



## Hottest Trend in Vacations: Cruising Growing Faster Than Land-Based Holidays

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More people than ever are flocking to cruises for its affordability and being a fun, relaxing way to see the world and enjoy being at sea on vacation.

Warning: If you take a cruise vacation, you'll likely get hooked and want to repeat the experience.

Just ask Jennie Spaulding, 41, of Peoria, Ariz., who with her husband, Jeremy, recently cruised for the first time on a four-day sailing to Mexico.

"It was the best experience and the best vacation ever," Spaulding said. "It was a way to reconnect for me and my husband, which is exactly what we did."

Spaulding is already planning the couple's next cruise vacation and in doing so she's right on trend. First-timer cruisers are very likely to become repeat cruisers, according to independent researchers.

A recent J.D. Power survey found more than 90 percent of those who take a cruise plan to set sail again, with Gen Y/Millennials and Gen Xers particularly enthusiastic about repeating the cruise experience. About the same number of cruisers would recommend a cruise vacation to family and friends.

The number of people experiencing cruise vacations for the first time also is increasing. A 2015 report from the United Nations World Travel Organization (UNWTO) show growth in the cruise market between 2004 and 2014 as percentage-wise the fastest growing segment of the global vacation industry, outpacing land-based vacations by 23 percent. In 2016, nearly 25 million people worldwide are expected to go on a cruise vacation.

Among the many reasons for the popularity is the public's recognition that cruising is affordable, particularly when compared to land-based vacations.

"The big appeal of a cruise vacation is that it offers superb value for your money, whether you travel to Alaska, the Caribbean or even more exotic itineraries," said Carolyn Spencer Brown, editor in chief of the popular website Cruise Critic. "That's something more and more people are discovering."

For the Spauldings, co-owners of a family heating and air-conditioning, and parents of a teenage daughter with a rare health disorder, affordability was key.

"Money was a little tight for us but we wanted to do something really nice for our 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary," Spaulding said.

On the advice of a friend she booked the cruise six months in advance so she could make payments. For just over \$1,000, including their drinks, the couple set sail for four days on Carnival Cruise Line's Carnival Inspiration. They saved on airfare by driving to the ship's homeport of Long Beach, Calif.

While they enjoyed visiting the Mexican port of Ensenada, including the famous La Bufadora (blowhole), the couple spent most of their time on the ship poolside, lounging and enjoying the lively fun at the open-air RedFrog Rum Bar and Blueguana Tequila Bar.

"It was neat to see everyone onboard just having a good time," Spaulding said. "We work very hard and we don't get a lot of time off, so this was perfect."

Experienced cruisers also appreciate the freedom and flexibility that cruising provides.

"If you're curious, you like people, and you like going to interesting places, cruising is very cool," says businessman Allan Benson, 75, of Denver, who with his wife Sandra, 69, has logged more than 1,800 days on Holland America Line ships.

Modern ships such as those in the fleets of Holland America Line and sister line Princess Cruises offer topflight activities, entertainment, spas and dining included in your cruise fare, and extras you can do if you choose. You are free to do all or none, tailoring your own experience.

Choice and ease, Benson says, is what draws him to cruising. He and his wife are foodies who like to seek out interesting restaurants in each port. They also relish days at sea when they can kick back in the ocean breeze and shade with a good book.

"You only unpack once and you have your floating hotel that travels to all these different places and then there are these languid sea days," Benson says. "It's simplicity -- that would be the word I would use."

Thanks to improved Internet connections, Benson says he even manages to keep up on work while at sea.

If you try a cruise, chances are you'll love it, says Cruise Critic's Brown.

"Cruise lines have listened carefully to what travelers want, adding new features and itineraries to suit just about everyone's travel style," Brown says. "There are travelers who just want to bask in the surf and sun and others who want to spend long days in port investing in distinctive experiences."

An intrinsic advantage of cruising over land vacations, she adds, is the fact that ships take you places.

"People love the tapas-style feel of exploring regions by cruise," Brown says. "You can sample new countries a day at a time.

Word is spreading about the virtues of cruising on social media and message boards, as well as through old-fashioned word-of-mouth, Brown notes.

According to the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), nearly 25 million people will have cruised this year, with the number expected to increase in 2017. If you haven't cruised, chances are you have a friend or relative who has and will wax poetic on the subject.

"The passion for the cruise vacation by past passengers is very persuasive as it dispels many of the myths about cruising such as it's boring, too expensive or reserved for seniors and wealthy elite, which are all far from reality," says Stewart Chiron, president and CEO of Miami-based CruiseGuy.com. "There really is a ship and destination for everyone."

First-time cruiser Spaulding said she had some initial trepidation before setting sail, especially about the possibility of getting seasick. But she quickly discovered her fears were unfounded.

"I would tell people there is absolutely nothing to be afraid of," she says.

Spaulding was delighted with Carnival Cruise Line's many food options including the complimentary hamburgers at Guy's Burger Joint, featuring creations by Food Network personality Guy Fieri.

"The burgers were to die for. They were so good I never even made it to the Mexican eatery nearby," she says with a laugh.

But what impressed Spaulding even more about cruising as compared to land-based vacations was the pampering provided by the ship's crew.

"Our steward, every time he saw us, he knew us by name and he just really provided that personal touch. We felt we mattered," she says. "You don't get that type of service at a hotel."

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