



Cruising 101 with Cristi

YOUR FIRST CRUISE WITH CONFIDENCE

Your first cruise, one step at a time.

YOUR FIRST CRUISE COMPANION

Planning • Packing • Life onboard

Your first cruise in simple steps

You don't have to read this all at once! Follow the steps in order, one at a time, and come back whenever you have a question. Ready to dive into the whole thing? Go for it!

I'm Cristi. This guide will help you choose a cruise, prepare for your trip, and feel more comfortable onboard. If you get stuck, send me your question. You do not need to know cruise lingo to ask for help.

Still deciding? Read Step 1 and contact me with your dates, travelers, and budget. Already booked? Start with Step 2. Sailing soon? Focus on Steps 3 and 4.

Follow your next step

[1 Choose your cruise](#) Set your budget, compare cabins, and understand booking. Pages 3-4.

[2 Protect your trip](#) Check documents, insurance, and important deadlines. Page 5.

[3 Get ready to go](#) Arrange travel, finish check-in, and pack your essentials. Page 6.

[4 Arrive and board](#) Plan your arrival, check in, and complete muster. Page 7.

[5 Settle in onboard](#) Get comfortable with meals, packages, Wi-Fi, and sea days. Page 8.

[6 Enjoy your port days](#) Plan time ashore and know what to do if plans change. Page 9.

[7 Head home](#) Prepare your luggage, bill, and return journey. Page 10.

Use these only when you need them

[Cruise lingo: pages 11-13](#). Look up a word when you need it.

[Trusted resources: page 14](#)

[Final checklist and contact Cristi: page 15](#)

About this guide: Mainly for U.S. travelers taking ocean cruises. Rules vary by cruise line, fare, citizenship, and itinerary. Follow your booking documents and current official requirements.

STEP 1 / CHOOSE YOUR CRUISE

Understand the price

Compare the whole vacation cost so your budget feels comfortable before you commit.

How cruise pricing works

An advertised fare is often per person, based on two people sharing a cabin. A solo traveler may pay a supplement. Third and fourth guest prices can differ, and promotions have conditions. Prices also change with the ship, dates, cabin, and availability.

Ask for the total for everyone in your party, with required taxes and fees identified. Check what the displayed total already includes before adding anything again. A quote is not a confirmed reservation, and an unpaid hold can expire.

Usually included on mainstream cruises	Often extra unless your fare includes it
Your cabin and transportation between scheduled ports	Flights, hotel, parking, and port transfers
Main dining room, buffet, and selected casual meals	Specialty restaurants and some room service
Selected basic drinks, such as tap water and regular coffee	Alcohol, soda, specialty coffee, and drink packages
Many shows, pools, and onboard activities	Wi-Fi, excursions, spa, photos, casino, and some activities
Standard cabin service	Daily gratuities or service charges

Some premium, luxury, and bundled fares include more. Always check your specific offer. [3]

Budget for gratuities

Many lines add a daily amount per guest for crew service. You may be able to prepay it, or it may be charged onboard. Rates and age rules vary. Drinks, spa services, and specialty dining may carry separate service charges. Review the bill before adding another tip.

Your vacation total

Cruise total + travel to the port + hotel and transfers + gratuities + insurance + chosen extras + a cushion for surprises = your working budget.

Next: Compare cabin choices on page 4.

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Choose your cabin and book

A cabin is also called a stateroom. The best fit depends on how you use your space and what you want to spend.

Cabin type	What to expect	Good to know
Inside	Usually no exterior window; often the lowest price.	A good fit if you mainly sleep and shower there.
Ocean view	A window or porthole; usually no private outdoor space.	Check for obstructed views and whether the window opens.
Balcony	A private outdoor area in most standard balcony categories.	Verify the actual design and whether it faces the ocean or an interior area.
Suite	More space and possibly extra amenities.	Benefits vary widely. Read the specific suite inclusions.

Location matters too

Look at what is above and below the cabin. Pool decks, theaters, and nightlife areas can create noise. Ask about walking distances, connecting doors, bed arrangements, and accessible cabins. A lower, midship location may help if motion is a concern, but no cabin eliminates movement.

A guarantee cabin means the cruise line assigns your room under that offer's terms. You may save money while giving up control over location. If location matters, choose an assigned cabin.

Deposits and final payment

The deposit is part of your cruise price. Its amount and refund rules depend on the fare. A nonrefundable deposit can be lost if you cancel, and changes may carry fees. Close-in bookings may require full payment immediately.

Use the final-payment date on your confirmation. Missing it can put the reservation at risk. Cancellation penalties can increase as departure approaches, even if you have already paid in full.

- ☐ Confirm names match travel documents and all travelers are listed.
- ☐ Review the cabin, total price, deposit terms, and cancellation schedule.
- ☐ Save the confirmation and calendar every payment deadline.

CRISTI'S TIP Tell me about mobility needs, allergies, children's ages, or medical equipment early so we can check the right options.

Next: Review Step 2 before paying a deposit, then contact Cristi to plan your cruise.

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Documents and protection

Handle these early. A little preparation now can prevent a difficult surprise at the terminal.

Passports and identification

For U.S. travelers, a valid passport book is the strongest practical choice. The U.S. Department of State recommends carrying one even when the cruise line does not require it, because an emergency flight home from abroad requires a passport book. A passport card does not work for international air travel. [1]

Some round-trip U.S. sailings allow certain U.S. citizens to use alternative documents. Do not assume your trip qualifies. Verify the cruise line's rules and every destination's entry requirements for each traveler. Ask about passport validity beyond the trip, visas, minors' documents, consent letters, and name changes.

REAL ID alone is not proof of citizenship for a cruise. Requirements differ for non-U.S. citizens. Carry the actual required documents, not just phone photos, and keep secure backup copies separately.

Understand travel insurance

Compare trip cancellation and interruption, travel delay, emergency medical care, and medical evacuation benefits. Your regular health plan may have limited coverage abroad. Look at exclusions, benefit limits, deductibles, and the claims process. [2]

Ask about insurance when you make the first trip payment. Time-sensitive benefits, including some pre-existing condition exclusion waivers, have purchase deadlines and eligibility rules. Cancel For Any Reason, when available, has extra conditions and usually reimburses only part of eligible costs. [2]

Insurance does not cover every reason to cancel. Once a storm is named or an event becomes foreseeable, buying a policy generally will not cover losses from that known event. Read the policy before relying on it. [2]

Before you leave

- ☐ Verify documents for every traveler and every port.
- ☐ Save your policy number and the insurer's emergency assistance number.
- ☐ Keep receipts and written records if a disruption happens.

CRISTI'S TIP Send document questions early. If you are unsure whether something is acceptable, verify it before travel day.

Next: Save your deadlines and arrange travel in Step 3.

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Arrange travel and pack smart

Start travel arrangements soon after booking. Finish check-in when it opens, then use the packing lists as departure gets closer.

Arrange the essentials

Book your hotel, transportation, and parking with an arrival buffer. Plan to reach the departure area at least the day before, especially when flying. Confirm the correct terminal and allow time for the return journey.

Complete online check-in when available, select an arrival window if required, and save boarding documents offline. Check reservation windows for any excursions or onboard experiences you want.

Plan for motion and comfort

If you are prone to motion sickness, ask a clinician or pharmacist before travel about suitable prevention and side effects. Some medicines cause drowsiness and are not suitable for everyone. Follow professional advice and the product directions. [6]

Looking at the horizon, resting, drinking water, and eating small amounts can help. Limit alcohol. Seek onboard medical help for severe or persistent symptoms rather than assuming every illness is seasickness. Medical visits generally cost extra. [6]

Pack in your carry-on

- ☐ Required travel documents, boarding pass, insurance, and contacts.
- ☐ Prescription medicines in labeled containers, plus a travel-delay supply.
- ☐ Valuables, phone, charger, glasses, and essential personal items.
- ☐ Swimsuit or change of clothes for the first afternoon.

Pack in your suitcase

- ☐ Comfortable daytime clothes, sleepwear, and dinner outfits for your ship.
- ☐ Walking shoes, pool footwear, swimwear, and a light layer.
- ☐ Toiletries, sun protection, hat, and a reusable water bottle.
- ☐ Small day bag, rain layer, and activity-specific items for your destination.

Wash hands with soap and water before eating. Report vomiting or diarrhea to the medical team and follow their guidance. Keep medication and medical equipment accessible.

Check the prohibited items list

Common restrictions include weapons, illegal drugs, candles, irons, and garment steamers. Electrical accessories such as extension cords, power strips, and multi-plug adapters may also be prohibited. "Cruise approved" on a shopping listing is not the ship's approval. [5]

Alcohol, bottled drinks, drones, and food have line-specific rules. Check your cruise line's current list before packing. For CPAP equipment or other medical needs, arrange permitted supplies with the line in advance.

Next: Review boarding day in Step 4.

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Make boarding day easy

Embarkation means boarding the ship. Give yourself time to get there and settle in.

Arrive the day before

Plan to reach the departure area at least one day before the cruise, especially if flying. This creates a buffer for delays and misplaced luggage. Longer or more complicated journeys may deserve more time. An overnight stay reduces risk but cannot guarantee you will make the ship.

Confirm the correct terminal, hotel-to-port travel time, parking or transfer details, and the cruise line's final boarding deadline. The ship's sailing time is not your arrival time.

Before you reach the terminal

- ☐ Complete online check-in and select an arrival window if required.
- ☐ Download the cruise app and save boarding passes offline.
- ☐ Attach the cruise line's luggage tags to bags you will hand over.
- ☐ Keep documents, medicine, valuables, chargers, and a change of clothes in your carry-on.

What happens at the port

You may hand larger bags to porters, then go through security and document checks. Carry bags must stay with you until your room opens. Checked bags can arrive later, so pack anything needed that afternoon with you.

Once onboard, find an included lunch option, check reservations, and explore at an easy pace. Your cruise card or wearable generally serves as your room key and onboard payment method. Keep it secure.

Complete the muster drill

Muster is the mandatory safety briefing. It explains emergency signals, life jackets, and where to assemble. Your muster station is your assigned meeting point. Follow your ship's instructions, complete every required step, and report to the station when directed. Watching a video alone may not finish the process. [4]

Next: Settle in onboard with Step 5.

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Enjoy life onboard

Your daily schedule is an invitation. You get to choose how much or how little to do.

Dining without the guesswork

Most mainstream ships offer an included main dining room, buffet, and selected casual venues. Dinner may use a set seating time or a flexible system. Flexible dining can still require reservations or a wait. Specialty restaurants usually cost extra. Check menus and room-service charges before ordering.

Tell Cristi about dietary needs before sailing, then speak with the dining team onboard. Do not assume a buffet label is enough for a serious allergy. Dress expectations differ by venue and evening, so check your line's guidance.

Do you need a drink package

You can often buy drinks individually. Compare the package's full trip cost, including service charges, with what you realistically expect to order. Port days may mean less time using it.

- ☐ Check eligible drinks, price caps, limits, and excluded venues.
- ☐ Check whether other adults in the cabin must also buy a package.
- ☐ Verify rules for sharing, private destinations, and cancellation.

A package is a convenience choice, not a requirement for a good cruise.

Wi-Fi and your phone

Ship internet is often an extra purchase, separate from cellular service. The cruise app may offer some functions on the ship's Wi-Fi without a paid internet plan. Check what is free and whether a plan limits devices or streaming.

At sea, use airplane mode and then turn Wi-Fi back on to connect to the ship's network. Maritime cellular roaming can be expensive. Confirm coverage with your carrier; a land-based international plan may not include service at sea. Internet speeds can vary.

Sea days are yours

A sea day has no scheduled port visit. Read the daily program for shows, classes, pool time, and quiet spots. Some activities need reservations or have fees. Build in downtime, and agree on a meeting place if your group splits up.

Next: Read the port-day checklist in Step 6 before going ashore.

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Explore ports with confidence

A port day can be a guided adventure, a beach afternoon, or a quiet day aboard.

Choose excursions thoughtfully

Shore excursions are organized activities ashore. Ship-sold tours offer coordination with the cruise line. Independent tours can offer different experiences, but you must verify timing, return arrangements, and missed-port cancellation terms. Do not assume the ship will wait for an independent tour.

Compare more than price: walking distance, stairs, transport time, age and weight limits, accessibility, required gear, and what is included. Leave a generous return buffer. Tender ports use smaller boats between ship and shore, which can add time and create accessibility limits.

Before stepping ashore

- ☐ Confirm all-aboard time and whether ship time differs from local time.
- ☐ Set an alarm using ship time. Do not rely on your phone updating correctly.
- ☐ Carry the ship card and the identification required for that port.
- ☐ Save the port agent contact and meeting instructions offline.
- ☐ Take water, sun protection, a payment method, and only what you need.

Follow local rules, use reliable transportation, and keep an eye on your belongings. A passport photo can be useful as a backup, but it does not replace required identification.

Weather and itinerary changes

Atlantic hurricane season runs June 1 through November 30, although storms can occur outside those dates. October falls within that season. Weather can affect any sailing, and captains may change ports, routes, or times for safety. [7, 8]

Watch cruise line messages and follow the updated instructions. A changed or missed port does not automatically mean a full cruise refund. Compensation, excursion refunds, and insurance benefits depend on the applicable terms. Check independent tour policies before booking.

Next: Use Step 7 on your final full day to prepare for heading home.

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Head home without the scramble

Debarkation, also called disembarkation, means leaving the ship at the end of your cruise.

The last evening

- ☐ Read departure instructions and confirm your assigned group or process.
- ☐ Review the onboard bill and resolve questions with Guest Services.
- ☐ Confirm your transfer and the cruise line's recommended flight timing.
- ☐ Check the safe, drawers, outlets, and balcony for belongings.

If the ship collects luggage the night before, follow the tagging and collection instructions. Keep travel clothes, shoes, medicines, documents, valuables, and an overnight bag with you. Self-carry departure means managing all your own bags, possibly through stairs and queues.

Departure morning

Leave the cabin by the requested time and wait where directed. The ship's scheduled arrival does not mean you can walk off immediately. Clearance, luggage collection, border checks, and traffic take time. Allow a comfortable buffer before flights or other timed travel.

First-timer mistakes to skip

Common mistake	A better habit
Comparing only the headline fare	Compare the whole vacation total and cancellation terms.
Leaving documents until the last week	Verify them early for every traveler and destination.
Flying in on boarding day	Build in an overnight buffer before the cruise.
Packing medicine in checked luggage	Keep essentials with you on both travel days.
Buying every package immediately	Compare the cost with your actual plans.
Using local time for the return to ship	Confirm ship time and the all-aboard deadline.
Booking every minute of the trip	Leave room to rest and change your mind.
Waiting until home to report a problem	Tell the onboard team while they can help.

Keep the final checklist and Cristi's contact details on page 15 handy.

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Directions and safety words

Look up a word whenever you need it. There is nothing here to memorize before your cruise.

Forward

Toward the front of the ship.

Aft

Toward the back of the ship.

Bow

The front end of the ship.

Stern

The back end of the ship.

Port

The left side when facing the bow. Port and left both have four letters.

Starboard

The right side when facing the bow. These side names do not change when you turn.

Midship

The middle area of the ship.

Deck and deck plan

A deck is a level or floor. A deck plan is the map of cabins and venues.

Gangway

The walkway or ramp used to get on and off the ship.

Embarkation

Boarding the ship at the start of your cruise.

Debarkation or disembarkation

Leaving the ship. Debarkation instructions usually refer to the end of your cruise.

Muster drill

The required safety briefing and check-in process. Complete every step your ship requires.

Muster station

Your assigned emergency meeting place. It is not necessarily where you board a lifeboat.

All aboard

The deadline to be back on the ship, before its departure time.

Ship time

The time used onboard. Verify it before going ashore because local time may differ.

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Port and cabin words

These terms appear in cruise descriptions, deck plans, and your daily schedule.

Itinerary

Your planned route and schedule.

Port of call

A destination the ship visits.

Sea day

A day sailing without a scheduled port visit.

Port day

A day with a scheduled destination stop.

Tender or water shuttle

A smaller boat carrying passengers between ship and shore when the ship is not alongside a pier. Tickets or assigned groups may be needed.

Docked

Secured alongside a pier.

Anchored

Held offshore by an anchor. Some ships hold position offshore without anchoring.

Shore excursion

An organized tour or activity ashore. Check its meeting place, duration, and return time.

Stateroom or cabin

Your room onboard. Your cabin steward or attendant helps care for it.

Inside cabin

A cabin usually without an exterior window.

Ocean view cabin

A cabin with a window or porthole.

Balcony cabin

A cabin with a balcony or a cruise line's specific balcony design. Check the details.

Suite

A larger accommodation category that may include extra benefits.

Obstructed view

A view partly blocked by ship structures or equipment.

Guarantee cabin

An offer where the cruise line assigns your cabin under that offer's terms.

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Dining and money words

Check your fare and onboard menus to see which services are included and which cost extra.

Atrium

The ship's central lobby area.

Guest Services

The desk for onboard questions, account issues, and help.

Main dining room or MDR

A sit-down restaurant usually included in the fare on mainstream ships.

Traditional dining

Dinner at an assigned seating time.

Flexible dining

Dinner with more choice of timing. Reservations or waits may still apply.

Specialty dining

A restaurant that often costs extra.

Buffet

A casual dining venue where you choose from food stations.

Sail & Sign

Carnival's cashless onboard account system. Purchases and gratuities are charged to your account. Your card is linked to it. Other lines use different names.

Onboard account or folio

Your running bill for shipboard charges and credits. Review it during the cruise.

Onboard credit or OBC

A credit toward eligible spending. Restrictions, expiration, and refund rules vary.

Gratuities and service charges

Tips or charges for service. Daily crew gratuities and charges on individual purchases may be separate.

Complimentary

Included at no additional charge. Check exactly which items or services qualify.

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Keep these resources handy

Use the links below for current guidance. Cruise policies can change, and your own line's rules take priority for your sailing.

[1 U.S. Department of State](#)

Passport books, cruise travel, and entry planning

[2 National Association of Insurance Commissioners](#)

Understanding travel insurance and coverage limits

[3 Royal Caribbean](#)

An example of what a mainstream cruise fare includes

[4 Royal Caribbean](#)

Safety briefing and guest conduct requirements

[5 Royal Caribbean](#)

An example of a cruise line's prohibited items list

[6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

Motion sickness prevention and treatment considerations

[7 National Hurricane Center](#)

Official hurricane season and tropical cyclone background

[8 Royal Caribbean](#)

How cruise itineraries can change during hurricane season

Sail & Sign details: Carnival Cruise Line

Numbered references in this guide point to these resources. Royal Caribbean links are examples, not rules for every cruise line. For your trip, also review your booking confirmation, cruise contract, destination entry rules, and insurance policy.

[Waves of Fun Travel website](#)

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Your first cruise starts here

You do not need to have every answer. A few starting details are enough to begin the conversation.

Your ready to sail checklist

- ☐ My names, documents, and destination entry requirements are verified.
- ☐ My payments are current and important deadlines are saved.
- ☐ I have reviewed insurance and saved emergency contacts.
- ☐ My hotel, parking, transfers, and arrival buffer are arranged.
- ☐ My online check-in and boarding documents are ready.
- ☐ I know what is included and have a budget for extras.
- ☐ My carry-on contains documents, medicines, and essentials.
- ☐ I have checked packing restrictions and my return travel plan.

When to contact Cristi

Before booking: Ask about ships, cabins, budgets, travel dates, and anything that makes you hesitant. Share accessibility needs, dietary concerns, and special occasions.

After booking: Contact me about payment questions, name or traveler changes, document concerns, and changes to your plans. Reply to your existing booking email so the details stay together.

During travel: For a delay or booking disruption, contact the relevant travel provider and Cristi. Onboard, tell Guest Services about ship issues right away. For an urgent medical or safety issue, contact the ship's medical team or local emergency services first, then your insurer's assistance team as appropriate.

Let's plan your first cruise

Tell me your approximate dates, number of travelers, preferred departure area, budget, and what you would love to do. If you are still figuring it out, just say so. We can start there.

[Start your Personalized Cruise Planning Request](#)

[Email Cristi • cristi@wavesoffuntravel.com](mailto:cristi@wavesoffuntravel.com)

[Call Cristi • 972-503-9910](tel:972-503-9910)

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