

Cruise Bargains Harder to Find

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<http://travel.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/travel/14pracdeals.html?ref=travel>

LOOKING for a bargain cruise? Better get booking. Deals in 2010 promise to be harder to come by than they were last year, when cruise lines introduced a wealth of bargains, and passengers benefited from deep discounts, waived booking deposits, free upgrades, onboard credits and other perks.

Those sales, along with aggressive marketing tactics, helped fill berths with paying passengers. Based on totals through the third quarter of 2009, the Cruise Lines International Association is projecting that a total of 13.44 million passengers sailed last year, up from 13.1 million in 2008. And with bookings on the upswing, 14.3 million passengers are expected in 2010, a 6.4 percent increase over last year.

All of this is putting a damper on the deals that travelers have come to expect. "There are still some super-cheap fares," said Carolyn Spencer Brown, editor-in-chief of Cruisecritic.com, which follows the industry. "But they're more the exception than the rule." For instance, she said, at this time last year there were \$25-a-day cruises to the Bahamas. "Now the least expensive bargain I'm seeing is \$209" for three days, she said, or about \$70 a day.

While cruise lines may continue to dangle free airfare and onboard credits, don't expect to see the level of upgrades and freebies of 2009. Disney Cruise Line is not offering its Kids Sail Free deal this year. Norwegian Cruise Line has dropped the \$250 onboard credit it offered to everyone early last year. Instead, it's offering up to \$300 in onboard credit but only for suites booked nine months before sailing. Reservations must be made by April 1.

And rates are inching back up. Last year Holland America Line offered rates as low as \$999 for 12-day Europe and Panama Canal voyages. This year those trips start at \$1,199. A seven-night Alaska cruise that could be found for \$399 last year is starting at about \$500 a person this year, said Bob Miller, an owner of Cruise Holidays in Alexandria, Va. More typical introductory rates, he said, are \$899.

To lock in the best deals, experts say, travelers should act now. "The lesson is don't wait," said Alex Goldman, vice president of cruises for Travelocity, which is offering additional onboard credits of up to \$500 to travelers who book a cruise by March 11 for travel from March through August, using an American Express card. The site is also offering 15 percent off shore excursions through its partner Port Promotions if booked by March 11.

Sure, you could hold off in the hopes of scoring an amazing last-minute bargain. But you run the risk of being closed out if ships fill up. Travelers appear to be heeding the warning signals; they are booking an average of 5.04 months in advance this year, compared with 4.6 months in 2009, according to a survey of travel agents by the Cruise Lines International Association.

"Aggressive promotions resulted in people booking sooner and availability once again becoming tight for popular destinations such as the Mediterranean, the Baltics and even, resulting in an uptick in Alaska bookings," said Mr. Miller of Cruise Holidays.

But it's still possible to find a reasonable rate. Princess Cruises has been running a Denali sale, for example, with rates up to 50 percent off for May and June departures and up to 25 percent off the entire season. Celebrity Cruises has rates from \$549 a person to Bermuda from Bayonne, N.J. Disney Cruise Line has 14-night trans-Atlantic cruises in April from \$699 a person that begin in the Bahamas and end in the Mediterranean. Its 10- and 11-night Mediterranean cruises in May and April begin at \$999 a person.

Some of the best deals are at the high end. Crystal Cruises, a luxury line offering worldwide itineraries, has two-for-one deals including round-trip airfare for prices as much as 20 percent less than 2009. The Yachts of Seabourn is offering up to 50 percent off certain Europe cruises with airfare if booked by the end of this month. And though Azamara Club Cruises prices are higher this year, starting at \$2,069 a person for an inside room, more amenities are included in the base price: gratuities, water and sodas, meals and room service, house wine at lunch and dinner and other perks.

While online comparison sites like Kayak.com can be helpful when researching prices, it can pay to talk to a travel agent to understand the full cost of the cruise. The agent may also be able to offer a better rate than what's shown online. "Major cruise lines have implemented a labyrinth of rules that force cruise retailers to display only approved pricing online," said Evan Eggers, president of SureCruise.com, a cruise shopping site, "whereas over the phone, we're allowed to bargain."

The New York Times

Cruise Holidays of Alexandria was able to secure space on a number of Azamara cruises to Europe before the line raised rates, enabling the agency to lock in significant savings for clients. For example, a 10-night Greek Isles cruise in an ocean-view cabin costs \$3,499 a person July 24 to Aug. 3, when booked directly with the cruise line. Cruise Holidays is offering the same trip for \$2,736 a person.

Working with agents may also be beneficial if the price drops after they've booked the trip. "Usually in such situations we can convince the cruise line to offer an upgrade or onboard credit," Mr. Eggers said.

When searching for deals, remember that the lowest price often means the worst cabins on the ship — usually without any windows — and that any extras like spa treatments and shore excursions will cost extra.

When booking, ask if there are any special discounts you may qualify for, like a senior discount, a resident discount — often available to cruisers who live in the state the cruise is departing from — or deals for repeat guests. Sites like [Kayak](#) and [Travelocity](#) allow you to search easily for such savings. For New York residents, a junior suite for two guests on a seven-night southern [Caribbean](#) cruise on Royal Caribbean's *Serenade of the Seas* is \$2,398 in April, a discount from the normal price of \$2,718, according to a recent [Travelocity](#) search. For ages 55 and up, an ocean-view room on a seven-night southern Caribbean cruise on *Celebrity Summit* (also in April) is \$1,058 — more than \$200 off.

Shifting your vacation dates can also help you save. A recent search for Bahamas cruises on [Kayak.com](#) turned up four nights on Carnival's *Fascination* from Jacksonville, Fla., on Feb. 11, for \$359. Leaving two weeks later brought the price down to \$269.

[SureCruise](#) has a new feature that points out how much you can save by postponing your vacations. Just click "Dates Flexible?" for the cheaper price. For example, a search for weeklong Caribbean cruises in July turned up prices from \$1,049 on Royal Caribbean. But the site noted that other dates were available from just \$539 in September.