

Best Family Cruises: Which Is Right for You?

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Taking a cruise as a family is a great way to allow everyone to have a bit of freedom while maintaining togetherness, since everyone doesn't need to be together 100% of the time.

Ships on any cruise line offer a variety of activities for almost every age group and a multitude of dining options for even the pickiest of palates. Also, many ships have places where kids can go and participate in activities or just hang out with other kids, allowing the adults some time alone.

When you're seeking a cruise for your family, consider:

- The itinerary: Does this cruise go where you want to go? Are shore excursions available that meet your family's needs?
- The cabin: Will everyone fit comfortably in the cabin you choose?
- The activities: What types of activities are available for your kids? Are there places that are just for the adults?
- The dining options: Are the types of foods available that your family likes? Can you eat when you want?

Keep in mind most cruise lines require children to be at least 6 months old at the time of sailing; however, the minimum is 1 year old for some sailings.

Since kids will often be separated from their parents, most cruise lines issue wristbands to children listing their muster station and other information so staff knows where to take them in case of a shipboard emergency.

Here's a starting point to help you decide the best cruises for your family.

Disney Cruise Line

When you think of family activities, Disney usually comes to mind. Disney Cruise Line has six ships, each painted in the red and black colors inspired by Mickey Mouse. Even the ship's horn plays the first seven notes of "When You Wish Upon a Star."

The ships bring a lot of the Disney experience on board with character interactions, immersive experiences and themes.

There are live shows for kids, fireworks, pools, splash pads, deck parties and more.

Some of the cabins are designed for families with a split bath-and-a-half design that includes a sink and bathing area in one room and a sink and toilet in another room.

Once the kids are on board, there are a variety of activities for them in Disney's Youth Clubs. These feature several distinct physical spaces and activities that are based on the child's age and vary by ship.

- The Oceaneer Club is for kids ages 3 to 10, and the experiences are different on each Disney ship.
- Edge is for tweens ages 11 to 14 and is a hangout space offering age-specific activities.
- Vibe is for teens 14 to 17 and has an exclusive physical space as well as activities like dance parties and karaoke.
- The "it's a small world" nursery is for the little ones 6 months to age 3. There is a fee for this service, and space is limited.

In-room babysitting isn't available.

Don't worry, Disney ships aren't just about the kids. The ships have areas that are for adults only. Certain nightclubs and lounges are only for adults, as are some pools, the spa and at least one restaurant.

Royal Caribbean

Royal Caribbean has 28 ships ranging in size from the smaller Rhapsody of the Seas, which holds 2,416 passengers on 12 decks, to the new Icon of the Seas, which can have 5,610 passengers on 20 decks. There really is a wide variety with something for everyone.

The ships are often colorful and are built for fun with all kinds of onboard activities like rock-climbing walls, surfing simulators, pools and splash pads, while the newer and bigger ships have water parks, indoor parks, ice rinks, bumper cars and more. Sometimes, you might even forget you're on a ship and think you're either at a resort or an amusement park. It's fun to see the kids around the ship with their new friends enjoying activities like costume parades, scavenger hunts and more.

All ships have a variety of dining options, including a main dining room, specialty restaurants and other casual options for all kinds of diners.

Royal Caribbean's Adventure Ocean kids club has a variety of activities, many with an adventure and science theme, making the vacation fun and educational. The program is divided by age. Aquanauts is for kids ages 3 to 5, Explorers is for kids 6 to 8, and Voyagers is for kids 9 to 12, and the activities and physical spaces are age-appropriate. There are also programs for tweens and teens with hangout spaces and arcades.

The Royal Babies & Tots program is for the younger set, ages 6 months to 3 years, and is on most ships. There is a cost for nursery services, and some even allow parents to drop off their kids outside of set program times.

For parents who want to get out and have some late-night fun, the Late Night Party Zone for kids and teens offers extended hours after 10 p.m. with special programming for a fee.

As for dining, Royal Caribbean offers My Family Time Dining for families with kids ages 3 to 11. This dining option plans that kids will finish their meal in 45 minutes. Then, staff from Adventure Ocean picks up the kids for evening activities, leaving the adults to linger over the rest of their meal.

Sometimes, the cruise line has a promotion where kids 12 and younger sail free.

Norwegian Cruise Line

Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) has 19 ships divided among nine classes.

Many ships have waterslides, racetracks, laser tag, bowling, mini golf, splash pads and more. Youth programs offer age-appropriate activities on all ships except for the Norwegian Spirit, and the activities vary by ship. Youths are divided into two groups, based on age: Splash Academy is for ages 3 to 12 and Entourage is for teens 13 to 17.

Splash Academy has a variety of activities for kids, like creative play and games, that are offered only when the ship is at sea. Entourage has a hangout area and offers activities for teens that can take place around the ship. The area often becomes a teen dance club at night.

For the little ones, there is no set drop-off program. According to NCL, the Guppies Open Play area “offers a play space for parents to interact with their infants/ babies/toddlers 6 months to 3 years old and/or children in diapers.”

One-on-one babysitting isn't available. If parents want some late-night fun, group babysitting is available for a fee for kids ages 3 to 12.

On certain cruises, the third and fourth passengers in a cabin sail for free.

Carnival Cruise Line

Carnival Cruise Line has 26 ships most have activities like sports zones, water parks, ropes courses and mini golf. A few ships have Bolt, a roller coaster that allows passengers to control how fast they go. All Carnival ships have a video arcade with a variety of games. Some of these activities are included in the fare, while others have an additional fee.

Carnival's youth program is fleetwide and is divided into groups based on age ranging from 6 months to 17.

- Turtles: The Turtles program is for kids 6 months to 2 years. A fee applies, and times vary.
- Camp Ocean: Camp Ocean is for kids who are a little older and are further divided into three categories — Penguins for ages 2 to 5, Stingrays for ages 6 to 8 and Sharks for ages 9 to 11. Kids play together in organized age-appropriate activities and eat meals together.
- Teen programs: Two programs are for tweens and teens. Circle “C” is for kids ages 12 to 14, and Club O2 is for ages 15 to 17. The C in Circle “C” stands for cruise, chill and connect. Circle “C” is an onboard hangout place and activity space. Club O2 is a hangout place with teen activities like movies, video games and karaoke.

For adults who want time alone, the Night Owls program is for kids ages 6 months to 11 years. It is available each evening from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m., and there is an hourly charge per child. The Camp Ocean space takes on a slumber party feel with movies, arts and crafts, snacks and more.

One-on-one babysitting isn't available. As for dining, kids menus are offered in most dining venues on board.

MSC Cruises

The Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) has had a large presence in Europe for many years and is growing in North America and the Caribbean.

The fleet has 19 ships with European-inspired touches that travel to more than 200 destinations around the world. The line has won awards for family cruises.

Ships have water parks, 4D cinemas, arcades, bowling, simulators and more.

The kids clubs are divided by age, and care for babies and toddlers under 3 is included in the fare.

Mini Club is for ages 3 to 6, Junior Club is for ages 7 to 11, Young Club is for ages 12 to 14 and Teen Club is for ages 15 to 17. Activities range from sports and dance to video games, theme parties and more.

For dining, MSC ships have a variety of options for kids, including special menus, specific areas of the buffet with kid-friendly items, places where kids can eat with other kids, as well as “Happy Dinners,” where staffers will take kids to the kid clubs after they’re finished eating, allowing the adults to finish their meals at their leisure.

MSC sometimes has sales where kids sail free.

Celebrity, Holland America and Princess

Other cruise lines like Celebrity Cruises, Holland America Line and Princess offer kids programs, but they’re not as well known for amenities on the ships like waterslides, go-karts and roller coasters. The ships often aren't as colorful or playful as other cruise lines' ships.

These lines can be great for multigenerational cruises because they often have programs targeted for mature passengers. You can often find things like lectures and card games. And they also have kids programs. Celebrity’s program is called Camp at Sea. Holland America’s is the Kids Club. The kids club on Princess is Camp Discovery.

The amount and frequency of activities can often depend on how many children are on each sailing.

How to maximize your rewards
