



What Category of Cruise Ship Cabin Is Best for You?

By Linda Garrison

Planning a cruise vacation involves many decisions. One of the most difficult is choosing your cabin type and location. Looking at cruise ship layouts and decks online or in brochures, one of the first things I always notice is the many different cabin categories. Sometimes there are over 20 different categories on a ship! How does one go about choosing the perfect cabin for their budget and lifestyle?

The cabin on my first cruise in 1967 was perfectly suited for four teenage girls on a high school graduation cruise. The stateroom on this 3-day cruise to Nassau was about the size of a walk-in closet, and with no windows, a tiny bath, and two bunk beds. I'm still not sure how we got all of our "stuff" in there. We barely had room to turn around, and the hum (or was it a roar?) of the engines was evident at all times.

We thought we were well below the water line, but who was to know--we certainly couldn't see whether it was day or night without going up several decks. However, it was better than the primitive tent camping I had done with my family--we had indoor plumbing and electricity. In spite of these somewhat Spartan accommodations, we had a wonderful time, and I was hooked on cruising.

Almost 40 years later, I still love to cruise and can have a wonderful time in an inside cabin on the lowest level. However, I found a long time ago that having an outside cabin with a window, or better yet a balcony, makes the cruise experience much better and more enjoyable. Sitting on the balcony with a good book or just being able to step outside and breathe in the sea air helps differentiate cruising from a resort vacation.

Having a cabin as a retreat after a busy day ashore has become more important as I've gotten older. Although many people recommend to new cruisers that they book the cheapest inside cabin since "they won't be spending much time in there anyway", that's not really true for everyone. If you are on a 7-day or longer cruise, you will have days at sea that you might want to spend relaxing in your room, watching a TV-movie, or taking a nap. On a cruise ship, your cabin is the one place you can get away from everything and everybody. I think selecting a cabin type is as personal as deciding

where to cruise and which ship to cruise on. Everyone is different, and what is not important to one person might well be important to you.

Price is certainly a consideration, but if your vacation time is limited, you might be willing to pay more to get a cabin better suited to your lifestyle. The best advice is to be informed about cruise ship cabins and make the right decision for you. A balcony cabin will cost you from 25 percent more to almost double the price of an inside cabin. Some cruisers would prefer to go twice as often and stay in an inside cabin. Others with more limited time might prefer to splurge on a balcony. Although I love a balcony cabin, these cabins are sometimes smaller than those with just a window since the balcony is replacing the inside space. Be sure to check when booking your cruise if size is more important to you than a balcony. This is a decision each person has to make on their own.

Types of Cruise Ship Cabins

The price of a cruise ship cabin or stateroom (the terms are interchangeable) is dependent on its size, layout, and location. Cabins on large mainstream cruise ships are often advertised as standard inside, ocean view, balconied, or suite. The smallest cabins on luxury lines are much larger than those on mainstream lines and are either ocean view or balconied, making the quality of accommodations one of the biggest differences between cruise lines. Cabin and balcony size and cabin location can vary significantly within the same price range on any ship. Let's take a look at some different types of cabins on cruise ships.

Standard Cruise Ship Cabins - Inside Cabins (No Porthole or Window)

Many cruise ships today have standard cabins of similar size and accoutrements, with the price differential being the location. The least expensive, inside standard cabins on a mainstream cruise ship run from about 120 square feet to 180 square feet. Since most cruise ships are relatively new or have been refurbished, the cabins usually are tastefully decorated with twin beds that can be pushed together to make a queen-sized bed for couples. The staterooms have wall-to-wall carpeting, individually controlled air conditioning/heating, dresser or storage space, closet, telephone, and satellite television. The television usually has news, sports, local on-ship channels for broadcasting information on shore excursions or from guest lecturers, and movies.

Some cabins have VCRs or DVD players, and some televisions also have radio/music channels. The cabins also usually have a night table, reading lamps, and a chair. Most modern cruise ships come with a hairdryer, so you won't have to bring one from home. Some standard staterooms feature personal safes, table, desk with chair, convertible loveseat, mini-refrigerator, and even Internet access, although it is often much more costly than in the common Internet lounge. The cruise line brochure or Web site usually specifies what amenities are in each cabin.

The standard cabin bathrooms are usually tiny and most only have a shower (no tub). The shower usually has good water pressure, with the only complaint being the small size. Don't be surprised if the shower curtain keeps trying to attack you! The bathroom also has a sink, toiletry shelves, and a noisy vacuum toilet like on an airplane. Often there is a small step up between the bedroom and bathroom, perfect for stubbing your toe. The bathrooms also usually have a retractable clothesline for drying your swimsuit or hand laundry.

Standard Cruise Ship Cabins - Outside Ocean View Cabins (Porthole or Window)

Oftentimes the ocean view standard cabins and the inside standard cabins are almost identical in size and layout. The only difference is the window. Most modern ships have large picture windows rather than portholes, but these windows cannot be opened. So, if you want to have a sea breeze in your room, you will need to get a balcony. Some ships have both porthole cabins and those with windows. The porthole cabins are on the lowest decks and are less expensive. About the only view you have from a porthole is whether it is daylight or dark. Sometimes you can also see the ocean waves splash against the porthole while sailing--I call these "washing machine" cabins.

Cabins with Balconies or Verandahs

The next step above an outside cabin is one with a balcony (verandah). These cabins have sliding glass doors, giving you access to the outside. The sliding doors also mean you can see outside from anywhere in the cabin, i.e. lie on the bed and still see the ocean outside. Usually the balcony cabins are also larger than the standard cabins, and some qualify as mini-suites. which means they have a small sitting area with a loveseat or convertible sofa. The mini-suites also usually have a curtain that can be drawn to separate the sleeping and sitting areas. This feature is ideal for couples (or friends) who have different sleeping habits. I like to get up early and my husband likes to sleep in. I can pull the curtain, sit in the sitting area or balcony, and enjoy the early morning sunrise without waking up my significant other.

Most balconied cabins do not have verandahs large enough for a lounge chair where you can lie down and sunbathe in private. The balconies are often narrow, just wide enough for two chairs and a small table. If you want a larger balcony, look for a cabin on the rear of the ship. The balconies on some ships offer no privacy. I often find myself standing at the balcony admiring the view and finding my neighbors doing the same! These balconies would definitely not be appropriate for daytime nudity.

Suites

Some balconied cabins are classified as suites because they have separate sleeping and sitting areas. The suites are larger, and many have bigger bathrooms with tubs. A suite will have all the amenities found in the other cabin categories, and you might even have butler service. Suites come in all shapes, sizes, and locations. They are a wonderful

treat, especially if you have a lot of seas days or want to spend a lot of time together in your cabin. Some luxury lines have all of their cabins as mini-suites or suites.

Location of Cruise Ship Cabin Is Key

Location is the third major factor in cruise category other than size and type.

Sometimes cruise ships will offer passengers a "guarantee" cabin, which means you are paying for a category rather than a specific cabin. A guarantee cabin can be less expensive than choosing a specific cabin, but it might not give you the location you desire. You are taking a chance and leaving it up to the cruise line to assign you a cabin in a given category. Be sure to do your research before you book a "guarantee" cabin (or any cabin). You might be delighted in the value for get for your dollar, but you might also be disappointed if other cabins in the same category are in much better locations. When reviewing deck plans be sure to check out what is above, below, or next to your cabin.

I know from personal experience how noisy a cabin can be that is located under a dance floor! Also, an ocean view cabin on a promenade deck will have lots of passer bys.

Lower Deck Cabins

The inside cabins on the lowest decks are usually the least expensive cruise ship cabins. Although the lower deck cabins will give you a smoother ride in rough seas, they are also the furthest from the common areas such as the pool and lounges. You will be hiking the stairs or riding the elevators more from a lower deck, but you can also work off some of those extra calories. Therefore, even though standard inside cabins might be all the same size and layout on a ship, you can save a few hundred dollars by choosing to be on a lower deck. The same applies for standard ocean view cabins, but you might want to inquire about the size of the window, since the lower deck ocean views might only have portholes or a smaller window. Two problems that you might experience with cabins on the lower decks are engine noise and anchor noise. If your cabin is near the front of the ship, it can sound like the ship has hit a coral reef when the anchor is dropped. The racket will wake anyone up, so the only good thing about the noise is it can serve as an alarm. Newer ships tend to have less engine noise and their stabilizers suppress the ship's motion, but you will still get that anchor noise a couple of times a day!

Higher Deck Cabins

Cabins on the upper decks usually cost more than those on the lower decks. Since these cabins are nearer the pool and sun decks, they are more desirable for those on warm weather cruises who plan to use these amenities. However, you will get more rocking motion up high, so on smaller ships those who are seasick prone might want to avoid a higher deck cabin.

Midship Cabins

Sometimes midship standard cabins are a good choice due to their central location and less motion. They are excellent for those who have mobility problems or who are seasick prone. However, a midship cabin can have more traffic outside in the hallways since other passengers will often be passing by. Some cruise ships charge slightly more for midship cabins or even have them in a separate category. If you are thinking of a midship cabin, be sure to check out the location of the tenders or lifeboats. They can block your view and be noisy when raised or lowered. Most cruise lines will tell you if a cabin has a blocked or limited view, but it is wise to check for yourself.

Bow (Forward) Cabins

Cabins on the front of the ship get the most motion and appeal to those who feel they are "real" sailors. You will get more wind and spray on the front. In rough seas, a bow cabin can definitely be exciting! Note that the windows on cabins on the front are sometimes smaller and slanted or recessed, meaning you can't see as much as you might on the side or rear of the ship. Cruise ships often put suites on the front of the ships to take advantage of the unusual shape and opportunity to provide the passengers with larger balconies.

Aft (Rear) Cabins

If you want a large balcony with your cabin, look to the rear of the ship. These cabins also provide a panoramic view of where you have sailed. Cabins in the aft of the ship have more motion than centrally located cabins, but less than those forward. One disadvantage--depending on the shape of the ship, sometimes passengers in the lounges or restaurants can look down on the balconies of the aft cabins. Not much privacy! We had a wonderful aft balcony cabin once directly below the buffet restaurant. Each day we found all sorts of surprises--lettuce, napkins, etc. that had blown off the deck above. The balcony was quite large however, with plenty of room for two lounge chairs.

If all of this information is confusing, it just demonstrates how much diversity there is among cruise ship cabins. When planning your next cruise, study the layout and architecture of the ship's deck plans before selecting your cabin. Query your travel agent and others who have sailed the ship. Think about what is important to you and consider the cost differential. If your vacation time is limited, you might want to spend a few more dollars for a better cabin.