FREE PLANNING GUIDE

Your First Cruise

A friendly planning checklist and guide, from picking your ship to stepping aboard and sailing home happy.



Carnival Mardi Gras at sea. Photo courtesy of Carnival Cruise Line.

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WELCOME ABOARD

Hi, I'm Thomas.

Your first cruise should feel exciting, not overwhelming. I put this guide together for the questions I hear most from first-timers here on Long Island and beyond.

There's a lot of advice out there, and some of it is out of date. This guide keeps it simple: the big decisions, the documents that actually matter, what to pack, and how embarkation day really works. Use the checklists as you go. Print it, scribble on it, share it with whoever's sailing with you.

One honest note before we start. Cruise line policies and government entry rules change. I've checked everything here against official sources, but always confirm the current rules with your cruise line and the official government sites listed at the back before you sail.

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SECTION 1

Choosing a cruise line and ship

Every cruise line has a personality, and so does every ship. The "best" cruise is the one that fits your group, your pace and your idea of a great vacation.

Start with the feel of the trip

If you want...	Look for...	Good to know
Lively, lots to do	Big, activity-packed ships with water parks, shows and plenty of casual dining	Great for groups and mixed ages. Busy pool decks on sea days.
Family-first	Lines with strong kids' clubs, family staterooms and character or themed entertainment	Kids' club ages and hours vary by line. Check before you book.
Relaxed and polished	Premium lines with quieter spaces, more refined dining and a calmer pace	Often more port-focused. Fewer water slides, more lounges.
Adults only	Adults-only lines, or adult areas such as quiet pools and sun decks on family lines	Some lines are 18+ for every guest. Ask about age rules first.
Short "test" cruise	3- to 5-night sailings to The Bahamas or a nearby region	A low-stress way to see if cruising is for you.

Questions to ask yourself

- [ ] Who's sailing, and how old will everyone be on sailing day?
- [ ] Do we want more sea days, or more time in port?
- [ ] Which matters more: the ship itself or the destinations?
- [ ] Can we drive to the port, or do we need to fly?
- [ ] How flexible are our dates (school breaks, holidays)?
- [ ] Any mobility, dietary or medical needs to plan around?

Ship size, in plain terms

Big ships are floating resorts with more restaurants, bigger shows and more to do on sea days. You'll walk a lot, and popular spots can get crowded.

Mid-size and smaller ships are easier to get around and often feel calmer. They usually have fewer "wow" attractions, and some can visit smaller ports.

Newer vs. older ships: newer ships have the latest features. Older ships are often refreshed and can be a cozy, great-value choice.

> **THOMAS'S TIP**
>
> Pick the ship first and the itinerary second if you're traveling with kids or a big group. For couples, it's often the other way around. Either way, tell me your must-haves and I'll narrow the field for you.

SECTION 2

Cabin types, made simple

Your cabin (some lines call it a stateroom) is where you sleep, shower and recharge. How much it matters depends on how much time you'll spend in it.

Cabin type	What it is	Great for	Think about
Interior	No window. Often the coziest option, and nice and dark for sleeping.	Travelers who'll be out and about all day	Some ships offer "virtual" windows. Not ideal if you feel closed in.
Ocean view	A window or porthole that doesn't open. Natural daylight.	Light sleepers who like to see the morning	Some views are partly blocked by lifeboats. Check the listing.
Balcony	Your own private outdoor space with a door you can open.	Sea days, scenic sailings, early-morning coffee	On cooler routes (New England, Bermuda in spring) you'll use it less.
Suite	More space, and often extra perks such as priority boarding or a lounge.	Families who want room to spread out, celebrations	Perks vary a lot by line and suite level. Ask what's really included.

Location matters too

- **Prone to seasickness?** A cabin on a lower deck near the middle of the ship usually feels the least motion.
- **Light sleeper?** Avoid cabins directly below the pool deck or buffet, or above the theater or nightclub. Look at the deck plan above and below.
- **Traveling with family?** Connecting cabins or family cabins can work better than one crowded room.
- **Limited mobility?** Being near elevators saves a lot of steps. Accessible cabins are limited, so ask early.

Your cabin checklist

- [ ] How many beds, and where does everyone sleep? (Sofa beds and pull-down bunks count.)
- [ ] Is the cabin rated for the number of people in our group?
- [ ] What's directly above, below and next to it?
- [ ] Is the view blocked or partly blocked?
- [ ] Do we want a "guaranteed" category, or a specific cabin number?
- [ ] Do we need an accessible cabin, a crib or other equipment?

> **THOMAS'S TIP**
>
> For a first cruise, a balcony is lovely but not a must. Many first-timers are surprised by how little time they spend in the cabin. If you're torn, tell me where you'd rather spend extra: a better cabin, or more in port.

SECTION 3

Documents: passport vs. passport card

This is the section to get right early. Passports can take a while, so start here before you shop for packing cubes.

What's a "closed-loop" cruise?

A closed-loop cruise starts and ends at the **same U.S. port** and stays in the Western Hemisphere. Think New York to Bermuda and back, or Florida to The Bahamas and back. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) says U.S. citizens on these cruises can re-enter the U.S. with a **government-issued photo ID plus proof of citizenship**, such as a birth certificate. Children under 16 generally need only proof of citizenship. CBP also notes that the countries you visit may still require a passport, so check with your cruise line.

Document	What it covers	The catch
Passport book	International travel by air, land and sea. The gold standard.	Takes the longest to get. Check its expiration date early.
Passport card	Entering the U.S. by land or sea from Canada, Mexico, Bermuda and the Caribbean. Wallet-sized.	**Not valid for international air travel.** If you have to fly home from a foreign port, it won't get you on the plane.
Birth certificate + photo ID	Accepted by CBP for U.S. citizens on closed-loop cruises.	Same problem as the card if you need to fly home. Your cruise line or a port may also ask for more.

WHY I STILL RECOMMEND A PASSPORT BOOK

The U.S. Department of State strongly recommends that cruise passengers travel with a passport book, even when it isn't required, in case you have to fly home in an emergency. Illness, an injury or a ship problem can leave you in a foreign port, and that's when the book matters. It also makes it easy to say yes to future trips.

Your document checklist

- [ ] Every traveler's passport is valid well beyond your return date (the State Department suggests six months) and has blank pages.
- [ ] Names match exactly on the booking, passports and any airline tickets.
- [ ] Destination entry rules checked for every port on the itinerary.
- [ ] Color copies of passport photo pages, kept separate from the originals.

Flying to the port? Kids?

REAL ID: for domestic flights, adults need a REAL ID-compliant license or another TSA-accepted ID. A passport book or passport card works.

One parent traveling? CBP recommends a signed consent letter from the absent parent, preferably notarized. It isn't a U.S. legal requirement, but it can save a lot of questions. Bring custody papers if they apply.

SECTION 4

Your countdown timeline

Once you've booked, it's mostly a matter of a few small to-dos at the right time. Here's the rhythm I give my first-time cruisers.

About 90 days out

- [ ] Double-check passports and IDs for everyone. Renew now if anything is close to expiring.
- [ ] If you're flying, plan to arrive the day before embarkation whenever you can.
- [ ] Start a shared list: must-dos, dietary needs, mobility notes, birthdays and anniversaries.
- [ ] Talk with your advisor about travel protection if you haven't already.

About 60 days out

- [ ] Watch for your cruise line's online check-in email. Some lines open it months ahead, and arrival times can fill up.
- [ ] Download the cruise line's app and create your account.
- [ ] Browse shore excursions, specialty dining and shows. Book the ones you'd hate to miss.

About 30 days out

- [ ] Finalize flights, hotel and transfers, or your parking plan if you're driving to the pier.
- [ ] Read the line's luggage and prohibited-items list.
- [ ] Check the dress code. Most ships are casual, with an optional dressier night or two.

About 14 days out

- [ ] Finish online check-in for everyone and pick your arrival time.
- [ ] Print or download luggage tags and boarding documents as instructed.
- [ ] Fill any prescriptions so you have enough for the trip plus a few extra days.

About 7 days out

- [ ] Pack your carry-on day bag separately (see page 7).
- [ ] Charge power banks and save boarding documents offline on your phone.
- [ ] Share your ship name, itinerary and emergency contacts with someone at home.
- [ ] Optional: enroll in the State Department's free STEP program for safety alerts.

THOMAS'S TIP

Set calendar reminders for these dates the day you book. It takes two minutes and saves a lot of "did we do that?" later.

SECTION 5

What to pack

You'll hand your big bags to a porter at the terminal, and they may not reach your cabin until later in the afternoon or evening. Pack a carry-on that gets you through the first day.

CARRY-ON DAY BAG

- [ ] Passports or IDs and boarding documents
- [ ] Medications, in their original containers
- [ ] Glasses, contacts and any medical devices
- [ ] Phone, charger and a power bank
- [ ] Swimsuit, sunscreen and sunglasses
- [ ] Credit card and a little cash
- [ ] Jewelry and other valuables
- [ ] A light layer for chilly indoor spaces

SUITCASE

- [ ] Casual daywear and comfy walking shoes
- [ ] An outfit or two for dressier nights (optional on many ships)
- [ ] Swimwear and a cover-up
- [ ] Light jacket or rain shell (essential from New York)
- [ ] Reusable water bottle
- [ ] Small day bag or tote for port days
- [ ] Basic first aid and seasickness remedies
- [ ] Lanyard or card holder for your ship card

Leave it at home

Every line publishes its own prohibited-items list, and security screens your bags at the terminal. Items commonly on those lists include:

- Clothes irons and steamers
- Candles and incense
- Some power strips and extension cords (check your line's rules)
- Drones, weapons, and anything your line or the ports you visit restrict

GOOD TO KNOW

The State Department reminds travelers to check luggage for any leftover ammunition or items that are illegal at your destination. Items that are fine at home can lead to arrest in some foreign ports, so give every bag and pocket a quick check.

THOMAS'S TIP

Sailing from New York? Even summer sail-aways past the Statue of Liberty can be breezy. Pack a sweatshirt in your carry-on so you can enjoy the view from the deck.

SECTION 6

Embarkation day and your first 48 hours

Embarkation day is part of the vacation. Here's what usually happens, in order, so nothing catches you off guard.

At the terminal

1. Arrive at your arrival time
Lines stagger boarding times. Showing up hours early usually means a longer wait, not an earlier boarding.

2. Drop your bags
Tag your luggage with the line's tags and hand it to the porters. It's delivered to your cabin later.

3. Security and check-in
Airport-style screening, then a quick document check. Have IDs and boarding documents in hand.

4. Step aboard
You'll get or activate your ship card (or wearable). It's your room key and your onboard charge card.

5. The safety drill
Required for every guest. Many lines now let you watch the safety information in the app or on your cabin TV, then check in at your assigned muster station. Follow the crew's instructions.

Your first 48 hours

- [ ] Grab lunch. Your cabin may not be ready right away, and that's normal.
- [ ] Find the main dining room, buffet, theater, pools and guest services.
- [ ] Confirm your dining time or reservations in the app.
- [ ] Register kids for the kids' club early if you want evenings to yourselves.
- [ ] Decide on Wi-Fi, or enjoy being unplugged.
- [ ] Check your onboard account in the app for anything unexpected.
- [ ] Make your shore-day plan for the first port.
- [ ] Head to the top deck for sail-away. Every first-timer should see it!

> **THOMAS'S TIP**
> Unpack fully on night one and slide your suitcases under the bed. A tidy cabin feels twice as big for the rest of the week.



The Havana pool area on Carnival Celebration. Photo courtesy of Carnival Cruise Line.

SECTION 7

Money onboard, ports and excursions

How money works onboard

Cruise ships are mostly cashless. You link a credit card (or leave a cash deposit) to your onboard account, then use your ship card for purchases. You settle up at the end of the cruise.

Usually included in your cruise fare

- Your cabin and the main dining room, buffet and many casual spots
- Most entertainment, pools and activities
- Basic drinks like water, coffee and tea (the details vary by line)

Usually extra

- Specialty restaurants, specialty coffee and alcoholic drinks
- Shore excursions, spa treatments and Wi-Fi
- Photos, shopping and some activities
- Gratuities: most lines add a daily service charge to your account. Review it in the app.

> **THOMAS'S TIP**
> Check your onboard account in the app every couple of days. It's much easier to sort out a mystery charge on day three than on the last night.

Ports and excursions

Ship-sold tours are often the easiest choice for first-timers. If a ship's tour runs late, the ship generally waits for it.

Independent tours can be wonderful, but if you're late for "all aboard," the ship can leave without you. Build in a big buffer.

Tender ports: when a ship anchors offshore, small boats called tenders take you to land. Expect lines at busy times, and weather can cancel tenders.

Every port day

- [ ] Note the "all aboard" time. It's earlier than departure.
- [ ] Set your watch to ship time, and set two alarms.
- [ ] Bring your ship card and required photo ID.
- [ ] Carry some small bills plus a card. Not every vendor takes cards.
- [ ] Know your ship's name and where it's docked.
- [ ] Plan to be back well before "all aboard."



Celebration Key, Carnival's destination on Grand Bahama. Photo courtesy of Carnival Cruise Line.

SECTION 8

Sailing from New York and New Jersey

For those of us on Long Island, a cruise from a local port means no flights, no airport security lines and no worrying about a delayed connection. You drive, take a car service or hop on the train.

Terminal	Where it is	Good to know
Manhattan Cruise Terminal	711 12th Avenue, on Manhattan's West Side along the Hudson	The most central option. Easy by taxi or car service from Penn Station or Grand Central.
Brooklyn Cruise Terminal	Red Hook, Brooklyn	Often a straightforward drive from Long Island. Good views of the harbor as you sail out.
Cape Liberty Cruise Port	Bayonne, New Jersey	The New York-area home port for Royal Caribbean and Celebrity sailings. Plan your route around bridge and tunnel traffic.

Cruise lines can move between terminals from season to season. Your boarding documents always name your terminal, so go by those.

Where you can go from here

- **Bermuda:** pink-sand beaches and an easy, English-speaking island. A favorite for first-timers.
- **The Bahamas and the Caribbean:** warm-weather getaways, usually with a couple of sea days each way.
- **Canada and New England:** lobster towns, history and beautiful fall color.

Sailings vary by season and year, so ask me what's on the calendar for your dates.

Local sailing checklist

- [ ] Decide how you'll get there: drive and park, car service, or train plus taxi.
- [ ] If you're parking, check the terminal's parking options before sailing day.
- [ ] Leave extra time for traffic, especially on summer weekends.
- [ ] Pack layers. Sea days heading north or south can be cool at first.
- [ ] Bring passport books for Bermuda and Canada trips too. They're strongly recommended.

Getting there from Long Island

By train: take the LIRR to Penn Station or Grand Central Madison, then a short taxi or rideshare to the Manhattan terminal. Easy, and no parking to worry about.

By car or car service: check the terminal's parking options ahead of time, and leave room for traffic. A car service drop-off at the curb is the least stressful way to arrive with luggage.

THOMAS'S TIP

Sailing out of New York Harbor past the Statue of Liberty and under the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge is one of the best sail-aways anywhere. Be on deck for it, and bring your camera.

SECTION 9 · PRINTABLE

Your quick first-cruise checklist

Before you book

- [ ] Who's sailing, and everyone's age on sailing day
- [ ] The feel of the trip: lively, family, relaxed or adults-only
- [ ] Date window and trip length
- [ ] Drive to a local port or fly
- [ ] Cabin type and location
- [ ] Travel protection discussed

Documents

- [ ] Passport book for everyone (strongly recommended)
- [ ] Passports valid well beyond return, with blank pages
- [ ] Names match the booking exactly
- [ ] Consent letter or custody papers for kids, if needed
- [ ] REAL ID or passport if flying

The final month

- [ ] Online check-in done and arrival time chosen
- [ ] Cruise app downloaded and documents saved offline
- [ ] Excursions, dining and shows booked
- [ ] Flights, transfers or parking set

Packing

- [ ] Carry-on: IDs, meds, swimsuit, charger, valuables
- [ ] Layers and a rain shell
- [ ] Prohibited-items list checked
- [ ] Bags and pockets checked for anything not allowed abroad

Embarkation day

- [ ] Arrive at your arrival time
- [ ] Luggage tagged and dropped
- [ ] Safety drill completed
- [ ] Dining plan and kids' club confirmed

Every port day

- [ ] "All aboard" time noted, two alarms set
- [ ] Ship card, photo ID, small bills and a card
- [ ] Back early

Going home

- [ ] Luggage plan: tags out the night before or carry off your own
- [ ] Onboard account and gratuities reviewed
- [ ] Customs declaration ready

Want me to plan it for you?

Reach out at

travelwiththomastoday.com

I'll help you choose the right line, ship and cabin, keep track of every deadline, and be there if anything changes before or during your trip. No pressure, just a friendly conversation about what fits.

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Official sources (checked November 9, 2026): U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative and FAQs (cbp.gov) · CBP Help, children traveling with one parent (help.cbp.gov) · U.S. Department of State: Cruise Ships, Passport Card vs. Book, and Traveling with Minors (travel.state.gov) · TSA REAL ID and acceptable ID (tsa.gov) · Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (step.state.gov) · Cruise NYC terminals (edc.nyc) · Royal Caribbean and Celebrity Cape Liberty port pages.

Rules, ships, itineraries and terminals change. Confirm details with your cruise line and official government sites before you travel. Cruise line policies vary, and some guidance here is general advice rather than a rule. Ship photos courtesy of Carnival Cruise Line. This guide contains no AI-generated images.