



Family Cruises - Your Guide to Travel with Kids

By Teresa Plowright

More and more people are taking to the high seas for family cruises, drawn by creative kids' programs, (nearly) all-inclusive pricing, terrific facilities, and interesting shore outings.

Tips for Family Cruises

Many families head to cruise lines that specialize in family cruises, such as Disney, or Carnival. Other ships have a strong family component, with kids programs. Do read the extra tips, below, if you're considering a general cruise where families aren't the majority.

Basics

- * check the size and location of the stateroom, and the guardrails on the bunk-beds.
- * some ships have cabins that can sleep five; some ships have adjoining cabins; some give special rates for a second cabin for teens.
- * check the medical services available.

Some ships bar women in the third trimester of pregnancy.

- * check what documentation for children is required (ID, etc.) Be especially careful if your child is crossing borders and only one birth parent is on the trip.
- * you never know when a case of chicken pox will change your plans: check cancellation fees, and fees for changing dates; trip cancellation insurance may be worth the price.

Budget

One of the pluses about cruises for families is that so much is included: meals, kids' programs activities... But don't forget to budget for:

- * gratuities. Ask about the common practice for your ship.
- * sodas: buy a "soda package" if your kids drink sodas: these drinks are typically not free. (Nor are bar drinks, of course!)
- * shore excursions. Be aware, though, that it's often possible to explore on your own rather than signing up for tours.

* infant care - Flounders Nursery isn't free on Disney ships. Also, perhaps you'll want to engage a baby-sitter.

Babies and Toddlers

How do you bathe the baby, when your cabin doesn't have a bathtub? (Few do.) What size stroller should I bring? (Not full-size!) Can we get in-cabin babysitting?

Parenting

One of the appeals of family cruising is that your kids can have a certain amount of independence in this enclosed floating resort. But parents are still parenting...

* is it important to you to have a pager? Check if the cruise line has this service. (Otherwise, bring your own walkie-talkies and see how they work.)

* does it matter to you how much time your kids play video games? Set some limits in advance.

* check out the style of the kids' programs, and the ratio of staff to kids: do you want active programs, learning programs? Is there a lot of movie-watching and video games?

Tips if you take a general cruise

* check for Kids Programs and be sure they're running on the dates of your trip!

* the longer the trip (10 days and up), the older the passengers, and the less likely you are to find many children.

* a 7-day trip may be best: 3-4 day trips sometimes get a "party hardy" crowd.

* check if baby sitting can be provided by staff at an hourly rate.

* many ships now offer pizza, hamburgers and hotdogs along with standard lunch buffets.

The variety of what's offered onboard these days is staggering: photography classes, escorted shore tours, parties, youth counselors, teen discos, kids-only pools...

See article entitled "Best Family Ships" for details on specific cruise lines and ships.