



New Cruise Ships in 2009

The star of the "class of 2009" -- no question -- is Royal Caribbean's Oasis of the Seas, and it's not just because the 220,000-ton, 5,400-passenger behemoth is, by far, the largest cruise ship ever built. It's also the most fantastical. Features like neighborhoods -- designated as Central Park and the Boardwalk -- an onboard zip-line, the Aqua Theater for aerial acrobatics and a bar that rises five stories like an elevator really makes the ship awe-inspiring.

And between now and November, when the ship is due for completion, you'll hear much about it.

Still, that doesn't mean the nine other new-builds slated for delivery this year are forgettable. Others will be trendsetters too. Carnival's Carnival Dream is the first new design for the Fun Ship line since it launched Carnival Conquest in 2002. Costa Cruises is taking a retro-step with the unique design of Costa Luminosa, which will be its first new ship in years that's small enough to slide through the Panama Canal. Along with an expanded range of itineraries, its highlights include a 4D cinema and a rollerblading track. Seabourn Odyssey is not only the first new ship on the luxury horizon in five years, it also represents a fresh, new interpretation of the upscale cruising lifestyle. And, in the river cruise niche, Viking River Cruises is raising eyebrows with its innovative new Viking Legend.

Trendwise, we found that most of 2009's new ships fall into one of three categories:

Biggest Ever: Oasis of the Seas may be the biggest cruise ship ever, but many ships debuting in 2009 will be the largest in their respective lines. Seabourn Odyssey, Carnival Dream, Silversea Cruises' Silver Spirit and Viking Legend will sport new designs and the largest size of all their fleetmates. The increased size gives the cruise lines more room to offer new and improved onboard facilities like expanded spas and kids' areas.

Carbon Copies: Many ships launching in 2009 are almost exact replicas of vessels that debuted in 2008. Costa Pacifica, MSC Splendida, Celebrity Equinox and AIDALuna all take their design from their trend-setting older sisters (Costa Serena and Costa Concordia, MSC Fantasia, Celebrity Solstice, and AIDADiva and AIDABella, respectively).

Incidentally, all four will also share the title of "biggest in fleet" with their clones. If you're looking for differences, check the restaurant roster. We've heard that a few lines might spice things up by offering a different specialty eatery on the second ship.

The Exception: Costa is leaning from big to bigger -- and, at the same time, introducing a more nimble, Panamax-sized ship. The latter is why Costa Luminosa is in a class all its own -- a unique new design that's afforded the luxury of a smaller size. (Could Alaska be in its future?) And of course, on the very same day -- in 2009's only dual christening -- the line will unveil Costa Pacifica, a sibling to the Costa Serena style of big-ship design.

Here's our sneak preview of the year's new ship launches.

Ship: AIDALuna

Maiden Voyage: March 22

The Inside Scoop: AIDALuna is the third ship in the German cruise line's Sphinx class, and even if identical to siblings AIDADiva and AIDABella, it still will offer one of the freshest, most care-free ambiances on any cruise ship. Onboard, the ship just screams fun with eclectic colors in the fabulous Theatrium -- where everything from dance performances to shore lectures are held -- and a vibrant pool area.

Other high points are its spa (fantastic couples treatment rooms with private balconies and baths for two), its three themed buffet venues (AIDADiva's standout was Markt, designed around an upscale food hall, featuring counters laden with fresh fruits, vegetables, fish, pastries and meats) and a selection of upscale boutique restaurants.

The bad news: AIDA, though owned by Carnival Corporation, makes absolutely no effort at all to reach out to English-speaking travelers. It's not so easy to book the cruises if you lie beyond AIDA's country-specific marketing efforts. So, unless you speak pretty good German, you'll feel adrift.

Where It Will Sail: After a short series of Mediterranean and Western Europe voyages in early spring, AIDALuna will reposition to its seasonal homeport of Rostock (Warnemunde). From there, it will offer Baltic cruises. In September, the ship repositions to its winter home in Tenerife, where it will cruise the Canary Islands.

Ship: Viking Legend

Maiden Voyage: May 10

The Inside Scoop: If you haven't often associated cutting-edge cruise ship designs with riverboats, Viking Legend may turn your head. The 189-passenger ship will feature a pair of splashy suites (310 square ft.) -- the largest accommodations on any European river vessel. A new propulsion system is another innovation, offering a smoother,

quieter and more fuel-efficient ride. Otherwise, more traditional features include a sun deck with 360-degree views, upgraded beds with European linens and a restaurant offering menus that highlight seasonal and regional specialties.

Where It Will Sail: Viking Legend will cruise from May to November, offering river cruises between Amsterdam and Budapest. On these 15-night "Grand European Tour" voyages, the riverboat will sail along the Rhine, Main and Danube Rivers through Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Hungary.

Ship: Costa Luminosa

Maiden Voyage: June 3

The Inside Scoop: As we've noted, Costa Luminosa is a trendsetter in that it will introduce a new, smaller design for Costa. The 92,700-ton ship will carry 2,828 passengers and will have the fleet's highest percentage of balcony cabins (68 percent), an innovative 4D cinema, a high-tech golf simulator and a rollerblading track. It will also offer its own twist on Costa favorites, such as the Samsara Spa and spa cabins, a racecar simulator and a pool deck with a retractable roof.

Where It Will Sail: After some pre-inaugural cruises in the Eastern Mediterranean in May, Costa Luminosa will offer Northern Europe itineraries from its seasonal homeport in Amsterdam.

Options include 11- to 14-night Baltic, Norwegian Fjords and North Cape voyages. In September, Costa Luminosa will reposition to Savona for Canary Islands, Spain and Morocco cruises.

Ship: Costa Pacifica

Maiden Voyage: June 5

The Inside Scoop: The 114,500-ton, 3,780-passenger Costa Pacifica is a sibling to Costa Serena and Costa Concordia. The ship, which will offer nearly identical features -- such as the Samsara Spa, racecar simulator and two-deck pool area with poolside movie screen -- will be designed around the theme of music. This vessel, along with its siblings, features interiors designed by Joe Farcus, who's also known as the oft-wacky visionary behind Carnival Cruise Lines' onboard schemes.

Where It Will Sail: For the duration of the summer and fall, the ship -- homeported in Rome -- will sail seven-night Western Mediterranean cruises slated to visit Italy, France, Spain, Tunisia and Malta.

Ship: Seabourn Odyssey

Maiden Voyage: June 24

The Inside Scoop: The 32,000-ton, 450-passenger Seabourn Odyssey will be three times the size of Seabourn's existing trio of 10,000-ton, 208-passenger ships. Yet, it will carry just double the number of passengers. All that extra space is being put to good use with new features, including the largest spa on any luxury vessel.

The 11,400-square-ft. spa will span two decks and include indoor and outdoor treatment rooms, as well as a Kinesis wall in the fitness center that will combine cardiovascular, strength and flexibility training into one workout.

Available for rent will be 750-square-ft. spa villas, where passengers can spend a decadent half-day lounging in a private retreat and indulging in their choice of spa treatments. New dining options include the avant garde Restaurant 2 with its tasting menu of innovative dishes; the indoor-outdoor Colonnade restaurant, where diners can watch their breakfasts, lunches or dinners being prepared in the open kitchen; and course-by-course, in-suite dining. Also included in the design are traditional Seabourn favorites like a water sports platform and, of course, the line's famed culinary service.

Where It Will Sail: Seabourn Odyssey will spend the summer and early fall cruising the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean before repositioning to Ft. Lauderdale in November. There, it will offer a handful of Caribbean cruises before it moves on to serve the line's first-ever world cruise. The 108-night voyage departs on January 5, 2010.

Ship: Carnival Dream

Maiden Voyage: September 21

The Inside Scoop: The 130,000-ton, 3,652-passenger Carnival Dream may be Carnival's largest ship, but it will also sport a brand new design for the cruise line -- with an emphasis on fun, of course! A wraparound promenade (the Lanai, on Deck 5) will not only let passengers take a stroll all the way around the ship, but four cantilevered whirlpools will provide relaxing hideaways with sea views.

On the same deck, the indoor-outdoor Ocean Plaza, with its coffee shops, bars and ocean views, is a gathering spot by day and entertainment venue by night, sandwiched between the casino and various clubs and lounges. The 23,750-square-ft. Cloud 9 Spa tops the charts as Carnival's largest ever, and it will offer spa cabins, a thalassotherapy pool and thermal suite. New cabin types, such as "cove balcony" cabins -- closer to the water line than any other ship's verandah staterooms -- are also being introduced, and family-friendly accommodations feature two bathrooms and sleeping arrangements for up to five people. Families with kids will also appreciate the huge kids' area with separate facilities for Camp Carnival, Circle C and Club O2 age groups; two twister waterslides, which will be the longest at sea; and a two-deck mini-golf course.

Where It Will Sail: Carnival Dream will homeport in Port Canaveral and sail alternating seven-night Western and Eastern Caribbean cruises. The western itinerary visits Cozumel, Belize, Costa Maya and Nassau, and the eastern itinerary calls in Nassau, St. Thomas and St. Maarten. Prior to the ship's arrival in Port Canaveral, it will offer a few Europe voyages, a trans-Atlantic cruise and a handful of sailings from New York as it makes its way to its new Florida home.

Ship: MSC Splendida

Maiden Voyage: July 13

The Inside Scoop: The 133,500-ton, 3,300-passenger MSC Splendida follows the innovative MSC Fantasia. Both are the largest ships ever built for MSC and, as well, offer some fresh new concepts onboard. Among them are French restaurant L'Etoile and the elaborate Yacht Club, a ship-within-a-ship concept (like NCL's Courtyard Villas) that offers a more luxurious ambience on the large vessel.

Other features of note include a Formula One simulator, expansive kids' areas, an Italian wine bar (complete with antipasti) and a covered main pool (for swimming in all kinds of weather).

Where It Will Sail: MSC Splendida will cruise in Europe year-round, starting with seven-night Western Mediterranean itineraries from Barcelona between July and November. The ship will visit Tunisia, Malta, Italy and France. In late November, MSC Splendida will reposition to Genoa and sail Eastern Mediterranean cruises to Italy, Greece, Egypt and Turkey.

Ship: Celebrity Equinox

Maiden Voyage: August 8

The Inside Scoop: Celebrity Equinox is the twin sister to Celebrity Solstice, the first ship in the Solstice class that debuted in November 2008. The 117,000-ton, 2,850-passenger Celebrity Equinox will debut in Southampton and will offer all of Celebrity Solstice's innovations -- multiple dining venues, the Lawn Club (carpeted in real grass), a glass-blowing studio and a gorgeous solarium. Differences will be minor; there's a possibility that one or two of the restaurants may have new themes and menus.

Where It Will Sail: Celebrity Equinox will sail 13- and 14-night itineraries from Rome between August 18 and October 23. The ship will visit ports in Israel, Egypt, Greece, Turkey and Italy, including an overnight in Alexandria. Celebrity Equinox will reposition to Ft. Lauderdale in early November, where it will offer 10- and 11-night Caribbean cruises to St. Thomas, St. Kitts, Barbados, Dominica, St. Maarten, Grand Cayman, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico.

Ship: Oasis of the Seas

Maiden Voyage: December 5

The Inside Scoop: Launching on December 5, 2009 (with a preview cruise on December 1), the 220,000-ton, 5,400-passenger Oasis of the Seas will be the largest cruise ship ever built. The revolutionary ship is divided into seven neighborhoods, with innovative elements like the open-air Central Park with live grass and trees, a zip-line, a theatrical venue that uses the pool as a performance space, two-story loft suites and balcony cabins overlooking the central indoor-outdoor areas of the ship.

Where It Will Sail: Oasis of the Seas will homeport in Ft. Lauderdale. It will cruise the Eastern Caribbean, calling in St. Thomas, St. Maarten and Nassau, through April 2010. In May, Oasis of the Seas will add Western Caribbean itineraries to Labadee, Jamaica and Cozumel on alternating weeks.

Ship: Silver Spirit

Maiden Voyage: December 23

The Inside Scoop: Silver Spirit will carry 540 passengers (compared to Silversea's current largest ships, which carry 382 passengers) but will still offer a high space-to-guest ratio. When the 36,000-ton ship debuts, it will entice guests with all-oceanview cabins (and only 12 without balconies), a heated pool, a supper club and an Asian restaurant. A larger 8,300-square-ft. spa will be the ultimate relaxation center with indoor/outdoor areas, a sauna, steam rooms, an outdoor whirlpool, and a tricked-out fitness center with two aerobic studios, top-of-the-line equipment and a Kinesis Wall. Interestingly, the ship will have programming for kids ages 3 - 12 -- a first for Silversea, which has not previously catered to children.

Where It Will Sail: After a few inaugural sailings in December and January, the ship will be officially named on January 21 in Ft. Lauderdale. Silver Spirit then sets off on a 91-day South America voyage from Ft. Lauderdale to Los Angeles and back to New York. During the summer, the ship will cruise the Mediterranean before repositioning to the Caribbean for autumn and winter cruises.

--by Erica Silverstein