



10 Best Cruise Lines for "Noncruisers"

By Fran Golden

On a recent cruise in, Alaska, passengers watched as a hotel-size chunk of ice calved spectacularly from a glacier in Glacier Bay National Park. Later they thrilled as a brown bear in the Misty Fjords stood on his feet to show off his full 10-foot height a natural show viewed through binoculars from the safety of the small ships open decks. Even avowed noncruisers and there were several onboard who had previously sworn they would never, ever take a cruise were glad theyd changed their minds.

The best way to experience a place just may be on water. In fact, theres no better way to view the vast landscape of Alaskas Inside Passage or the stunningly beautiful fjords of Norway, the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica with remote wildlife areas like Corcovado National Park, the Galapagos of Ecuador, or even the hidden beaches of the Greek Isles and Caribbean.

But cruising doesnt have to be about big floating resorts. There are ships that skip the bingo tournaments, Elvis impersonator contests, and flashy Vegas-style shows in favor of scenery, nature, and culture ships for those who consider themselves true travelers.

The biggest upside? Solitude. Most of these vessels are in the small-ship category, carrying fewer than 300 passengers and sometimes less than a dozen. But the advantages go beyond not tripping over other passengers on the lido deck. While bigger ships stick to the large and often overtouristed ports, small ships are able to explore more out-of-the-way and sometimes otherwise inaccessible locales. They can often dock right in town and spend more time in port-you may even tie up overnight so you can enjoy the local nightlife.

Theres also added flexibility if youre having a great time at a secluded cove or spot a pod of whales nearby, the captain may decide to linger. On ultraluxury line Silversea Cruises, you can even create your own itinerary, choosing where you want to board the ship and where you want to disembark; you are not limited to the lines itineraries.

Onboard life too is less regimented and more intimate. SeaDream Yacht Club and Windstar Cruises offer more of a private-yacht feel than the Queen Mary 2 ever could. For those who fear getting seasick, Peter Deilmann and French Country Waterways feature calm river and barge cruises, with the boats serving as your floating hotels as you explore landlocked cities and towns. Even closer to the private-yacht experience is Star Clippers. While passengers are hardly roughing it everyone is welcomed aboard with a glass of champagne you can help pull the sails and climb the masts if you like.

So if you're considering a cruise but don't think of yourself as a cruiser here are 10 unique options.

Hurtigruten (Norway)

Cargo ship, anyone? No, you won't be stuck in the hold with a bunch of packages. In fact, passengers stay in comfortable cabins, and the substantial meals include a sit-down Scandinavian dinner each night. And Hurtigruten has a dozen ships that navigate the scenic fjords of Norway, delivering cargo to 34 ports and taking you through natural beauty, small cities, and the North Cape (the northernmost point in Europe).

Tip: Buy the land excursions to see more of the ports and the Norwegian countryside (you get off at one port and meet up with the ship at another).

Details: You can book the entire 12-day circuit or a six-day half-circuit. Six-day voyages from \$1,499 per person.

Lindblad Expeditions (Worldwide)

This company's all about getting you up close to remote natural areas in its small ships (40 to 110 passengers). Experiences include seeing giant tortoises and blue-footed boobies in the Galapagos, howler monkeys and tree sloths in Costa Rica, and whales off Alaska and Baja. Take Zodiacs off for shore landings, with excellent naturalist guides leading the way (the line has an alliance with National Geographic, which has added its name to the ships). Unlike many cruise lines, there are single occupancy cabins, with the largest staterooms at 240 square feet, and all have private baths. The well-prepared food stars local ingredients think Ecuadorean beef tenderloin and filet of Galapagos tuna.

Tip: Friends and family can follow your adventure with Daily Expedition Reports posted by the onboard naturalists on the company website.

Details: Areas of exploration include Central America and Mexico, Alaska and the Pacific Northwest, Europe (including Norway), Egypt, and Antarctica. Weeklong Costa Rica cruises from \$4,240 per person.

Star Clippers (Europe, Asia, Caribbean)

Unfurl the sails and conjure romantic visions of turn-of-the-century life on the high seas. The line has three ships that can bring this dream to life: the 170-passenger, four-masted Star Clipper and Star Flyer; and the slightly fancier 227-passenger, five-masted Royal Clipper, which boasts an incredible 42 sails. Cabins are comfortable, with queen- or king-size beds and private baths with brass and marble fixtures. And the food is better than any 19th-century sailor ever had. Three-star Michelin chef Jean-Marie Meulien is the culinary advisor and has worked to incorporate local ingredients and dishes based on cruise itineraries.

Tip: Take some time to relax in the ship's bowsprit net as the waves lull you to sleep. But for the best view, ask to visit the "crow's nest."

Details: Itineraries in the Western Mediterranean, Greek Isles, Thailand, French Polynesia and the Society Islands in the South Pacific, and Windward Islands and Grenadines in the Caribbean. Prices from \$1,645 in Thailand for a weeklong cruise, \$1,745 in the Caribbean.

Cruise West (Worldwide)

So enthusiastic about nature are this line's passengers that you may encounter competitive wildlife viewing. Whether spotting sea creatures in Alaska or exploring rainforests in Costa Rica, you'll want your binoculars close at hand on one of the nine ships that carry 78 to 138 passengers. While the food and cabins are decent, it's the service that really makes Cruise West special. Every cruise has an on-board Exploration Leader who aids guests in familiarizing themselves in new destinations, and everyone—even crew members—partake in nature walks, port outings, and kayak trips. Visiting lecturers, including U.S. service rangers, conduct onboard classes. On the Sea of Cortez cruise, for example, a John Steinbeck scholar uses *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* to teach passengers about the region.

Tip: If you really want to get to know your destination, check out the line's expertly curated Suggested Reading lists.

Details: Eight ships spend the summer in Alaska (the other is in Costa Rica year-round) and also cruise British Columbia, the Pacific Northwest, California's Wine Country, Baja, Japan and the Far East, and the South Pacific. Eight-night Alaska cruises priced from \$4,449 per person.

Peter Deilmann (Danube)

The Danube is more green-gray than blue (Johann Strauss exaggerated), but a cruise winding along the waterway from Germany to Hungary is more about culture than water color anyway. Sloping vineyards, ancient castles, hillside monasteries, deep

forests, and rustic fishing shacks are among the sights on the leisurely voyages. And Peter Deilmann operates floating luxury hotels that carry 98 to 200 passengers round-trip from Passau, on the Germany-Austria border, with port calls including overnights in Vienna and Budapest. Some cabins are as large as 400 square feet, and the MV Mozart is the only river ship in operation with a full-size indoor pool and solarium. Morning bouillon, afternoon tea, and a midnight snack are served, in addition to regular Continental meals, and entertainment includes local choirs, folkloric dancers, and acrobats.

Tip: Be sure to attend the Friday night beer and bratwurst party a mellower version of Oktoberfest for a really fun time.

Details: Weeklong cruises run March to November, from \$1,635 per person.

French Country Waterways (France)

Barge cruises in France are the antithesis of a big-ship cruise. You watch the passing scenery—forests, châteaux, and rolling hillsides—and enjoy as much French wine and cheese as is humanly possible. And should the gourmet indulgences become too much, you can work off the calories exploring the ports or biking alongside as your barge is slowly raised and lowered through the locks of the historic canals. French Country Waterways is one of the best outfits for just this experience, with five barges that accommodate eight to 18 passengers each with six crew members, including an experienced Paris-trained chef. Barges dock and passengers dine at a Michelin-star restaurant one of the nights.

Tip: Since quarters are extra-close, consider booking the whole barge for you and your friends.

Details: Weeklong cruises in Burgundy, Champagne, and Alsace-Lorraine are offered April through October, and priced from \$4,295 per person.

Windstar Cruises (Caribbean, Mediterranean)

If you want to do a traditional cruise route in a very nontraditional format, this is your best bet. Windstar's upscale, no-ties-required, yachtlike experience includes gourmet food, attractive cabins equipped with flat-screen televisions and DVD players, and plenty of open deck space and sails (albeit computer-operated ones). The larger Wind Surf carries 312 passengers, while the Wind Star and Wind Spirit each carry 148.

Tip: Swim with the fishes in the Cousteau Reserve, near Guadeloupe; you won't want to miss this protected area that has some of the most majestic underwater reefs in the world. It's a popular excursion, so book it at least five days before you depart.

Details: The three ships cruise on creative itineraries in the Caribbean or Costa Rica in winter and the Greek Isles and Western Mediterranean in summer. Weeklong Europe cruises from \$2,399 per person; from \$1,899 in the Caribbean; from \$2,099 in Costa Rica.

Silversea Cruises (Worldwide)

While passengers can book a traditional point-to-point itinerary on four of Silversea's 296- to 385-passenger ultraluxury ships, what really makes this cruise line special is its Personalized Voyage, which lets you choose your own embarkation and disembarkation ports. And your options are vast: the Mediterranean, Northern Europe, Africa and the Indian Ocean, Asia and the Pacific, Alaska and the Pacific Northwest, the Caribbean and Mexico, South America and the Amazon. Suites are spacious with water views, and most come with a private veranda. Classical concerts and hot stone massages are just a few of the onboard activities. Other indulgences include cigars designed exclusively for Silversea Cruises, and special programs like guided wine excursions to distinguished vineyards.

Tip: This is a distinctly upscale cruise, so pack your gown or tux.

Details: Nine-day Asia cruises from \$3,957 per person.

Seabourn Cruises (Europe, Caribbean)

One of the major benefits of a small ship is the ability to reach destinations larger ships simply can't. Seabourn definitely takes advantage of its size, offering unique itineraries to locales like the coastal village of Le Lavandou on the French Riviera or the Corinth Canal in Greece. Guests are pampered from the start on the line's three 208-passenger ships, with cuisine created by celebrity chef Charlie Palmer, all-suite accommodations, liberally flowing champagne, designer soaps, and cold towels awaiting you pier-side when you return from explorations. The ships have spas, nightly shows with professional singers, and retractable water platforms for swimming, sailing, windsurfing, and waterskiing.

Tip: At some ports you can request a personal shopper, who will take you in a chauffeured car to all of the best boutiques, designer and craftsman studios, and art galleries.

Details: The line particularly excels in Europe, where it sails in spring, summer, and fall; in winter the yachts traverse the Caribbean. Weeklong Greek cruises from \$4,275 per person.

SeaDream Yacht Club (Caribbean, Greek Isles, Mediterranean)

This is as close as you can get to having your own yacht, which of course is the ideal way to explore smaller ports of call in the Caribbean, Greek Isles, and Mediterranean.

The line operates two 110-passenger vessels that are luxurious yet casual and designed for a well-heeled, active crowd. No ties are required, but there is pampering, including its famed Champagne and Caviar Beach Barbecues. Yachts are stocked with mountain bikes, Jet Skis, a golf simulator, and other cool toys, and the decent-size cabins are all ocean-view and have mini-bars and flat-screen TVs. Experienced chefs, who shop in every port, use the freshest ingredients and prepare dishes to order, including creative vegetarian and spa dishes. Piano players entertain at night.

Tip: Sleep on deck under the stars in a sexy Balinese Dream Bed for two; ask the steward for al fresco turndown service.