



## Weighing the Risks and Rewards of a 'Cabin Guarantee'

by Douglas Newman

Travelers who take the risk of booking a cabin guarantee face two big questions:

Do you really save enough money to make the suspense worth it?

And, perhaps even more important, what are the chances you'll wind up with an upgrade?

While those who book their cruise in a more traditional manner instantly receive a cabin assignment, folks who book a guarantee are only promised a stateroom somewhere, anywhere on the ship in the exact same category that they've chosen. The actual cabin may not be assigned until sometime after your booking (more likely, closer to departure).

Travelers are guaranteed a cabin in the category they've chosen, but there's always the possibility of an upgrade. The real risk is simply giving up the chance to pick your spot midship, high deck, low deck, etc.

As simple as this may sound, guarantees remain something of a mystery to many cruisers. Central to this is the fact that there is no standard method of dealing with them: Each line has its own unique policy. But first, the facts:

What are the advantages? Money-wise, the advantages of a guarantee scenario depend on cruise lines. In some cases, even if you don't get an upgrade (more on that later!) you can still save a few bucks. Cunard, Carnival, Seabourn, and Costa are among those that sell guarantee cabins at slightly lower fares.

Sometimes, there's no real savings; Crystal, Disney, and Holland America are among those that told us they permit guarantees, but you'll pay the same as anyone booking a cabin that particular category. For instance: On the May 19 Canada/New England sailing aboard Holland America's Maasdam, you'll pay \$1,049 for a guarantee and, guess what? It's \$1,049 for an assigned cabin, too. Same goes for a trip to the Mexican

Riviera on HAL's Oosterdam; a March 31 departure offers a deluxe verandah cabin for \$999 whether you go with the guarantee or book cabin 4007, as I did.

In that case, the lure of the guarantee is the possibility of an upgrade and it does happen. A reader posted on a forum that "our VE guarantee cabin category was upgraded to a VA." Based on cruise fares for a later date, the passenger hypothetically wound up with the same cabin class on a more premium deck: a \$224 advantage.

If you book a guarantee in a certain category and that category is full, you might get upgraded. On the other hand, someone else (perhaps a member of the past-passenger program with higher status) might get upgraded and you might get their cabin in your category. There's no way to tell.

Thus, the cardinal rule of booking guarantees: Don't book a guarantee in any given category unless you would be happy with a cabin in that category! In other words, if you will not be happy with anything less than a suite, don't book an inside guarantee.

As obvious as that may seem, I once met a couple whose travel agent convinced them that if they booked an inside guarantee, they were "virtually" assured an upgrade to a balcony cabin. They decided to save the money and book the inside guarantee rather than the balcony cabin they'd planned on. Unfortunately for them and perhaps not surprisingly they wound up with an inside cabin on the lowest deck, in the category they paid for. Fortunately, the ship wasn't full and they were able to upgrade (and paid plenty for it), but their cruise could nearly have been ruined.

No matter what a travel agent or anyone else tells you, the cruise line is not obligated to give you a cabin in a higher category than you booked! When booking a guarantee, do exactly what you would do when booking an assigned cabin: book the least expensive category that you will be happy with. An upgrade is a nice surprise, but not something you should count on.

The other very common question is, "When will I get my cabin assignment?" Unfortunately, I can't answer that either, because it depends on the specific cruise line's policy and other factors, like how full your particular sailing is. Either way, waiting for a cabin assignment is becoming a pre-cruise ritual for more and more people. The element of suspense can be rather fun or not. Another reader posts on the Holland America forum that he "finally got a cabin assignment today ... didn't get an upgrade but that's alright. I just feel better knowing I have a cabin."

Lastly, people will wonder, is a guarantee for me? If the cruise line is offering a guarantee at a lower fare than the least expensive assigned cabin, and you're not picky, go for it. If you really don't care too much about your cabin, and you can save money by taking a guarantee, go ahead and do it. You are, after all, guaranteed to get

at least what you paid for, and you just might be lucky and get that great upgrade. And it does happen ... sometimes.

On the other hand, if you won't save any money by booking a guarantee, you'd probably do just as well by looking at a deck plan and choosing a specific cabin you know you'll be happy with. If you're very particular about location, then a guarantee definitely isn't for you. Another reader posts, "I have always booked a specific cabin, because I want to be midship, on a low passenger deck (less motion equals less seasickness). Also, I like to get a cabin that is not directly below a noisy area like the disco, casino."

For a closer look at guarantees, we asked each major cruise line to detail their own policy on guarantee cabins.

#### Azamara

**How It Works:** Azamara offers two types of guarantees. Passengers can choose a category type (inside, outside, etc.) and pay a price lower than the regular fares for that category. They will be berthed in a cabin within the chosen category. Or, they can choose a specific category and pay the associated fare (no discount), and be berthed in that category or a higher category.

**When You'll Know:** Guarantee cabins are typically assigned between two and six weeks prior to departure, although some are assigned the week of sailing.

#### Carnival

**How It Works:** Passengers may either book a generic cabin type (e.g. inside, outside, balcony) at a lower fare than for the lowest specific category within that type, or book a guarantee within a specific category at the normal fare for that category.

**When You'll Know:** Carnival begins assigning guaranteed cabins about eight weeks prior to sailing and the majority of passengers are notified of their cabin assignment when they receive their cruise documents.

#### Celebrity

**How It Works:** Celebrity offers two types of guarantees. Passengers can choose a category type (inside, outside, etc.) and pay a price lower than the regular fares for that category. They will be berthed in a cabin within the chosen category. Or, they can choose a specific category and pay the associated fare (no discount), and be berthed in that category or a higher category.

**When You'll Know:** Guarantee cabins are typically assigned between two and six weeks prior to departure, although some are assigned the week of sailing.

## Costa

**How It Works:** Costa's guarantee passengers are offered a generic cabin type at a lower fare than the lowest specific category within that type.

**When You'll Know:** Cabin assignments are generally made around 30 days prior to departure.

## Crystal

**How It Works:** Crystal offers guarantees in all categories, except CP (Crystal Penthouse the highest category); passengers book guarantees at the same fare as an assigned cabin in that same category.

**When You'll Know:** Cabin assignments may be made as early as one month prior to departure, or as late as the day prior to departure. Most cabins are usually assigned one week before sailing.

## Cunard

**How It Works:** Cunard offers guarantees both for generic cabin types at special lower fares and for specific categories at the normal fare within that category.

**When You'll Know:** Cabin assignments may be made anywhere from 150 days prior to departure through the day before.

## Disney

**How It Works:** Disney offers guarantees in any given category at the normal fare for that category, depending on availability.

**When You'll Know:** Cabin assignments generally take place within 30 days of departure.

## Holland America

**How It Works:** Guarantees are offered in specific cabin categories on an as-needed basis, at the normal fare for that category.

**When You'll Know:** Assignments are made between 30 days and one week before sailing.

## MSC

**How It Works:** MSC offers guarantee cabins selectively based on inventory management restrictions. Guarantees are not available for all categories on all sailings. Guarantees are offered by category and type (single, double, triple or quad).

When You'll Know: The time frame for assignment of guarantees can vary according to the sailing, category and type of guarantee. In general, guarantees are assigned within two weeks of sailing and in some instances may not be assigned until embarkation.

#### Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL)

How It Works: Norwegian guarantees are offered for a stateroom in the category the guest initially paid for, or possibly a higher category.

When You'll Know: Assignments are made any time after final payment has been received, up to the day of sailing.

#### Oceania

How It Works: Oceania's guaranteed cabins are offered within specific categories at the prevailing rate, once all available cabins in that category have been assigned.

When You'll Know: Cabin assignments are done as soon as accommodations open up. It could be the day after the reservation is made, after final payment is due or even upon embarkation.

#### Princess

How It Works: Depending on availability, Princess offers guarantees within specific categories as an alternative to an assigned cabin.

When You'll Know: Cabin assignments may be made at any time between booking and several days before departure.

#### Regent Seven Seas

How It Works: The category and pricing depends on the sailing. Sometimes Regent is able to offer guests a guarantee cabin at the lowest cost if there is enough availability.

When You'll Know: Cabin assignments are usually made between 30 and 14 days before departure.

#### Seabourn

How It Works: Seabourn occasionally offers guarantee fares as a special promotion on selected departures. They are typically offered as a "run of ship" guarantee at a flat fare for all suite categories except the larger Classic and Owners Suite categories.

When You'll Know: Guarantees are typically assigned about a week prior to departure. Seabourn points out that when passengers choose a guarantee fare, they probably aren't worrying about what suite they get they're all great!

#### Silversea

How It Works: Silversea offer guarantees if all assigned suites are sold out in a particular category.

When You'll Know: A suite may be assigned at any time before departure.

Windstar

How It Works: Windstar offers guarantees within specific categories, at the normal fare for that category.

When You'll Know: Cabin assignments could be made as late the day of sailing, but normally they are made much earlier.