

COME SAIL AWAY

Cruising is becoming more popular than ever with young families. Why? Because it truly offers something for everyone. So jump on board and get ready for some serious high-seas fun!

BY HOLLY PEVZNER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CATIE MCCABE



DANNY LEHMAN



explore

IDEAS FOR **GETAWAYS** BIG AND SMALL



WHEN MY FAMILY CLIMBED ABOARD the *Norwegian Breakaway* last spring for our first-ever cruise, we were ready to explore everything the ship and its destinations had to offer. But between checking out the epic waterslides, cool kids' club, and turquoise waters of the Bahamas, I had another mission: trying to figure out what makes cruising so popular. After all, 76 percent of people who've been on a cruise say it's better than land-based vacations. That's a lot of happy travelers!

After just two days on the boat, the answer was clear: Cruises offer so much to do that each family can craft its own unique experience. "Just because everyone is on the same ship doesn't mean everyone is having the same vacation," says Stephanie Goldberg Glazer, a travel agent and owner of Live Well, Travel Often Travel Agency, in Miami. "How you enjoy it is entirely up to you." A family cruise is almost like those one-size-fits-all dresses that can be converted into dozens of styles. At first, it doesn't seem possible that one thing can work for so many and be totally customizable at the same time. But I own that magic dress, and after my very first family cruise, I know, gosh darn it, both *can* do exactly that! Ready to make those **#vacationgoals** a reality? Just follow our advice, and you'll have smooth sailing from here on out.



Book Early

Fellow parents are looking to vacation during school and summer breaks, just like you, so start planning nine to 12 months prior to setting sail to get dibs on the best cabin types and destinations, says Colleen McDaniel, senior executive editor at *CruiseCritic*. But procrastinators (raising my hand!), rejoice: “If you’re fairly flexible with cabin types, dates, and itineraries—and you can drive to a port—you’re better able to score a last-minute deal, even during popular times,” says Goldberg Glazer.

Choose a Home Port

When planning a vacation, you might think it’s smarter to focus on where you wind up, not where you start.

But if you’re not married to a specific destination, figure out if you’re able to drive to a nearby port. This way, you can eliminate the added cost (and hassle) of flying your family. Me? I live in Brooklyn, a short car ride from one of the New York City ports, which host seven cruise lines including family favorites Disney, Carnival, and Norwegian. Cruises depart from obvious locations in Florida and California, but they also leave from ports in Mobile, AL; New Orleans; Boston; San Francisco; Baltimore; Seattle; and many other coastal cities.

Get a Room

Standard cabins, while snug, can accommodate as many as four, thanks to pullout sofas and super-cool

bunks that emerge from the ceiling. Family cabins can generally house up to six, and connected suites can hold about a dozen. But because I booked late, we had to go with what was available, which happened to be side-by-side, but not connected, staterooms. This was the best mistake ever. We all loved being able to rest and decompress between activities without being on top of one another. While I got this setup by accident, if adjoining is what you crave, book early, and know it will cost more. “Usually the third and fourth person in a room can be booked at a lower rate,” says Goldberg Glazer. “So say the parents are \$1,200 per person, kid one and kid two may be only \$499.” If you book more than

one room, that discount doesn’t happen. “If there are no good third- and fourth-person deals, you may be better off with two rooms—and more space,” says Goldberg Glazer.

Learn About Kids’ Clubs

All the big-hitter family-cruise lines have clubs for the 3- to 11- or 12-year-old set. After taking a gander at each of the offerings, I quickly surmised that my first-timers (7 and 10 at the time) would have a blast at any of the clubs. We settled on the *Norwegian Breakaway*, with its Splash Academy kids’ club. Because of my boys’ ages, they landed in two separate programs—and that’s not unusual. (Disney is one of the only kids’ clubs to host all ages in the same group.) And not all cruises divide kids in the same manner, so check first. “I needed my kids to be together so they’d be comfortable,” says Nicole DeBickes, a mother of two with 11 cruises under her belt who also blogs at *FamilyWithLatitude.com*. “I found that we’d be able to keep the kids together on Disney and Norwegian but that they’d be split on Royal Caribbean. Knowing that helped us pick the right line.” (Even though my kids were in different groups, they were still able to hang together during certain free-play hours.) Bringing teenagers along? There are dedicated areas and activities for them too. Disney Cruise Line’s private island, Castaway Cay, even has a beach just for 13- to 17-year-olds!

Get Ahead of the Queasies

My oldest son and I have a messy history with motion sickness, so that was a real concern. “It’s a big worry for many, but shouldn’t be a deterrent, especially because most will never experience it,” says Goldberg Glazer. Why? Cruise ships, particularly large ones, have stabilizers to minimize motion. Plus, there are many places where you can look out at the horizon.



Gather intel before booking your trip (or any onboard extras): Go to cruisecritic.com and read through your selected cruise. You'll find a soup-to-nuts breakdown of cabins, dining options, activities, and more. Plus, those who have taken your cruise in the past offer up their takes.

Your Family-Cruise Cheat Sheet

Ready to sail away on your next family vacation, but not sure where to start? Find your match with our chart that breaks down the deal-makers and breakers for each major U.S. line.

	Carnival	Disney	Norwegian	Princess	Royal Caribbean	MSC
Biggest draw	connecting cabins; onboard water park; kid-free areas	favorite characters throughout; all onboard entertainment is included	mealtimes are flexible, with lots of options; family-friendly Broadway-style shows	destination-themed onboard activities	wide selection of onboard activities that are great for older kids	kids under 11 sail free (except for taxes and fees) and 12- to 17-year-olds sail at a discounted rate
But know this ...	appeals to college and spring-break crowds too	not awesome for adrenaline-fueled/ adventure-seeking teens/tweens	important to book shows and dining times in advance to avoid missing out	no adrenaline-pumping extras	large-capacity ships can feel crowded	only U.S. port is in Miami
Character tie-ins	Dr. Seuss parades, storytimes, and more; plus, life-size Hasbro games	Mickey and the gang; the princess posse; Marvel and Star Wars characters abound	None	Discovery and Animal Planet show tie-ins like <i>MythBusters</i> , <i>Deadliest Catch</i> , and Shark Week	favorites from Dreamworks films like <i>Kung Fu Panda</i> and <i>Madagascar</i> roam the ship	Lego-themed games and competitions on board; Lego Sailor character meet-and-greets
Big-kid & family thrills	IMAX theater; Skyride; water park; mini golf	AquaDuck waterslide; sports simulators	ropes course; zip line; rock-climbing; sports courts	sports courts; mini golf	ice-skating; surf simulator; bumper cars	race-car simulator; waterslide/video-game combo ride
Price <i>(Starting prices for a family of four on a seven-day cruise to the Western Caribbean)</i>	\$539 per adult and \$349 per child	\$1,736 per adult and \$974 per child	\$574 per person based on four guests	\$799 per adult and \$399 per child	\$2,025 per adult and \$799 per child	\$777 per adult and \$277 per child

(Having a steady spot to fix your eyes quells the queasiness.) Nonetheless, I came prepared with Dramamine and NoMo Nausea acupressure and aromatherapy bands for all. While we needed (and liked using) the peppermint-infused bands on the very first night, which was rocky, we didn’t need them again the rest of our vacation. If motion sickness happens to sneak up on you, know that most ships’ guest services will give out

seasickness pills for free. You just have to ask. And if you can’t spot the horizon because it’s dark, head to the center of the ship, which is steadiest.

Don’t Worry About Food

If your family is dotted with allergies, intolerances, or food particulars, you’ll be fine. Seriously. “Cruise lines can handle any food restrictions or preferences,” says Goldberg Glazer. “Just make your



First-Time Cruisers Must-Haves

1. PASSPORTS Technically, all you need is proof of citizenship and a government-issued photo ID to cruise to the Caribbean, Bahamas, Bermuda, the Mexican Riviera, or Canada. But if you miss your ship and need to travel outside the U.S. to meet up with your cruise or you need to depart the ship unexpectedly (like for a medical emergency), a passport is required to enter the country by air.

2. FIRST-DAY BAG It will take time before you see your luggage after you board, so keep essentials (such as bathing suits and meds) with you.

3. POWER STRIPS In-room plugs are scarce! (But make sure strips don't have surge protectors, which aren't allowed on board.)

4. DRESS-UP CLOTHES Most family-centered cruises gently encourage a dress code for dining, so pack some cute things.

5. MEDICINE KIT Bring your own stash of OTC meds for kids and grown-ups, plus bandages and ointment. (A trip to the ship's doc is best saved for an emergency.)

6. INSURANCE Travel insurance covers you in case of an unforeseen onboard or in-port medical emergency, trip cancellation, and more. It will cost 5 to 15 percent of the price of the total trip.

cruise line aware of your issues when making your reservation and speak with the maître d' upon boarding." Parents of picky eaters can go ahead and exhale: Kids' menus are everywhere. But be assured that your children will absolutely be allowed to order off the regular menu too—music to my ears, especially since my kids teeter-totter between their love of hot dogs and shrimp scampi.

Keep Busy on Port Days

Our cruise made three stops, but we remained on board during our first port day in Florida. While fellow passengers filed off the ship, we stayed behind to enjoy less-crowded pools and amenities. Some, like Corinne Lavinio, a mother of two who has been on five cruises, never leave the ship. "We don't want to be nickel-and-dimed with excursions or feel rushed, so we stay put," she says. I hear that. But my boys had never dipped their toes in the turquoise waters of the Bahamas and could not wait to do so. (And, my goodness, me too!) For the next two stops, we disembarked with a plan. I prebooked excursions—a snorkel day and a dolphin encounter—directly through Norwegian. While this tends to cost more, it seemed the safest bet. "When you book excursions directly through the cruise line, they're required to wait for you before departing for the next port of call," notes McDaniel.

"That's not the case if you book independently." That said, for my next cruise (oh, there will be a next cruise), I'll probably work with a travel agent to secure excursions; I'll pack snorkeling sets instead of renting; and perhaps I'll steal this idea from Johnique Tullis-Brodie, a mother of three and a three-time cruiser: "Instead of excursions, we get a day pass at a hotel or rent cabanas. We get access to a pool, the beach, and bars and restaurants. It's perfect."

Be Open-Minded

To be honest, I wasn't convinced that I'd like cruising. I thought it would be too crowded, that the food would stink, that I'd feel claustrophobic, and that we'd be bored. I'm stunned by how wrong I was on all fronts. My family fell for the Broadway-esque shows, the huge variety of yummy restaurants, the music, the sporty activities, even the bingo—hook, line, and sinker. I'm also amazed that cruising is not as crazy-pricey as I imagined. And while lots of ships up-sell you on drinks and onboard extras—such as spas, certain shows, and specialty dining—you don't have to participate in any of that. "With so much included and at your fingertips, a family cruise is a lot of bang for your buck," says Kristine Gobbo, a mom of two who has cruised twice. "Plus, it makes vacationing with kids so easy." What more can you ask for?