



Travelers share 13 ways to save money on a cruise

Thinking of taking a cruise? Then you picked the right time — and you're reading the right story.

Wave season — the time of year when most cruises are booked — is just ahead. It runs from January to about mid-March, and because everyone's out there buying a floating vacation, there are lots of deals to be had.

But the 2008 wave season promises to be a little different than past ones. Coming off a year in which the industry trade group Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) expected to welcome a record 12.62 million cruise passengers, an increase of about a half-million guests over 2006, there's trouble on the horizon.

The biggest, as far as passengers are concerned, is a pesky and probably illegal fuel surcharge on cruises. It's no secret that fuel prices have risen recently, but the cruise industry appears to have taken the Gordon Gekko approach to paying its energy bills.

Many have retroactively charged customers who already paid for their cruises in full, offering a piece of the action to travel agents who helped them collect.

Forget, for a moment, that some cruise lines have hedged their fuel costs, which means they aren't really paying more for energy. And forget that those same cruise lines also agreed in 1997 to not charge any fees in addition to the advertised initial ticket price — except those actually passed on by the company to a government agency.

Apparently, greed is good. At a time like this, you have to be smarter about your cruise purchase. First, find a competent travel agent. Professional travel consultants sell nearly 9 in 10 cruises, and there are



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many knowledgeable agents out there who know their stuff. I always check to make sure they're members of the American Society of Travel Agents or CLIA — signs that they're on the up-and-up.

Next, you should know that there could be deals, and lots of them. The major cruise lines were expected to add 12 new ships totaling 22,039 beds, and if demand doesn't keep up with supply, you could see some serious discounting come wave season. So shop hard.

And beyond that? I asked a few good agents and veteran cruisers for their money-saving secrets. Here they are:

1. Buy now. When Jeff Cooper worked for a cruise line, the best deals didn't come during wave season. They came just before. In other words, now. "The sailings prior to Christmas and New Year's were rarely at capacity," says Cooper, who now works as a hospital administrator. And while the bargains during wave period were good, these were better.

2. Skip the air-inclusive cruise. "Cruise air is usually the worst possible deal," says Amber Blecker, an agent for CruiseResource.com. "You get bad itineraries, multiple connections and higher prices." And, she adds, don't think for a moment the cruise line will wait if your plane is late. "That's a wives' tale," she says.

3. Find a preferred agent. There are travel agents, and then there are travel agents. "Find one that specializes in booking with your de-

sired cruise line," advises Charles McCool, a consultant who specializes in finding travel deals. "Only a select few have preferred status. These agents and agencies offer better discounts and amenities, and the cruises cost between 10 percent and 20 percent less than cruises bought from other agents."

4. Think small, think shoulder-season. Crystal Griffith, a nurse from Baker, Fla., scored a deep discount on her Alaska cruise by choosing a September itinerary and picking a windowless inside cabin. "We rarely spent much time in the cabin, and use it mainly for sleeping," she says. "It saved us lots of money."

5. Become a shareholder. "If you buy 100 shares of Carnival or Royal Caribbean stock, you'll get between \$50 and \$200 of free cabin credit on every cruise," says George Smart, a consultant in Research Triangle Park, N.C. NOTE: Carnival and Royal Caribbean own most of the cruise lines out there, so this is a pretty decent deal.

6. Ask about discounts. One of the most popular is the military discount. Some cruise lines insist on either active-duty status or evidence of a long career. But not all. "Carnival Cruise line will sell their military rate to anyone who has served for two years," says Liz Lamagase, a Tampa-based travel

agent. "As long as you have your separation papers to fax them, you can get very low rates on most of their cruises."

7. Private tours can save you big money. That's what Jerry Rothstein, a New York investment consultant, discovered on a recent cruise to the Greek islands. "We quickly figured out that for six people, we'd be better off having a private arrangement for shore excursions," he says. Now he regularly runs Internet searches to find less costly tours for groups that are "more intimate" and cost less than those offered by the cruise line.

8. Become a frequent cruiser. Evelyn Fine, a market researcher based in Daytona Beach, has found that loyalty pays. Cruise lines offer her everything from discounts to special on-board perks, like VIP receptions and priority dinner reservations. "Becoming a loyal customer is worth it," she says.

9. For a free upgrade, tell them you're a VIP. Actually, get your travel agent to tell them you're a VIP, says Royce Jones, a Jackson, Miss., furniture manufacturers representative. "My agent tells the cruise line I'm one of her best customers, and that if I like the trip, I'll return again in the future," he says. "And then she asks for an upgrade. It works most of the time."

10. Don't get on the bus.

"One of the best ways to save money on a cruise is to not take the provided transportation that meets you at the dock," says Michael Berger, an information systems consultant in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada. "They usually cost more or end up taking you to their uncle's store to get a discount." Instead, he recommends walking a block or two away from the dock and finding a local transportation option. It's cheaper, and you're less likely to fall for a tourist trap.

11. Get a soda sticker. If you like bubbly drinks, buy the soda sticker for the cruise if your cruise line sells one. On Princess, for example, \$29.50 gives you unlimited soda — something Tom Kinsella Woodbridge, Va., software manager, discovered on his last cruise. "And bring your own large soda mug. Ours is 64 ounces, and they'll fill it any time you need it filled. That way, you're not stuck with their small glasses."

12. Or try these two booze tricks. TIP NO. 1: Bring your own wine and pay a corking fee at dinner. "It's still cheaper than the roughly \$30 low-end wines offered by the cruise line," says Kirsten

Taylor, an information technology manager in Feeding Hills, Mass.

TIP NO. 2: If you prefer hard liquor, try emptying a water bottle and replacing it with your favorite vodka or gin. "No one will notice," says David Tuder, a banker from New York.

13. Buy your next cruise... on your cruise. "The cruise line will offer special deals available only onboard, with much lower base prices than you'd find off the ship," says Kevin Harris, a hotel owner from Fort Lauderdale. "And when you book with the onboard person, you usually receive higher onboard credits to spend anywhere on the ship."

This wave season, you don't have to be swamped with higher cruise prices and unexpected surcharges. Just take a few tips from people who are in the know, and you'll save a few bucks and have a better cruise.

Christopher Elliott is the ombudsman for National Geographic Traveler magazine. This column originally appeared on MSNBC.com. You can read more travel tips on his blog, elliott.org or e-mail him at [celliott\(at\)ngs.org](mailto:celliott(at)ngs.org).

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10 REASONS

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6. Napkin folding and other things you won't admit to.

There are a lot of activities on cruises that on the surface sound totally "un-cool" that secretly — if nobody knew — you'd love to take part in. Want to watch the chefs make ice sculptures? Want to learn how to cleverly fold napkins for your next dinner party? Find out how the cabin stewards transform towels into towel animals? How about learning the waltz? Cruise solo and you can dork out to your heart's content — no explanation necessary — and nobody will ever know (unless you tell them)!

7. Bingo!

I had cruised dozens of times and never considered participating in this routine activity that takes place on nearly every ship. But recently on a solo cruise I wandered in and sat down. And to my utter amazement, I won \$125. Ever since that day, I've been hooked. Make no mistake, this isn't your grandma's bingo. Bingo at sea boasts big money jackpots. The last cruise I went on someone actually walked out with \$4,000 for winning a single game of bingo!

8. Dining with the officers.

If you're a cruise lover, being able to spend one-on-one time with a ship's captain and chief officers is a treat. They have some fascinating stories to tell. Getting the opportunity to do so isn't easy, but on nearly every cruise a few lucky passengers are invited to join the officer's table for dinner each night. My experience tells me that when you travel solo, your odds are much better at getting an invite. After all, if there's only one empty seat, they can't invite you to join them if you're traveling with companions.

9. Stepping outside your comfort zone.

We all have roles we play in life — wife, mother, boss, friend. Cruising solo allows you to break free of who you "have to be" every day and allows you to be who you'd "like to be" if only ... you fill in the blank. When you cruise solo you don't have to be that person — the responsible parent, the level-headed friend, the care-taking sibling, the penny-pinching spouse. I'm not suggesting you throw caution to the wind, act irresponsibly or do something you'll regret when you get back home. I am suggesting that cruising alone affords you the distraction-free ability to step outside the comfort zone of who you are day-to-day. It allows me to break away from my normally introverted behavior to be much more social. After all, when you travel solo you have to talk to strangers.

10. Because you can.

If I only went on cruises when I could coordinate them with the hectic schedules of my family and friends, I'd be lucky if I ever cruised! I've been fortunate enough to travel around the world to dozens of countries — Russia, Egypt, Turkey and even Antarctica — and I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt, that never would have happened had I not made the decision years ago to not let other people's availability dictate if and when I cruised.

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