

The Can't-Lose Cruise

Low tide for the cruise biz means a shipload of savings for you.



Don't let the storm-tossed economy discourage you from sailing on a cruise. With fewer people booking passage and more (and bigger) cruise ships being launched, cruising has become a buyer's market. Here's how to find the lowest fare at the best time.

Look for bulk buyers

Check out cruise consolidators, which buy large blocks of cabins from the cruise lines at a deep discount. Most of the deals don't include airfare, but the savings are significant, and companies such as CruiseOne.com, CruiseBrothers.com, and Cruise.com feature dozens of discounted cruises around the world every week.

Don't shrug off "shoulder season"

Rates are lower between peak and off-peak seasons, when fewer people are escaping winter. Try sailing to Alaska in mid-May or early September; to the Caribbean in late April or September and October; to Hawaii in late August, late November, February, or May; or to the Mediterranean in March or November.

Check the school calendar

Avoid any time kids are on vacation, such as spring or summer break. That's when the supply of empty cabins is usually the lowest—and prices for them are highest. Cruises are wildly affordable right after Labor Day and during the week after Thanksgiving, for example.

Wait...Wait... Okay, *now* book it!

If you don't have a specific cruise date in mind, try waiting until the last minute to book online. Almost all cruise lines quietly unload any remaining inventory as the departure date draws closer. **Note:** "Last minute" doesn't mean what it used to. Post-9/11 security regulations require cruise lines to close the list of passengers as much as 96 hours before sailing.

Keep That Sail a Sale

Cruise lines don't make a profit on your cabin, so they try to separate you from your money the second they pull up the gangplank. Here's how to keep your budget afloat.

Factor in tipping

Some cruise lines automatically add gratuities, while others still rely on passengers to make that decision. One helpful resource is cruisetip.tpkeller.com, which calculates the suggested tip per day for each major cruise line.

Stick with the main dining room

More and more cruise ships have specialty—restaurants to give passengers options beyond the cost—included main dining room and midnight buffet. But eating at one of the ships' designer restaurants will run you extra: on Royal Caribbean International, for example, dinner at Chops Grille is \$25 per guest.

Budget for booze

Don't expect to bring your own. Most cruise lines frown on this, and some actually employ a "liquor retention team" to seize alcohol not purchased on board (the bottles are returned at the end of the cruise).

Source: AARP.com; by: Peter Greenberg | from: [AARP The Magazine](#) | May/June 2010 issue