 3,500+ excursions met the organization's criteria. Examples: A wild-caught salmon cooking class with a third-generation Alaskan fisherman and a tour of Aruba's cultural and geological landmarks combined with a visit to a local aloe factory.

In Alaska, where sister brands Holland America Line and Princess Cruises own their own lodges and transportation and rail divisions, Holland America Princess is certified by Adventure Green Alaska for its environmental, economic, and cultural sustainability practices, such as using electric and hybrid vehicles and providing guests with recyclable aluminum water bottles. Both lines work with many local companies that are also AGA-certified for shore excursion options, such as the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, Kenai Fjords Tours, and Wings Airways.

In 2024, French line Ponant became the first cruise line to achieve Green Globe certification for its contributions to sustainable tourism, which include involving local communities in developing shore activities. For example, Balinese guides introduce guests to the island's unique Hindu-Indonesian traditions and provide opportunity for guests to help with daily activities.

Economic benefits for local communities

One of CLIA's guiding principles for responsible tourism is to "contribute to the economic well-being of host communities." Shore excursions support this effort. In addition to working with local communities on planned, managed tourism, CLIA member lines support local businesses through activities ashore.

For example, when Carnival Cruise Line created its new beach destination, Celebration Key, on Grand Bahama Island, the company prioritized economic opportunities for Bahamians. In addition to enjoying water activities, cruisers can purchase art from local craftspeople and sample authentic Bahamian flavors from food trucks, that are operated by local vendors and feature locally sourced ingredients.

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