

TRIPTIPS

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EQUIPPED WITH THE RIGHT INFORMATION

--and with the help of a travel agent with experience booking accessible cruises—you'll have smooth sailing during your vacation at sea

As accessibility continues to improve in the cruise industry, passengers with disabilities have more choices than ever when it comes to a holiday at sea. Since access is just the means to an end, the first task in planning a cruise holiday is to figure out what kind of cruise you're really looking for—quiet and romantic, sun and fun or a family holiday where all ages can enjoy themselves?

Some cruisers are happy to just relax and enjoy the ship while others can't wait to get to port and explore the destination. Other variables include what season you can travel, how much time you have, what onboard activities you prefer and how independent you are. If this is your first venture overseas with a wheelchair, perhaps you'd be more comfortable on a group cruise where accessible excursions are escorted.

Given the range of choices, most travelers prefer to work with a specialized cruise planner who can suggest which cruise lines, ships and itineraries match their particular cruise style and budget. For those with access needs, the assistance of a knowledgeable agent is even more important. There are, however, good online resources for those who prefer to book directly. Vacations

To Go, for example, provides detailed access information for almost all ships serving the US market.

Because the supply of accessible cabins is limited, the earlier you can book, the better. For destinations like Alaska with a short sailing season, you may need to reserve 6-12 months in advance, especially if you want an accessible balcony cabin. The more flexible you are in terms of timing, destination and cabin type, the more you can take advantage of last minute bargains. One can also find bargains by booking at the beginning and end of the season for a particular region. By purchasing travel insurance when you book, if an unusual or tragic event prevents you from traveling, you're assured of a refund.

The spread of home ports around the US is making cruising more affordable and convenient. One can avoid the cost and hassle of flying, as well as potential damage to mobility devices, by simply driving to the nearest port. The Gulf Coast alone has four home ports—Galveston, New Orleans, Mobile and Tampa—while Northeasterners can now sail out of Baltimore, Philadelphia, Bayonne, New York City and Boston. For details on who sails where, visit the Cruise Line International Association Web site.

In general, the newest large ships serving the US market have the best access to public areas and the widest choice of cabin types. As these vessels are repositioned to other regions such as Asia or the Mediterranean, one can enjoy accessible cruises in these far flung destinations as well. Be aware, however, that access onshore may be challenging.

Even in the Caribbean, poor access in ports of call continues to be the Achilles heel of the cruise industry. Many ports require cruise ships to anchor offshore and ferry their passengers back and forth in small boats called tenders. While cruise lines like Holland America, Royal Caribbean and Princess have relatively accessible tender systems, rough seas may still make it impossible for visitors with restricted mobility to go ashore. To avoid or minimize the problem, check the cruise line's list of tender ports before choosing an itinerary. Individuals who use power chairs or scooters may want to take along or rent a manual wheelchair for tenders and shore excursions.

Sad to say, there are still very few ship-sponsored excursions that are wheelchair accessible except in Alaska and Hawaii. But a growing number of taxi companies and small tour operators in the Caribbean now have ramp or lift-equipped vehicles. These companies can be located online or through your accessible cruise planner. Again, book well in advance. If you have a folding wheelchair and can transfer, local taxis offer a readily available, lower cost alternative.

In most home ports, cruise lines can arrange accessible transfers between airport and ship. These typically are free for fly/cruise guests, but only on the days you embark and disembark. Given the high incidence of delayed flights and

lost luggage, you may want to arrive a day earlier and have your travel agent arrange the accessible hotel and transfers. Many cruise lines permit passengers with disabilities to board early or offer priority boarding on request, avoiding long lines at the pier.

By boarding early, you can also resolve any problems with the cabin, such as adaptive equipment that was not supplied. With advance notice, cruise lines can often provide a commode chair, transfer bench or toilet seat riser, as well as alerting devices for persons with hearing loss. Other items such as a Hoyer lift, manual wheelchair or scooter must be rented from outside suppliers. Medical oxygen and oxygen concentrators can also be delivered to the cabin before you board. Before ordering, check to see if the cruise line restricts delivery to approved suppliers.

All cruise lines require guests with disabilities to provide a medical profile or physician's clearance, even where no unstable medical condition exists. For those with a chronic illness, it is reassuring to know that a modern medical facility is available onboard. All CLIA cruise line members must meet strict medical standards set in conjunction with the American College of Emergency Physicians. Ships serving US ports also are subject to regular sanitary inspections by the Centers for Disease Control, with ratings available at their Web site.

If you do need medical treatment at sea, be aware that Medicare does not provide coverage aboard foreign-flagged and registered ships, in short, almost all cruise lines. Travel insurance will, however, cover emergency treatment and medical evacuation, which can cost a fortune. To be insured for pre-existing conditions, you must purchase the policy at the time of booking or shortly thereafter.

Those traveling with service animals also need to provide health and rabies certificates. The major cruise lines welcome service animals and will provide a toileting area, typically a box with mulch or Astroturf. Familiarizing the dog with this material before the cruise is a good idea. If you plan to take your guide, hearing or support dog into ports of call, begin the process of obtaining import permits and health certifications well in advance. Hawaii, for example, has very strict requirements, and some islands in the Caribbean, mainly former British colonies, have quarantines. For detailed information and helpful links, visit the US Department of Agriculture Web site.

RESOURCES

CLIA-Cruise Line International Association
www.cruising.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Vessel Sanitation Program

<http://wwwn.cdc.gov/vsp>

Connie George Travel Associates

www.wheelchaircruising.com

Accessible Journeys

www.disabilitytravel.com

Nautilus Tours & Cruises

www.nautilustours.com

Vacations To Go

www.vacationstogo.com

Flying Wheels

www.flyingwheelstravel.com

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/>

Able to Travel

www.abletotravel.org

Accessible Cruise Planners

www.love2cruise.com

Easy Access Travel

www.easyaccesstravel.com

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