



# Your Guide to CRUISING

*Thousands of ships set sail each year. Which cruise is right for you?*

BY HILARY ACHAUER

**M**y packed day planner is a true picture of my life—booked solid with appointments, meetings and reminders. It's clear that I really need a vacation, but researching a detailed itinerary is the last thing I want to add to my to-do list.

As my life has gotten more complicated, I've discovered I want my vacations to be simple. I just want to show up, bathing suit and book in hand, ready to relax.

Enter the cruise. With more than 3,000 different cruises to choose from each year, and about 2,000 cruise destinations worldwide, cruising offers almost unlimited variety and unmatched ease.

“Where else can you see a different destination each day, have all your meals included, be entertained by the cruise line in the evening and spend your days at sea?” says Lynne Steidle, a AAA Travel Counselor in Concord, Calif. “How much better can it get?”

## **Why Cruise?**

The cruise industry is the fastest-growing segment of the travel industry, with more than 2,100 percent growth since 1970, when only an estimated 500,000 people took a cruise. The Cruise Lines International Association estimates that 12.8 million people will have taken cruises by 2008's end.



As more people cruise, the face of the typical cruise passenger is changing. Contrary to the misconception that cruises are for the 70-plus set, the average age of first-time passengers is now well under 40. Depending on the type of cruise you choose, you'll meet singles, couples, families and groups of friends of all ages.

Think you'll be bored? As long as you choose the right ship for you, that's rarely a problem. These days, ships now have boxing rings, ice-skating rinks, surfing (on a flow rider pool) and bowling alleys.

With the value of the dollar falling against the euro, a cruise is a great choice if you're looking to maximize your vacation budget, especially with travel to Europe, where the all-inclusive cost is in dollars.

## Picking Your Cruise

With so many options available, how do you find the cruise that's best for you?

Cruises range from ships that take fewer than 200 people to large resort liners that can hold more than 3,000 passengers. The experience—and the destinations—on these ships vary wildly, so picking the right cruise sets the tone for your entire vacation.

First, figure out your destination. This will narrow down your choice of ship. Cruises travel to almost anywhere you can think of, including old standbys like

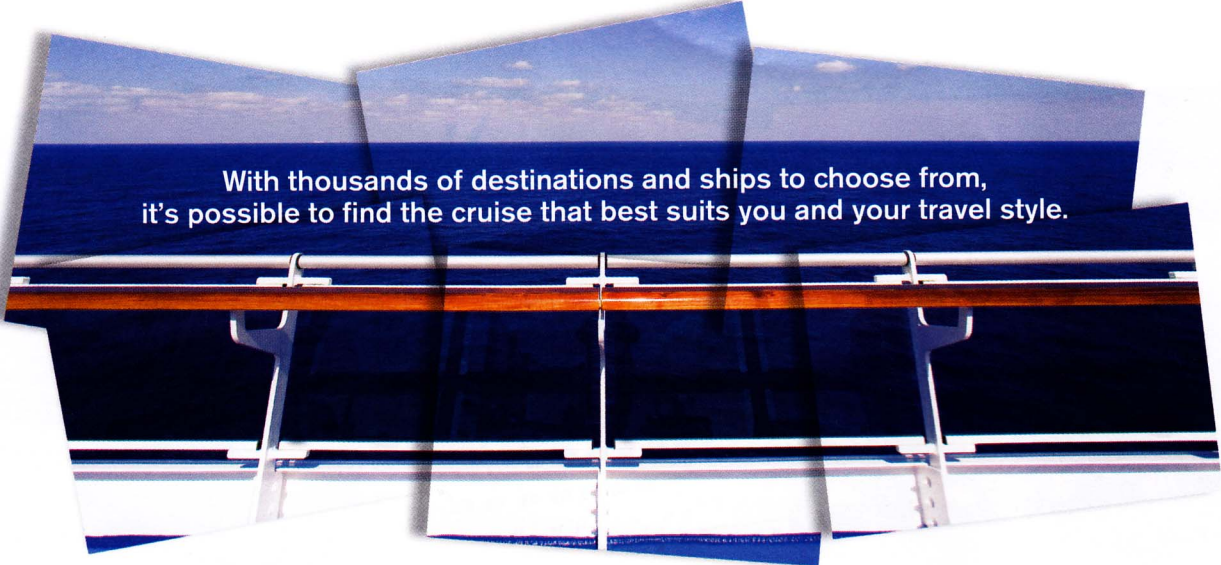
the Caribbean, Europe and Alaska, as well as new destinations such as Asia, the Indian Ocean, South America and Dubai.

After you've decided where you want to go, a AAA Travel Counselor can help you find a cruise that fits you. They have been trained to distinguish the nuances between each cruise line and ship, and know the newest cruise industry information, itineraries and special offers.

"We help you break down the components to find the right cruise," says Judie Pivarnik, a AAA Travel Counselor located in San Mateo, Calif. "We also have the inside track on special promotions, discounts and upgrades."

When you meet with your Travel Counselor, be prepared to tell them your budget, how long you can get away and what you expect from your experience. Do you want a cruise with dress codes, one geared toward baby boomers or one that's kid-friendly? Do you want nonstop, Vegas-type action or a ship with onboard academic lecturers? AAA Travel Counselors receive hands-on training in cruise options.

You can cruise any month of the year, but the sailing seasons are limited in some parts of the world. Savvy travelers, however, can use this to their advantage by traveling during what are known in the



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cruise industry as shoulder seasons: before or after the most popular vacation weeks for an area. Try the Mediterranean in the early spring, or save that cruise to Alaska for September. You may find bargains on price and smaller crowds.

### Choosing the Right Cruise Line

So you've decided on a destination and your AAA Travel Counselor has given you information about the ships and cruise lines in your budget. How do you narrow down your choices and find the ship that's right for you?

"I like to compare it to department stores," says Pivarnik. "Some cruise lines are like Target or Sears, and some are more like Neiman Marcus."

Each cruise line is different, and a knowledgeable, experienced travel specialist is the best person to help you sort through your choices. According to Steidle, Carnival Cruise Lines is very true to their advertising—they really are "The Fun Ships," full of bright colors, neon lights and games.

Princess Cruises and Royal Caribbean tend to attract a mixed range of ages to their cruises, which are also mid-priced. Holland America Line and Celebrity

Cruises have more mature passengers and activities to match. For example, *Celebrity Solstice* just introduced AquaClass veranda staterooms, which offer unlimited access to spa amenities and an aromatherapy and steam room.

As Steidle puts it, "I usually start by asking clients what type of vacations they take, and what type of hotels they choose."

Choose the ship that fits your personality first, and then use that as a guide for the other details. If luxury is important to you, but you're watching your vacation budget, a shorter cruise on a luxury line such as Crystal Cruises might be a better choice than a longer cruise on a moderate line.

Or, if cabin size and placement are most important, a cabin with a balcony on a moderate line might offer a better fit than an inside stateroom on a high-end line.

With thousands of destinations and ships to choose from, it's possible to find the cruise that best suits you and your travel style—which means planning the perfect vacation is one more thing you can cross off your to-do list.

*Hilary Achauer lives in San Diego and has traveled worldwide researching tours and writing for travel publications.*

AAA Travel cruise expert Sarah Grace Walsh has more tips for Members on page 16. Now that you've studied some good advice on getting the most out of cruising, it's time to launch your own adventure. Visit your local AAA Travel branch and pick the perfect cruise for you.