



The USA's Six Best Cruise Itineraries

by Ralph Grizzle

Cruises make it possible to see much of the best of America "from a ship."

Traditionally, we Americans take to the highways when vacationing in our own country and with good reason: In such a large landmass, we find scenic beauty, historic sites and cultural diversity. But you also can count on high gas prices, traffic jams and the hassle of moving from one hotel to another each day.

Plus, budgeting for the do-it-yourself vacation is always a challenge, because the cost of meals is a big unknown. Increasingly, however, cruise lines seem to be adapting a phrase coined by the bus industry in the 1970s, "Leave The Driving To Us."

Homeland cruising has sky rocked in popularity as cruise lines offer enticing itineraries that allow us to visit America's tourist areas affordably and comfortably. Board a ship and unpack once to enjoy an unhurried week with pampering cabin service, an endless array of food and evening entertainment. Each day your floating hotel arrives in a port with sightseeing options either within walking distance or on a shore excursion.

Following are my six favorite American itineraries.

1. Hawaii. There are few places on earth as beautiful as Hawaii - with lush tropical vegetation, high craggy peaks, volcanoes and sweeping Pacific beaches. Cruise for a week, and you'll arrive each day in a tropical paradise that you will have a chance to experience on shore excursions that include nature walks, helicopter flight-seeing, tropical forest tours and snorkeling.

Norwegian Cruise Line offers year-round voyages sailing round-trip from Honolulu aboard Pride of Aloha, Pride of America and Pride of Hawaii. (Beginning in September 2007, the company also will offer 10- and 11-night inter-island cruises).

Or, combine a Hawaii cruise with a Pacific crossing from Vancouver, Canada or Ensenada, Mexico, aboard the dozen or so ships sailing on this route. Your itinerary will include stops in Hilo and Kona on the Big Isle plus Kahului on Maui and Nawiliwili, Kauai.

On the Big Island, be sure to get to the top of Mona Kea, the earth's largest volcano, where observatories dot the rim. On Maui beaches you'll find surfers riding enormous waves. Try your luck at deep sea fishing, or sit back and relax on a catamaran cruise. Explore the sights beneath the sea snorkeling. Golfers visiting Hawaii have eight of the country's 25 top resorts courses to choose from.

2. New England. Each fall, half-dozen cruise lines sail between New York and Montreal - with stops in Boston, Newport and/or Bar Harbor, Maine. A one-week cruise combines historic attractions of Colonial America with visits to grand estates of the wealthy perched on craggy ocean cliffs and the rugged scenery of the Northeast Coast.

In Boston, be sure to stop for a lobster salad sandwich and bowl of clam chowder, true New England delicacies. And don't miss a visit to the Breakers in Newport, where the Vanderbilt family built their 70-room summer "cottage" at the end of the 19th century.

Skip the port town of Bar Harbor only if you must, but don't miss the view from Cadillac Mountain and the beauty of Acadia National Park with its rugged coastal beauty. Golfers can tee off at Kebo Valley Golf Club, the country's eighth oldest golf course, which wraps itself between the mountains and the sea.

3. Alaska. Second in popularity only to the Caribbean, Alaska is a region of stark beauty, diverse animals, marine life and the frontier spirit. Whales and dolphins accompany ships sailing from Seattle or Vancouver, a mix of large vessels and small ships carrying eco-tourists and naturalists.

In port, sightseeing options include salmon fishing, touring by helicopter or small plane, salmon bakes, walking on glaciers, panning for gold and scenic rail excursions. Key ports include Ketchikan, Skagway and Juneau. Ships stopping in Glacier Bay and Hubbard Glacier bring some of nature's most awesome beauty up close, as passengers experience the thundering echo of a glacier calving a short distance from the ship.

Those who opt for a up-close encounter with nature will love the small ships of Cruise West, Lindblad Expeditions and Clipper Cruise Line, which cruise right up to sea lion colonies and Cliffside bird rookeries and whales up close.

Extend your cruise with an Alaska ground tour that includes a visit to Denali by domed train, stays in cozy mountain resorts and wildlife tours. Princess Cruises and Holland America Line boast the largest selection.

4. Inland Waterways. Majestic America Line, formed in 2006 through the combination of American West Steamboat Company and Delta Queen Steamboat Company, offers uniquely American cruise itineraries with its fleet of U.S.-flagged and built ships. Majestic America Line travels America's great rivers and coastal waterways from Alaska and the Pacific Northwest to the Heartland and the Lower Mississippi.

Sailing aboard the historic Delta Queen or the newer Mississippi Queen and American Queen is to navigate America's heartland, as you meander along. As some of the only overnight paddlewheelers left in America, they are charged with the mission of keeping alive a more than 150-year tradition as they cruise along the Mississippi, Arkansas and Ohio rivers.

While watching the banks drift by is still the favored pastime, passengers can also enjoy spontaneous sing-alongs, kite flying over the paddlewheel, calliope playing contests, lectures by staff members and visiting guests on river history and commerce. And you'll find more theme cruises - ranging from Civil War to Quilting - than on any other cruise line.

5. The Napa Valley. Each fall, two cruise lines, Cruise West and American Safari Cruises, operate small ships that transport you into the heart of California's famous wine growing region. The three- and four- day itineraries sail round-trip from San Francisco and offer the opportunity to visit cellars of area estates, private visits to architectural masterpieces and exclusive luncheons and tastings at the area's prominent wineries.

Aboard American Safari's luxurious 21-passenger Safari Quest, passengers can kayak ashore and take a private art tour at muralist Carlo Marchiori's private villa. Cruise West passengers aboard the Spirit of Endeavor will witness the autumn harvest crush, attend private events at the Culinary Institute of America and have a chance to visit shops and galleries along Sausalito's landscaped waterfront.

6. West Coast. Each fall and spring cruise lines reposition ships between winter and summer cruising areas. It's a time when dozens of vessels move between the Caribbean or Mexico and Alaska, offering wonderful opportunities for voyages that stop in rarely visited West Coast ports in California, Oregon and Washington.

There are many cruises, ranging from three to seven days. Also, Majestic America Line operates two new sternwheelers, with cruises on the Columbia River.