



Small Ship Cruises

By Elizabeth Armstrong

Want to cruise with the wind aboard a masted tall cruise ship, amble down a lazy river or embark on an adventure that takes you to some of the world's most pristine, secluded locales? Small-ship cruises offer a unique alternative to traditional megaliners. The on-board setting is intimate - most small cruise vessels carry less than 200 passengers - and itineraries are typically geared to cruisers who want an off-the-beaten track experience.

River cruises glide past historic cities and quiet country villages along the world's fabled waterways, from Mark Twain's beloved Mississippi River to the legendary Yangtze in China. These river cruise ships offer a more intimate perspective and a slow, easygoing rhythm as they travel to destinations that ocean liners can't reach.

Majestic windjammers make splendid sights, with their broad, white sails unfurled against brilliant blue skies. Their breezy appearance is matched by a relaxed on-board atmosphere.

And for cruising that's up close and personal, nothing beats small-ship adventure travel. These vessels go where the big ships can't, to hidden inlets, tiny ports and narrow channels. Itineraries are often destination-specific and explore a region in depth. Experts in history, culture, geography and anthropology are usually on board to give informal lectures.

All these cruise ships have small passenger capacities and fill up quickly. You'll see that some lines offer discounts, while others - such as the river cruise companies - typically do not. But you'll find that they cover the gamut in pricing, from budget to high-end. Each offers an undeniably unique experience that you won't find on a megaliner. Here's a look at our favorite niche cruise lines.

SeaDream Yacht Club likes to keep things unstructured aboard its sleek 110-passenger vessels. While your yacht will depart its first port on time and arrive at its last port as scheduled, what happens in between is not set in stone. Captains will adjust itineraries to take advantage of local events, perhaps making an unscheduled port call. The yachts are luxurious - the staff serves champagne and caviar to poolside guests - but they maintain an intimate and casual ambiance. Officers often lead shore excursions to their favorite spots, and passengers are welcome to drop by the bridge for a cup of coffee and a chat with the captain.

Cruise the great rivers of Europe aboard one of the deluxe vessels of Peter Deilmann and take in the ever-changing scenery of quaint villages, lush vineyards, lively cities and storied castles. Uniworld, whose river cruise ships cruise the rivers of Europe and Russia as well as the Yangtze in China, caters to American passengers and conducts tours and activities in English. Viking River Cruises also cruises in Europe, Russia and China, and it supplements its European and Russian itineraries with an Old World Highlights program that features folkloric entertainment, lectures, demonstrations and daily shore excursions.

The old-fashioned paddlewheelers of the Delta Queen Steamboat Co. maintain a slow and steady pace of 8 mph as they cruise down the rivers of America's Heartland. An onboard "riverlorian" brings local tales to life for passengers, who can watch the passing scenery from rocking chairs on deck. The boats are resplendent in Victorian charm and staffed by all-American crews.

Windjammer Barefoot Cruises offers one of the most laid-back and mellow atmospheres at sea. Wear your bathing suit and T-shirt to dinner. Bring your bedding to the top deck at night and sleep under the stars. As these ships sail the Caribbean and Bahamas, most of the action takes place on deck, where there's sunbathing, dancing and socializing.

The sailing ships of Star Clippers cruise the waters of the Caribbean, Mediterranean and Far East. Its flagship, the Royal Clipper, is the largest full-rigged sailing ship in the world, boasting no less than 42 sails totaling 56,000 square feet.

The motorized sailing vessels of Windstar Cruises offer a more upscale tall ship experience, with an onboard ambiance that's most often described as elegantly casual. The graceful ships cruise in Europe, the Caribbean and French Polynesia, and each boasts an open-air sports platform equipped with sailboards, snorkeling gear, water skis and kayaks.

Bring out your inner explorer with Clipper Cruise Line, which offers up-close adventures around the globe, often going to remote locales. Visit an isolated village of Choco Indians in Panama, or watch seals and pilot whales frolic amid the isles of the North Atlantic. Sail so close to a glacier that you feel you can reach out and touch its icy surface. Ships are equipped with Zodiac landing crafts that take passengers ashore.

The vessels of Cruise West

- the largest carries just 114 passengers - sail the rivers and other regions of the west coast of North America, including Alaska and British Columbia, the Pacific Northwest, the California wine country, Baja Mexico's Sea of Cortez, Costa Rica and Panama. The small size and shallow draft of these ships allow them to maneuver close to shore - you might spy a bear strolling at the water's edge in Alaska, for example.

The 98-passenger Celebrity Xpedition sails from Ecuador to the Galapagos Islands. The archipelago is home to more than 1,900 species of plants and animals that can't be found anywhere else in the world. For naturalists and wildlife-watchers, it's a pure delight.