

FRUGAL TRAVELER

# In the Cruise World, This Isn't Winter. It's Wave Season.

During the annual deal-making ritual, cruise-goers can snap up savings that generally aren't available the rest of the year.



Silverseas Cruises — whose ship, Silver Wind, sailed beneath London's Tower Bridge on a recent cruise — is one of many cruise companies offering savings during "wave season." Silversea Cruises

By Elaine Glusac

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Most people in the Northern Hemisphere call the three-month period between January and March “winter.” But in the cruise world, it’s “wave season,” a time of year when sales sweep the cruise lines as they try to encourage early bookings on sailings throughout the year and beyond.

“Wave season is the Black Friday or Cyber Monday of cruise bookings,” Erika Richter, the spokeswoman for the American Society of Travel Advisors, said, noting the name has nothing to do with high seas. “The term ‘wave’ comes from the wave of savings a traveler can capture when booking during that time.”

According to the Cruise Lines International Association, a member organization that represents most of the major cruise lines, [32 million passengers](#) are expected to sail globally in 2020. Nineteen new ocean ships are anticipated this year to meet demand.

North Americans accounted for the greatest share of cruisers in 2018 at 14.2 million. Winter sales aim to reach them when they may be vulnerable to images of sun and sand.

“The industry is trying to capture the traveler when they might be in a travel mood,” said Colleen McDaniel, the editor in chief of [Cruise Critic](#), an online review site. “They’ve gone through a couple of months of poor weather, just come off the Christmas holidays and thinking, ‘what might a summer vacation look like for my family?’”

Here are some reasons to consider booking a cruise in wave season.

### **The benefits of early booking**

In addition to financial incentives, cruise experts stress the less quantifiable advantages of early booking, including getting the cabin style you want — suites sell out quickest — desired itineraries and prime cabin locations (those prone to seasickness prefer midship locales, which are calmest).

Large cruise lines, like [Princess Cruises](#), offer comprehensive sales across many departures. Small lines, like [Pearl Seas Cruises](#), which specializes in cruises in New England, Canada and the Great Lakes area, tend to keep sales restricted to certain sailings.

It's a gamble whether potential cruisers will see such deals later in the year. According to the Cruise Lines International Association, wave season sales account for more than 60 percent of all Caribbean cruise bookings each year.

“Cruise lines want people who book early to feel they got a good bargain,” Ms. Daniels said. “They don’t want passengers to sit at a dinner table with people who booked two weeks out and hear what a great deal they got.”

### **Perks versus discounts**

Some wave season sales come as straight as “take \$200 off” deals. Others cover amenities, such as alcoholic drinks, gratuities, cabin upgrades, Wi-Fi and shore excursions.

“People remember the experience, not that ‘I saved \$100 or \$200,’” said Michelle Fee, the founder and chief executive of Cruise Planners, an agency based in Coral Springs, Fla. “That’s why they started adding amenities.”

Often sales include both perks and discounts. Running through Feb. 5, [Celebrity Cruises](#) is offering savings on cabins between \$100 and \$500 a person on select four-night-and-longer trips departing through May 3, 2022. The first two guests in a non-suite stateroom can choose one perk each from among free drinks, unlimited Wi-Fi, \$150 in onboard credit and prepaid gratuities.

The farther away the departure point, and the smaller the ship, the greater likelihood that airfare will be involved.

“With luxury and river cruise lines, because they’re not in the Caribbean or leaving from drive-to ports, most come out with airfare specials,” Ms. Fee said.

Through March 8, [Avalon Waterways](#) is offering free airfare on select 2020 European river cruises and, on some of them, complimentary pre- or post-sailing overnight stays in Budapest or Prague.

### **Deposit now, renegotiate later**

Many travel advisers who specialize in cruising stress the lack of risk that booking in sale season runs. Though it bears reading the fine print, most cruise lines will allow changes to a booking up until the time final payment is due, which varies between 30 days and six months, pre-departure. This means that if a better deal comes along, travelers can take advantage of it and still keep their preferential place in terms of cabin selection and itinerary.

In the case of rebooking to get a lower fare, travelers might have to forfeit some perks secured during wave season, such as free drinks and gratuities, but sometimes the savings will outweigh their value.

“You can’t get hurt,” Ms. Fee said.



This year, Lindblad Expeditions is offering deals on its Alaska trips. Andrew Peacock (Lindblad Expeditions)

### **Consider using a travel agent**

[Phocuswright](#), the travel industry research firm, says that nearly 70 percent of all cruise sales are done by travel agents. Agents say this volume gives them buying power and access to discounts and perks travelers won’t find on their own at cruise line websites or online travel agencies.



To substantiate their claim, Cruise Planners provided a list of deals widely available on cruise line websites, along with offers exclusive to the agency, including onboard credits running from \$60 to \$300.

“When clients book with me, I’m their advocate,” said Shari Levy, a travel adviser with Protravel International, based in Woodmere, N.Y. She monitors future promotions from the cruise line to determine if an updated booking would save more money, and stresses that her relationships with cruise lines get her clients preferential treatment.

Commissions paid to agents usually come from the cruise line, rather than the client, making prices similar. Sometimes agents require a planning fee, starting at \$50.

#### **Luxury and expedition sales**

Wave season sales extend across the spectrum, from large carriers like [Holland America Line](#) to small lines like [UnCruise Adventures](#), new lines such as [Virgin Voyages](#), launching in spring, and luxury lines like [Crystal Cruises](#) and [Seabourn](#).

High-end ship lines are relatively new to wave sales, which they hope will “instill this idea that the further out you book, the better,” Beth Butzlaff, the vice president of cruise sales for Virtuoso, the travel adviser consortium, said. “Generally, it’s based on value like an upgrade or amenity or shipboard credit.”

That’s true at [Silversea](#). Through Jan. 31, the price for its Caribbean itineraries will include round-trip airfare, transfers between the airport and the ship, and shore excursions in every port; the operator says the savings is worth around \$1,100. Departing March 27, a [10-day Silversea cruise](#) from Barbados to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., costs \$4,500 a person.

The small but growing segment of expedition cruising to distant destinations like the Galápagos and Greenland is starting to show up during wave season. Through Feb. 28, [Hurtigruten](#), for example, is offering savings of up to 40 percent on select sailings through 2022 in destinations departing from [Svalbard](#), Norway, to see polar bears (starting at \$5,200 a person for 10 days, discounted 30 percent) and to [Antarctica](#) (from \$8,733 a person for 12 days, also 30 percent off).

The small-ship adventure cruise line [Lindblad Expeditions](#) has historically not had a wave season sale, but this year is offering one on Alaska sailings for families, through March 31, including 50-percent-off fares for up to two children 22 and under for May and August 2020 sailings. Fares start at \$4,420 a person, pre-discount, for six-day cruises.