



Tips for New Cruisers

Contents

Cruise Fare.....	2
Before the Cruise, Boarding, & Arrival.....	3
Food & Drink.....	4
Attire.....	7
Shore Excursions.....	8
Packing Tips.....	9
Cruising with Children.....	11
Miscellaneous.....	12

This guide is intended to provide a general idea of what to expect on a cruise. Exact policies vary between cruise lines and do change from time to time. Please check your cruise lines' website for current policies and exact details. This information is not guaranteed but is solely intended to be a guide on what to expect and how to prepare for your first cruise experience.

Cruise Fare

Cruises are essentially “all inclusive”: the fare price you pay includes your stateroom, food and drinks, onboard activities and entertainment, and more!

Staterooms are usually offered in several categories, which you’ll select at booking: Interior, Oceanview, Balcony, or Junior Suite/Suite. Each category will have several sub-categories within it usually signified by a number and letter combination (Interior 4A, 4B, 4C etc.). These are based on location within the ship, so the higher the number/letter combo, the better location you’ll get. Better locations are usually classified as mid-ship and/or higher decks.

Almost all food and drinks on the ship are free; however, there are some specialty drinks, restaurants, and snack shops that will be an extra charge. Free food available to you usually will include unlimited options in the main dining room, a buffet restaurant, and multiple other venues around the ship such as a pizzeria, poolside grill, cafe, soft serve ice cream, international cuisine, and more. Snacks, afternoon tea, popcorn, cookies, and other snacks are often served in various places around the ship for free as well.



Most activities and entertainment onboard are free, including live theater, performances and shows, concerts and music, movies, contests, classes and lectures, recreational activities, waterparks, pools and hot tubs, fitness equipment, children’s programming, deck parties, and LOTS more. There are usually multiple bars, lounges, and clubs (while use of these facilities are free, the drinks are not)

Activities usually not included in your cruise fare are use of the spa, some adult-only retreat areas, childcare for children under 3, gambling in the casino, classes/tastings involving alcoholic beverages, lounges reserved for certain suite or membership level guests, and other special activities varying by cruise line and ship.

Cruise fare also does not include mandatory staff gratuities. Exact rates vary based on cruise line and stateroom category but they average \$13-17 per person, per day, including infants and children. These can be paid ahead online or through your onboard account.

Shore excursions are also not included and will be an additional expense per person, per excursion. You are free to browse the port areas on your own at no charge, or book a planned excursion through your cruise line or a third party.

Before the Cruise, Boarding, & Arrival



Before you leave home, complete your online registration and check-in. You will be able to print your official boarding passes and cruise-issued luggage tags, which you must use for your luggage. I recommend printing an extra copy of each. **Make sure you bring all documents and your passports to check in.**

Be sure to select your check-in time. Select the earliest time available as you can check in LATER than what you selected, but not earlier. Once at the terminal check-in, ask for the lowest group number being given, as they will begin boarding by numbers. There are usually comfortable waiting areas.

Most cruise ports have an official parking lot onsite but there are usually private lots nearby that are up to 50% cheaper. Most of these are secured with guards, gates or security cameras. Make sure it is secure and offers free shuttle service to the terminal, and you'll save on parking.

Note: even at the cruise terminal and pier, porters who assist you with your luggage are not cruise employees and it is expected to tip them. \$1-2 per bag is acceptable.

At check-in many cruise lines require either a cash deposit or a minimal hold to be placed on a card in order to open your onboard cruise account. You will be issued a “cruise card” to make any purchases onboard and will settle your account at the end of the sailing.

Many times you won’t be able to go to your cabin immediately after boarding so plan to eat lunch first. (Your luggage will be taken onboard to your room for you.) Lunch is usually served in the buffet restaurant during and after boarding. Lines queue up quickly, so save your sightseeing for later and go grab a table.

Your steward will likely come by your cabin on embarkation day. He/she will ask if you prefer to have your cabin cleaned either morning, evening or both. Also, most cruise lines provide nice, complimentary bathrobes. If one is not already in your cabin, ask your room steward.



Almost all staterooms now have safes. Some have a keypad where you enter a pin, and some use the magnetic strip such as off a credit card. For the magnetic strip, it is best to avoid using a current credit card or driver’s license. There have been cases where the data on the card gets corrupted. Instead, use an expired gift card, old credit card, or something similar.

Food & Drink

As mentioned above there is a huge variety of free food available throughout the ship. In addition to the main dining room and other included venues you may see some other free surprises! International cuisine-of-the-day stations, pop-up restaurants, snack stands, and special Sea Day meals are very popular. Sea Days are especially well-known for great brunches, afternoon tea, and a traditional British pub lunch.

Specialty restaurants are NOT included in your fare and will have either a cover charge or price per item. These are usually steakhouses, upscale Italian or Asian, Chef's Table Experiences, contemporary American, and other similar venues.



You should make reservations ahead of time to dine at one of these places. (Tip: on the first night of a cruise they offer special deals you won't find any other time, like a free bottle of wine!)



The main dining room and majority of specialty restaurants offer plated service. Most other free restaurants onboard are walk-up to order or self-serve.

Breakfast is usually served in the main dining room and the buffet restaurant, but lunch and dinner should be available at most all venues. On port days check for special hours at all dining venues.

Dinner service in the main dining room has 3 types of seating and you'll select which one you want at booking. You can change it later or be put on a waitlist.

<u>Early Dining</u>	<u>Late Dining</u>	<u>My Time/Anytime Dining</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Usually between 5:30-6pm ● Assigned tables ● Same tablemates each night ● Good for young ones, families ● May have to rush back on port days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Usually between 8-8:30pm ● Assigned tables ● Same tablemates each night ● Good for adult groups and adventurers who like to stay out in port all day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Eat anytime in dinner hours, usually in a separate dining room ● Sit at your own table or with different people each night ● Offers the most flexibility, but you may have to wait for a table

Even though you have to pick one of these, it is always your choice whether to eat in the main dining room or pick a different place to eat. You do not have to go there each night. (However if you sign up for Early or Late you do have to go at your assigned time or eat elsewhere.)

Room service is available 24/7 and is usually complimentary, though some cruise lines are now charging for certain overnight hours or menu items. Room service is great for a leisurely breakfast on the balcony! The breakfast menu is sometimes on a separate card that you will find in your cabin. When the food is delivered to your cabin, they will ask you to sign a receipt, and on that slip is a place for “tip”. It is customary to leave that blank and to tip the person a few dollars in cash. When you are finished, place your tray outside your cabin door.

As far as drinks onboard, here’s what you can typically expect:

<u>Unlimited Free Drinks</u>	<u>Available for Purchase</u>
Non-bottled water	Bottled water
Iced tea	Soft drinks (<i>Disney does include these</i>)
Lemonade	Alcoholic beverages
Some juices	Some juices
Hot coffee and tea (non-specialty)	Specialty coffee (lattes, frappuccinos, etc.)
Hot chocolate	

You can purchase “for pay” drinks either a la carte onboard OR as a prepaid package. It is usually only financially beneficial to purchase a package if you drink 4 or more non-free drinks per day, per person.

All purchased drinks have an automatic 15% gratuity added to the price. When you sign for the drink, there is a line for “Gratuity”. If you add anything there (which most people do not) it will be in addition to the 15% tip already included in the price of the drink. Drink packages will also incur a gratuity surcharge on top of the package price.

Take a nice big travel coffee mug, preferably one with a lid. You can fill it up and enjoy a morning walk around the ship. You can also take a different travel mug for ice water and tea. Great for sitting out by the pool or on the balcony.



Attire

Everyday attire is extremely casual. Most people are in shorts and T-shirts (and definitely don't forget your swimsuit!). Breakfast and lunch generally don't have dress guidelines other than common courtesy and decency. Dinner in the main dining room does sometimes have regulations; check your cruise line's specific policy as some do not allow shorts, sleeveless shirts, etc. in the main dining room.



New cruisers are sometimes concerned about "formal night". For most cruise lines, this is really not the big event it is used to be. Once or twice during a cruise the main dining room will require formal wear, but if you do not wish to participate, you are free to dine elsewhere that night in normal attire. If you DO participate, check your cruise line's exact policy for formal attire. Typically some people still dress "formal" (such as a tux, suit and tie, floor length or cocktail dress), but most passengers now dress down considerably. Slacks and a polo shirt are very much the norm, and even some wear jeans. Again this varies drastically between cruise lines.



Do not forget hats, sunglasses and sunscreen - especially for Caribbean cruises. And use the sunscreen. You are much further south, and you will burn before you know it.

Take a light windbreaker. Even during the summer, a breeze off the open ocean can have a slight chill. You may want to take a sweater for the dining room, the theater and evening lounges.

Shore Excursions

Every day you are in port shore excursions will be available. Your cruise line will offer official excursions to book directly but many 3rd party vendors offer them as well. (When you get off the dock at some ports, there will be booths advertising excursions to sign up for onsite, but these often can't be vetted and will be overpriced.)

Shore excursions offer something for EVERY personality, change from port to port, and range from low-key walking or riding tours to extreme adventure! Just a few examples:

- Swimming with dolphins, snorkeling, scuba diving, parasailing, jet skiing, paddleboarding
- Ziplining, ATV tours, alpine roller coasters, helicopter rides, horseback riding
- Fishing, whale watching, glacier climbing
- Historical tours, fine dining, train rides



There are countless more activities. Also, many cruise lines now have their own private Caribbean islands where they will stop for a day and these can be a blast. Relax on the beach, choose from excursions, enjoy a free bbq/luau style lunch and more.

Most shore excursions are limited to a certain number of people. Although you can book them on the ship it is highly recommended to do so ahead of time.

Official cruise line excursions are often the priciest but they do come with benefits. If bad weather arises or your itinerary changes, they will refund your money or take care of it for you. They also always have a return-to-ship guarantee, meaning if your groups runs late, the ship will wait for your return or worst case they will pay to transport you to the ship. If booking a 3rd party excursion or activity, be sure you inquire about return-to-ship guarantees.

Many people take their passport with them when going to the islands. No one plans to miss the ship, but if that happens you do not want to be in a foreign country without a U.S. passport.

Keep in mind that you are free to browse the port area on your own and that is free, but the ship will NOT wait for you to return or be responsible for anything that happens to you on shore.

Packing Tips

If you're staying in one cabin with multiple people and would like some privacy, consider bringing a sheet and some magnetic hooks. The walls are almost always made of metal and you can hang up the sheet as a divider.

Power outlets have traditionally been scarce in staterooms, though cruise lines are slowly modifying them to have more. A 3-way plug or extension cord may help if you have many devices to charge (it must be in "like new" condition and not appear to be a fire hazard). Some rooms offer a European outlet; if yours does you can bring a converter and use it also.

Bathroom counter space is also lacking so you may want to bring a hanging bag or useable toiletry case. The counter should be fine for 2 people, but a family of 4 will be crowded for space.

You may want to bring a low-wattage nightlight particularly if you are in an interior stateroom.

You do not need to pack beach towels - they are provided for free, and you will be allowed to take those off the ship to the island beaches. Free towels are also available at the pools.

You will likely have wet clothes/swimsuits so bring a bag for wet items.

Consider a waterproof case for your ID, cruise card, credit card, etc. while swimming or snorkeling in port.



Binoculars may be nice for viewing the ocean or land when pulling into port, especially if you have a balcony room.

Take a wristwatch. There are very few clocks on the ship. There are some, but they are few and far between. You also need a watch when you are off the ship. The local island may not be on the same time as “ship time”. Set your watch to “ship time” and leave it there. When they say the ship will leave the island at 3PM, that does not always mean 3PM island time, and you may very well (literally) “miss the boat”. And do not use a cell phone as your watch (it will sync to island time).

This is not the airlines; there are no limitations as to the number of carry-on bags. There are limitations on size and content, but not quantity. Just remember – it is called “carry on” because you have to carry it, and you are not going to be allowed into your room right away. If you are taking a flight to and from the cruise you will still have to follow airline baggage regulations.

In your checked luggage, place photocopies of your passport, medicine prescriptions, return airline tickets, and emergency contacts. You may also want to keep the international toll-free number of your credit card company in case you lose your credit cards.

During debarkation, do NOT pack your passport and ID cards in your luggage. When you are coming back through homeland security, you are essentially re-entering the United States. They will not allow you back onto US soil without proper documentation.

Most cruise lines will allow you to bring a small amount of wine onboard per person (typically one bottle). Some will allow you to bring water or canned sodas; check your cruise line’s specific policy and packing requirements. For a nominal fee you can also order bottled water to be delivered ahead of time to your stateroom. If you bring your own wine, don’t forget a small corkscrew. Your cabin steward will provide an ice bucket with ice if you ask. Your cabin will have wine glasses available.



Take a bunch of \$1 bills to use for tips - room service, baggage handlers, taxis, etc. Also take small bills rather than large bills. When you are shopping on the islands, if all you have are “twenties”, you will end up either paying a higher price OR when they give you back change it will not be in US dollars. Have small bills (\$1, \$5, \$10), negotiate the price, and pay the exact amount if possible.

If you have a CPAP machine, take it as carry-on. Cruise staff see these every day, and they know what it is. In your CPAP travel case, pack a long (ie: 15 foot) extension cord (with the machine). In most cases, your cabin will NOT have an AC outlet next to the bed. The extension cord must be in “like new” condition.

Cruising with Children

Most cruises require an infant to be 6 months old to sail; some transoceanic and longer cruises have a 12 month old requirement. Also note: women over 24 weeks pregnant are also not usually allowed to sail for health and safety reasons.



Every major cruise line offers special programs for children and teens. These are usually grouped into ages groups approximately: 6 months- 3 years, 3-5 years, 6-8 years, 9-11 years, and teens. Childcare under 3 is charged by the hour, but older children and teen programs are almost always free.

There will be a sign-up and registration on embarkation day for all age levels, so make sure you go see the facilities and have your child(ren) registered on the first night. For children under 3, you usually have to select the hours you want childcare ahead of time.

Childcare workers are extremely well-qualified staff who will provide a fun, safe environment. Most cruise lines require anyone working in the children's staff to have a minimum 4 year degree in a childcare related field, 3-5 years experience working with children before joining the cruise staff, 30+ hours of extra training including CPR, first aid, and basic medical care. They take the staff-to-child ratio very seriously. Your children will be in good hands and very safe.

Kids and teens are all the time talking about how much fun they have in their groups! They have constant entertainment, kid-themed programs, classes and educational activities, contests, and lots more. It is NOT like dumping your children off to be supervised for a few hours. It is a fun, intentional, awesome program where they will have a blast.

Kids must be signed in and out by a parent. Teenagers are usually free to come and go as they please.

You are allowed to bring breastmilk and breastmilk equipment onboard, as well as formula and water to make formula. Check your cruise line's specific packing policy.

Miscellaneous



During your cruise, they will take many photos. (You do not have to buy any.) There will be multiple photographers available, each with a different backdrop. There are no "sitting fees", so go to each station and let them take as many photos as they want. Later, you can decide how many to purchase, or not purchase any at all. They do take some pretty good pictures, and it will be much cheaper than having a family portrait taken at a studio.

If necessary, the ships have self-serve laundry rooms, or sometimes you can have cruise staff do your laundry for a fee. Take one or two of those "one load" laundry soap tablets, or a small box of dry laundry detergent.

Placing some bright colored duct tape or other easy identifiers on your luggage can help with your bags. Duct tape is easy because you can put it on all sides, and that way you can see it no matter how the bags are stacked. It will also help cruise staff easily see which bags go together in your cabin.

Turn off your cell phone when you board the ship, and do not turn it back on until you get off the ship. (Or alternatively put it on airplane mode if you only want to use the cruise line's mobile app or other offline apps). Once the ship pulls away from land, they turn on the ship cellular system. It is not the normal system by Verizon, Sprint, etc... It is operated by the cruise line and uses satellites. It may not matter what type of calling plan you have, how many free minutes you get each month, nor anything else. You will be using the ship cellular system and the contract you have with your regular cell provider may be moot. The cruise line will charge you - and charge you a lot - for each and every minute used, for every byte of data used, and for every text message sent. This may be especially true for "smart phones", which can update apps without you even knowing it.

You can connect to Wifi on the ship but usually have to purchase an Internet package to do so. Some cruise lines also offer a phone/data/ package.



Some hotels offer "pre-cruise specials" where they allow free parking during your cruise. Some also have free shuttles to the pier. Call the hotel directly and ask (call the hotel direct, not the corporate 800-number).

Some people express concern about safety when walking around the ship by themselves late at night. Common sense and awareness always applies, but crime is surprisingly low on cruise ships. There are security cameras everywhere and the ship is active 24 hours per day. There are always crew members and passengers wandering about. Use good sense and you should be fine.

If you purchase liquor from a duty free shop, it will be delivered to your cabin on the last night of the cruise. You will NOT be able to walk out of the gift shop with it (this also applies to liquor purchased in ports of call. When you board the ship, it will be confiscated and delivered to your cabin on the last night). Duty free prices may or may not be such a great deal. Sometimes you can get better prices from discount liquor stores. When price comparing, be aware that duty free bottles are usually not the same size as those in the US, so make an apples-to-apples "per ounce" comparison.

The specialty coffee shop often has free daily crossword and Sudoku puzzles. It usually has a small paper with top news stories.

There are some special activities only available on Sea Days. Make sure you check out your cruise newsletter ahead of time so you don't miss them! Here are a few examples:

- **BRUNCH**

Sleep in a bit and check out the special brunch put on in the "anytime" dining room. A typical menu will have things like pancakes and bagels, soups and salads, steak-n-eggs and Huevos Rancheros, a Bloody Mary bar and lots more!

- **AFTERNOON TEA**

Complementary service with special desserts served only at tea time alongside delicious hot teas.



- **TOWEL ZOO**



While you will get used to seeing a happy little towel animal in your room each night, on sea days with some cruise lines, if you get up early you'll find a whole zoo of towel animals scattered around one of the pool decks. This is especially fun for little ones and young children to discover.

- CASINO

Sometimes the casino will be closed during dock on port days due to regulations with the different countries of port. Sea days are the day to play the casino, and often extra tournaments and slots are offered as well.

- "BEHIND THE FUN" ULTIMATE TOUR

Many cruise lines have an exclusive "behind the scenes" tour, typically only offered on the very last sea day of the cruise and limited to around 16 participants. Go behind the scenes to to the ship's bridge, engine control room, main galley, staff dining areas, storeroom, laundry and other spaces for a rare insider's view of many areas typically seen only by the ship's crew. This can only be purchased onboard at the Shore Excursion Desk, so hurry to book after you've boarded. Cost averages \$55-\$95 per person depending on the length of the cruise.

- CHECK OUT A MATINEE SHOW

Sometimes- not guaranteed- there will be afternoon matinees of shows on sea days. Enjoy the show with less crowds or take the little ones before they're too sleepy to see it at night.

