



## **For Groups Small or Large, Cruises Become Latest Trend for Fun, Easy Vacations**

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Vacations are often best when shared. Go on a cruise vacation with a group – whether your friends, extended family, co-workers, alumni association, church or the folks in your bowling league – and everyone can experience quality time together as well as private moments.

Cruise line group departments help make planning a snap whether your group is looking for a getaway for a few days, a week or more, and you don't have to be a huge crowd to qualify for group discounts.

In cruise lingo, a "group" usually is a minimum of 16 passengers in eight staterooms – on Princess Cruises and on the Odyssey-class ships of luxury line Seabourn, a group begins at 10 passengers in five staterooms.

Perks are part of the group programs too. On Holland America Line, for instance, family reunion and other groups booking eight staterooms or more qualify for bonuses such as a stateroom upgrade, lunch or dinner at the posh Pinnacle Grill and beverage cards.

Groups might expand to dozens, hundreds or even thousands of people on the largest ships.

Gary Bertch, president and co-owner of Waterloo, Iowa-based Bertch Cabinets, recently chartered hundreds of cabins on a ship to reward his 800 employees for meeting company revenue goals. Everyone was invited to set sail on Carnival Cruise Line's 2,758-passenger Carnival Victory, and the boss footed the bill for the four-day cruise from Miami to Cozumel.

"It's a good value and most everything is included," says Bertch, who was joined by his wife and co-owner Becky Bertch, employees and their guests on the sailing. "For us it's a celebration of working hard for a year."

On the ship, Bertch Cabinet employees could do their own thing, lounging by the pool, zipping down the Twister water slide, playing Ping-Pong in the sun, enjoying show productions, experiencing both downtime and togetherness.

"We don't do a lot of formal meetings on the ship," says Bertch, who also took employees to sea several years ago during a flush period. "We see this as an effective way to get people focused on the same goals."

Advantages that cruising brings to larger groups are also available to smaller groups, from value and ease of planning to opportunities to customize your experience to the "wow" factor inherent in traveling by ship.

Destinations popular with groups include the Caribbean, Bahamas, Mexican Riviera, Alaska and the

Mediterranean. Wherever you cruise you only unpack once and your ship takes you to exciting places. Onboard, your fare covers a dizzying array of dining options, fun activities for all ages, entertainment and nightlife.

For celebrations such as anniversaries, weddings, milestone birthdays, family reunions and bachelorette parties, shipboard chefs, photographers, videographers, florists, ice carvers and musicians are available to make your event special, no matter the size or focus of your group. For weddings and vow renewal ceremonies, specialized wedding advisors focus on creating the affair of your dreams.

The sky is the limit when it comes to customization. Ask the ship's bakery to whip up a cake featuring your football team's logo. Make arrangements for your church group to conduct a prayer gathering under the stars. Get everyone in colorful t-shirts and pose for a photo or book musicians to play at your wedding.

A great way to make a family reunion memorable is to hold a private dinner in a specialty restaurant, with shipboard photographers capturing the celebration.

At the ports of call, get co-workers pumped on a customized zip line adventure or treat your multigenerational family group to a private scenic catamaran trip with a stop at a white sand beach. Lasting memories will no doubt ensue: When's the last time the whole gang spent time at the beach?

For groups with kids, cruise lines such as Carnival Cruise Line, Princess Cruises, Holland America Line, P&O Cruises Australia and Italy's Costa Cruises, and the five family-friendly ships of British line P&O Cruises, have supervised activity programs for toddlers to teens.

While the kids are occupied, parents can enjoy some time off, relaxing at the pool, indulging at the spa and enjoying such shipboard activities as a cooking demonstration or a wine tasting.

"There's something for everybody," says Justin C. French, regional vice president of sales for Carnival Cruise Line. "Variety and quality is key."

Planning a group cruise is easier than you think. Depending on the cruise line, and where and when you plan to sail, groups are typically able to lock in specific cabins at a set rate for a period of time, giving the group leader opportunity to get the word out.

Group reservations can encompass a variety of accommodations to fit all pocketbooks. If you are doing a family reunion and Aunt Beryl wants a suite, and cousin Joe prefers a value-priced inside stateroom and you prefer a family-sized balcony stateroom, all desires can be handled in one booking. Deposits and payments can even be made directly to the cruise line using a group booking code.

Cruise ships have a distinct advantage over land-based resorts in that they can move. You don't have to worry about being stuck, for instance, at an all-inclusive resort where it rains for a week.

There is also the advantage on ships, as compared to land-based venues, that a wide array of entertainment such as lavish show productions, comedians, live music, movies and parties with DJs

are all included in the cruise fare.

For the meetings and incentive market, cruise ships are an increasingly popular venue, especially when it comes to rewarding top-performing employees and salespeople for a job well done, says Melissa Van Dyke, president of the McLean, Virginia-based Incentive Research Foundation. Visiting several destinations on one trip is an attraction as is the diversity of onboard attractions, Van Dyke says.

Other perks include the fact you're in a relaxing environment where all your needs are cared for – the pampering crew even making up your bed twice a day.

For generous boss Bertch, who has also done family reunions on Carnival Cruise Line ships, the opportunity to let your hair down is key.

"We like to have fun," Bertch says. "It's worked out really well."

Here are six tips for putting together the perfect group cruise:

- 1. Appoint a group leader.** This point person can help get everyone on the same page, coordinating when and where and on what ship your group wants to cruise and serving as the liaison with the experts in the cruise line's group department.
- 2. Make reservations well in advance.** You will want to lay claim to a block of cabins as soon as possible. Booking a year in advance is preferable, which means now is the time for your group to look at winter 2018.
- 3. Work with a travel agent.** Experienced travel agents can help take pressure off the group leader, handling logistics and working with the cruise line to make your experience special.
- 4. Book a shore experience.** As you seek to create memories consider splurging on a group outing, designed by cruise line experts and led by local guides at a port of call.
- 5. Plan a special meal.** For a memorable celebration, book the steakhouse or one of the ship's other specialty restaurants. The ship's experienced food & beverage team can assist with menus and wine selections.

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