

YOUR MONEY

Sea worthy

There are deals to be had on every luxury cruise line—and here's how to find them by Caren Weiner Campbell



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In the world of cruise vacations, where “more” is often considered synonymous with “better”—endless buffet tables!—five stars are simply not enough. Enter the six-star class of ultra-luxury cruise ship. Six stars is the highest rating bestowed by the boaters’ bible, *Fielding’s*

Guide to Worldwide Cruises. Ocean liners currently in that category hail from the Crystal, Cunard, Radisson Seven Seas, Seabourn, Sea Dream, and Silversea fleets.

“Our new favorite line is Crystal,” says Edith Bjornson, who with her husband, Carroll, has taken dozens of luxury cruises to

destinations all over the world. “It’s the optimal size for us—about 1,000 passengers—and we like their philosophy. The management has carefully thought through what their passengers will need.”

Offering such amenities as flat-screen TVs, fully programmed MP3 jukeboxes, private verandas,

A new seasickness

Many cruise ships were hit with a virus last year. Here's how to protect yourself.

In 2002, "seasickness" took on a whole new meaning. Last year's outbreaks of the Norwalk virus—a gastrointestinal bug that causes vomiting, diarrhea, headache, fever, and cramps—afflicted more than 1,200 passengers on such major cruise lines as Royal Caribbean, Holland America, Carnival, Disney, and P&O.

Though the virus's sudden prevalence has been attributed to everything from sewage in seawater to bioterrorism, the truth is far more prosaic. The Norwalk virus, which is caused by poor hygiene and spreads through person-to-person contact, is actually one of the most contagious stomach bugs; it affects about 181,000 Americans each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Nevertheless, the 20-plus outbreaks at sea in 2002 do constitute "more than [the CDC] has seen in the four previous years combined."

To combat the virus—and the public relations fallout from it—cruise lines are scrubbing, scouring, and sanitizing their ocean liners. (In fact, the CDC has established industry-wide cleanup guidelines via its Vessel Sanitation Program; concerned travelers can read them in detail at the agency's Website: www.cdc.gov/nceh/vsp.)

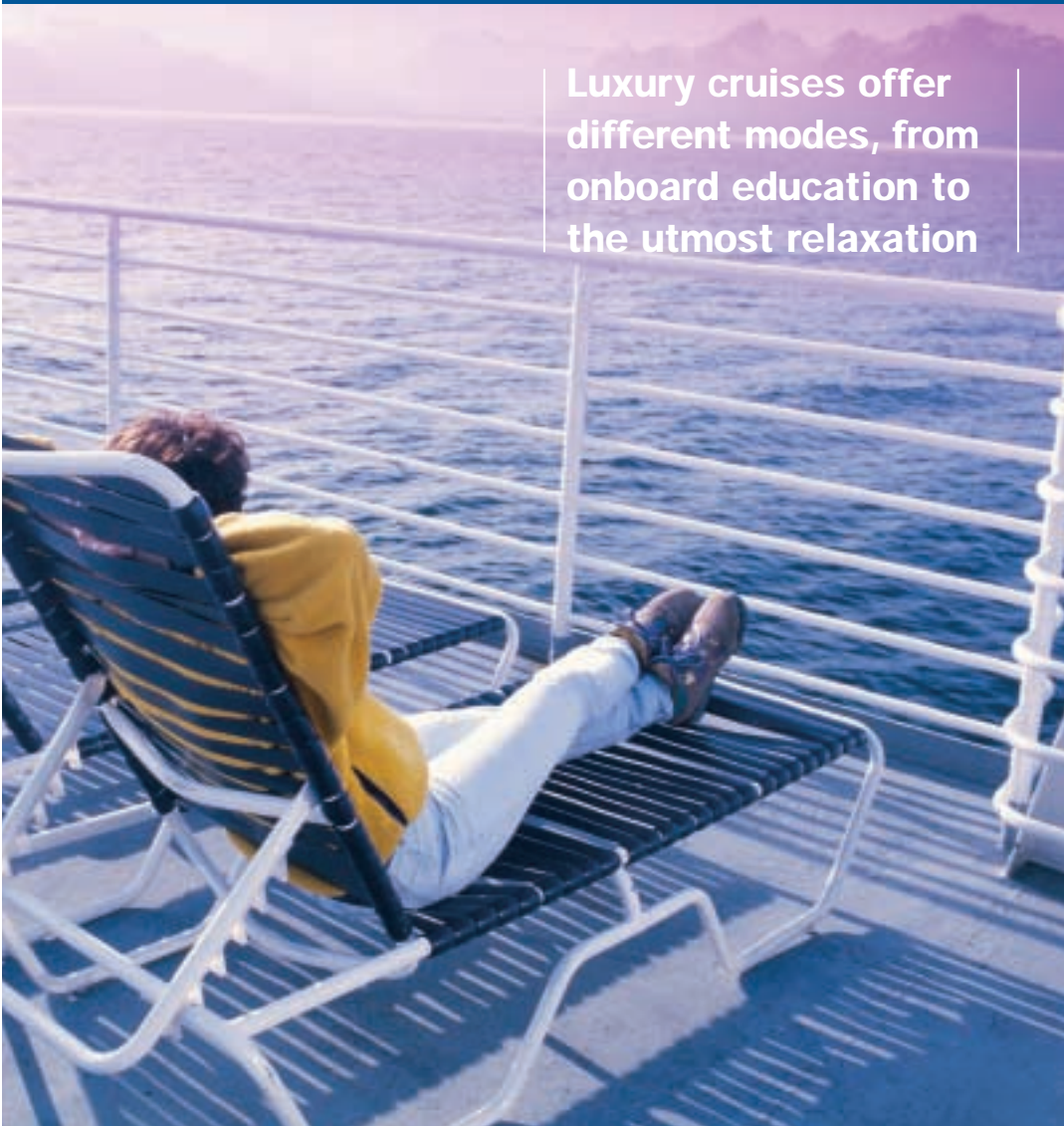
Life aboard many ships has changed in subtle ways: Buffets are no longer self-serve; crew members greet you with a hearty hello rather than a handshake; casino dealers chuck out decks of cards after each use. Most important, people who do contract the illness are asked to quarantine themselves in their cabins and order room service to avoid infecting others (though unfortunately not all comply).

To treat stubborn ships, even more drastic measures have been taken. For instance, Holland America's *Amsterdam*, which suffered four consecutive Norwalk outbreaks last fall despite stringent cleaning standards, was sidelined for a week so that the company could sanitize remote controls and bibles, disinfect poker chips and currency, discard every pillow (more than 2,500), and steam-clean the carpets. Result: The virus was vanquished at last.

You can protect yourself from the bug by taking some simple precautions. First, be sure to wash your hands often and thoroughly. The Website CruiseCritic.com recommends that you steer clear of uncooked foods—from raw oysters to salads—and stick to bottled water (no ice cubes!). Don't share plates, drinking glasses, or silverware. Avoid touching other passengers. Finally, pack extra soap, Lysol, and, should the worst occur, a bottle of Pepto-Bismol. —CWC



and Balinese sun beds for outdoor lounging, these deluxe cruises are making a bid for experienced seafarers who are accustomed to top-of-the-line accommodations. On the Silversea line, for example, you can savor cuisine prepared by Relais & Châteaux-trained chefs or browse at onboard boutiques for Davidoff cigars and Bulgari baubles. The two ships run by Sea Dream feature marble bathrooms with complimentary plush bathrobes and multi-jet massage showers, as well as state-of-the-art home entertainment centers, complete with CD and DVD systems and Internet connections.



Luxury cruises offer different modes, from onboard education to the utmost relaxation

Bjornson. “They do it well, with some style.”

If you prefer a more intimate experience, with a higher crew-to-passengers ratio, select one of the yacht-like lines: Seabourn or Sea Dream. If you want a cruise that will take you back in time, you’ll be happy on a Cunard ship such as the *Caronia* or *Queen Elizabeth 2*, with their mahogany and teak fittings, pubs and libraries, and afternoon high tea. Or maybe you want a truly old-fashioned sea voyage—on a four-masted sailing ship; the Windstar, Star Clipper, or Sea Cloud lines provide luxury amid a casual ambiance (no ties!).

You can and should read profiles of individual ships in a guidebook such as *Fielding’s* or *Stern’s Guide to the Cruise Vacation*, or on the cruise lines’ Websites. Be sure to visit Websites (see box on next page) that feature trip reports from

Of course, canny cruisers will want to look beyond the stars to find out exactly what they’re getting. “The little things make a big difference,” says Bjornson. “For example, on one line, each time you come aboard, there are crew members in uniform; you hand them your card and they bring your baggage to your cabin for you. On some other lines, they just point you down the hall and say, ‘The elevator’s down there.’”

Even within the rarefied realm of ultra-luxury cruising, you’ll find many different modes, from onboard education to the utmost relaxation and from black-tie

to barefoot. Best of all, you’ll find that “ultra-luxury” doesn’t have to mean “megabucks.” High-end cruises from all the lines are offering promotions and incentives. Here’s how you can chart a course to savings:

Be sure your ship suits you. For pastimes galore, choose a ship from the Crystal or Radisson Seven Seas lines, which offer full-scale casinos, spas, nightclub-style entertainment, and multiple restaurants. “The atmosphere on Crystal is reserved but not precious—you don’t have to wonder about which fork to use, but there aren’t any short-shorts either,” says

passengers.

Plan early, but be flexible. If you book your trip several months in advance, you may be eligible for early-bird discounts—maybe 20% or more—two-for-one pricing, kids-sail-free programs, or perks like free hotel rooms before or after the cruise. (Realize, though, that if you book early at a guaranteed rate, you leave your cabin location up to the cruise operator. Ask your travel agent what your options are.) Conversely, if you are willing to defer choosing a destination until a few weeks before your departure, you can reap some phenomenal discounts. A December

bargain hunt, for example, turned up a \$1,750 two-for-one deal for a 14-day Caribbean cruise on the Radisson Seven Seas line in January, and a March trip from L.A. to Tokyo for 16 days aboard the *Crystal Harmony* for \$3,140 (54% off).

Investigate group rates. Large travel agencies, especially those that specialize in cruises, frequently buy blocks of space on a ship in advance; this means they can offer packages to their clients at a volume discount.

Consider traveling during off-peak seasons, along less popular routes, or on a virgin ship. Head to the Caribbean in the summer or to Alaska in the early fall. Or ponder the possibilities of a spring or fall “repositioning” cruise: When a ship moves from one region to another between seasons—say, from summer in Alaska to winter in the Caribbean (going through the Panama Canal) or across the Atlantic to or from Europe—you can get a lower fare for the voyage. (Because the main purpose of this cruise is to transport the ship, the itinerary will include fewer port visits and more days at sea.) Or perhaps a cruise line is drumming up inaugural passengers for a new ship by offering publicity-sparking discounts.

Eliminate airfare. Perhaps in response to the new rigors of airport travel, cruise lines have increased the number of embarkation cities. Instead of flying to Miami, perhaps you can pick up your cruise in New Orleans, San Diego, Baltimore, Charleston, or Galveston. Cruises to the Caribbean will originate from New York this year for the first time in more than half a century, according to Oivind Mathisen, editor of *Cruise Industry News*.

Become a “frequent sailor.” If you know which cruise line you

Cruising websites

For info on cruises:

www.cruising.org
www.cruise2.com

For top-rated ships:

www.cruise4.com/TopShipsByCruiseReports.html

For discounted rates:

www.vacationstogo.com
www.luxurylink.com
www.cruiseshipco.com
www.cruiseshopping.com
www.cruiseserver.net
www.value-cruise.com
www.cucruising.com
www.seadreamyachtclub.com (Sea Dream lists its own discounts—as of early January, a seven-day Caribbean cruise, departing from St. Thomas, was 50% off.)

prefer, consider joining its preferred-passenger club, such as the Cunard World Club or the Crystal Society. You can often score discounts on future voyages with the company. Members of Silversea’s Venetian Society, for example, save 5% to 10% on certain sailings; the more they cruise, the greater the price reductions.

Buy travel insurance. This expense can save you thousands of dollars in case of injury, illness, or family emergency. But don’t buy it through your cruise line or travel agent. According to *Consumer Reports*, insurance bought directly from the travel supplier won’t cover you if the cruise company falters, so always ask if the carrier covers your specific cruise line. (Note: Federal Maritime Commission bonds cover passengers if a cruise is cancelled or its parent company goes under—but only if the cruise ship visits a U.S. port.)

Don’t limit yourself. Even for

the most opulent cruise ships there are deals and promotions to be found. For example, ResidenSea’s *The World*, an enormous ocean liner with condo-like “residences” that is essentially a floating pied-à-terre for millionaires, was recently offering short cruises in its rentable “studio residences” for \$225 per day per person (food, drinks, tips, and taxes included).

When searching for discounts, of course, bear in mind the difference between low price and good value. If the nearby engine room turns your cabin into a cocktail shaker, or your porthole gives you a view of the bottom of a hanging lifeboat, you’re not necessarily getting a bargain. Elements to consider when booking a cabin include size, noise level, sea motion, foot traffic, and access for the disabled. Smooth sailing! *O*

Caren Weiner Campbell writes for Real Simple, The New York Times, and Entertainment Weekly.