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ANNUAL REPORT: 2025 CRUISE TRAVEL TRENDS

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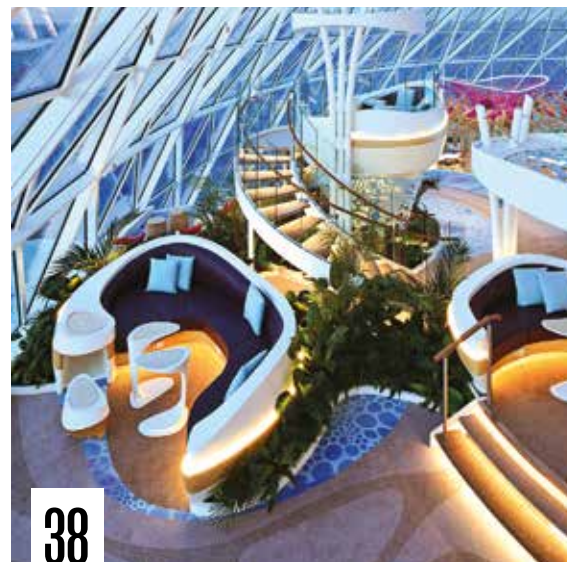
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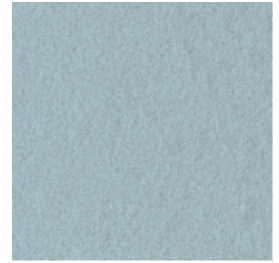
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<b>Birmingham</b> . . . April 23rd	<b>Leeds</b> . . . . . June 12th
<b>Edinburgh</b> . . . . . May 7th	<b>Manchester</b> . . July 9th



"I WOULD HIGHLY RECOMMEND THIS EVENT TO ALL AGENTS WHETHER YOU ARE NEW TO CRUISE OR VERY MUCH ESTABLISHED AS THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW TO LEARN & WHAT BETTER WAY THAN AT A FUN NIGHT OUT. I'M ALREADY LOOKING FORWARD TO THE 2025 EVENT IN SCOTLAND."

Muriel Morgan  
Travel agent at Travel Counsellors



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# WELCOME...

**I**t brings me great pleasure to welcome you to *Cruise Trade News*' first-ever industry report, produced in partnership with Mail Metro Media. Published in February 2025, the research and analysis found throughout these pages are a pulse check on an industry that finds itself at an important tipping point.

Intent to cruise has arguably never been higher, with new ships and an appreciation for their ability to ferry travellers to some of the most sought-after corners of the globe fuelling new-found enthusiasm. Yet, as the UK economy continues to stutter, rising living costs are forcing households to re-evaluate their holiday spend.

What impact will this have on booking figures in 2025 and beyond? This, as well as a wealth of other consumer habits, is precisely what we've attempted to gauge in this report with the help of our research partner Mail Metro Media, whose titles – which include the Mail brands, *Metro* and *The i Paper* – reach 38 million adults a month.

Working with Mail Metro Media's data and insight team, we accessed an audience of travellers for whom cruise is either a regular fixture of their holiday patterns or is likely to be in the near future. Our in-depth survey ascertained what they like about



**ABOVE** Cruise ships can spirit guests to much sought-after destinations

cruise, where they turn to for holiday inspiration and what factors might be preventing them from booking.

Before I invite you to discover the findings for yourselves, I want to extend a huge thank you to the sponsors of this report, whose expert analysis has helped bring our data to life.

Happy reading!

**Jack Carter**  
*Editor*

**cruisetradenews.com**

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Cruise Trade News



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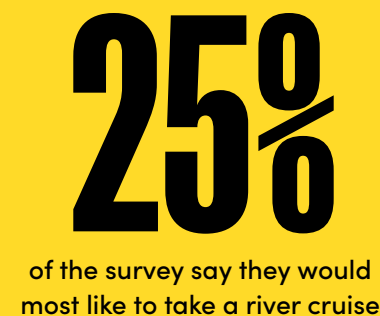
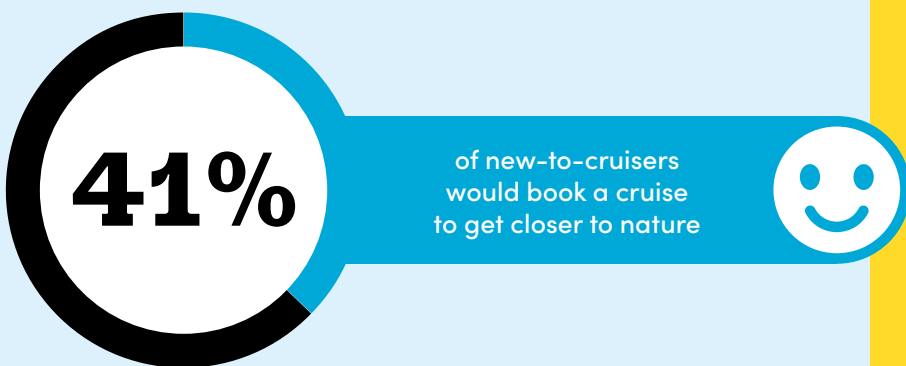
Cruise Trade News

On the cover: Illustration by Phil Couzens

## What do travellers **LIKE** and **DISLIKE** about cruise?

## Where are **cruise-goers travelling to next?**

The Mediterranean, the Caribbean and Scandinavia are travellers' most sought-after cruise destinations



### Sustainability

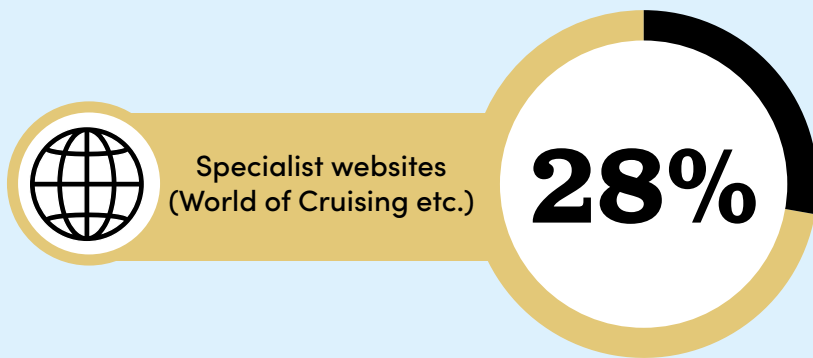
67% of travellers want lines to highlight what they're doing to become more sustainable

Only 40% of travellers surveyed agree cruise is one of the 'greenest' ways to holiday

Nearly half of 18-44-year-olds think lines aren't doing enough to limit their environmental impact



## Where do travellers engage with cruise ads most?



### Who did we speak to?

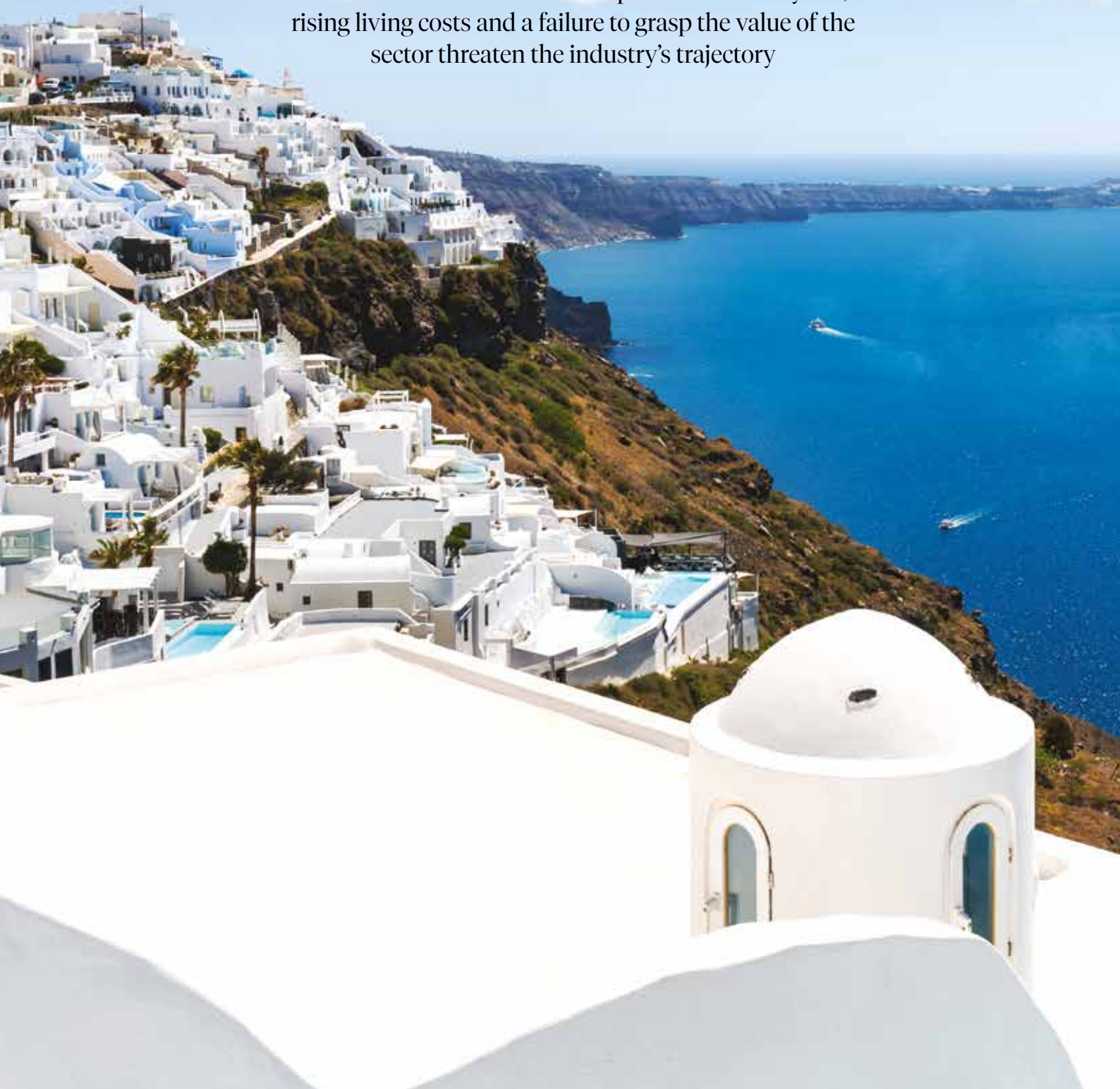
To get a deeper understanding of the tastes and intentions of UK travellers today, *Cruise Trade News* and *Mail Metro Media* zoned in on a high-quality audience made up of people who've either cruised before or are currently considering booking their first holiday-at-sea.

Our survey canvassed the opinions of 763 travellers aged 25-75+, including 399 previous cruisers and 364 new-to-cruisers. Of those who've cruised previously, 75 per cent have been on two or more voyages, while 39 per cent say they've been on a ship in the last year.

When it comes to the types of travellers our survey identify with most, 41 per cent say they're all-inclusive/package holidaymakers, with 16 per cent saying they're more adventure-minded. Conversely, 14 per cent are budget travellers and 13 per cent lean more toward luxury.

# The cost of cruise

As more travellers choose to explore the world by sea, rising living costs and a failure to grasp the value of the sector threaten the industry's trajectory





“**There’s a perception that there are too many additional costs when booking a cruise**”

the pounds and pence fall, our research tells us that the value of cruise is failing to be recognised by consumers.

When asked what, if anything, has previously stopped them from booking a cruise, 52 per cent of new-to-cruise respondents say it’s because cruises are too expensive, with another 29 per cent believing they are too pricey once onboard. And when asked to pick just one aspect of cruising they value most, out of 14 options, only 2 per cent choose its value compared to a land-based holiday. This is compounded by the fact that consumers have a low awareness of how a sea fare is priced, with 54 per cent saying they’re “not very knowledgeable” about what’s actually included in the price of a cruise.

In a summary of respondents’ feelings toward the affordability of cruise, the overriding sentiment was that lines should “make the price more transparent and honest”. One commented: “When I see a headline price, it’s always so much more expensive when I look at how much it will be to go.” It’s no surprise, then, to see that 36 per cent of travel agents ▶

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** The Mediterranean tops the wish list of where to cruise next for our survey respondents; cruising appeals to an increasingly younger generation; we can expect to see more guests getting hitched at sea in 2025

**S**ailing to multiple destinations in one trip, the joy of hassle-free travel and accessing diverse cuisines are just a few of the aspects of cruise UK travellers value most. However, high prices, rigid itineraries and a lack of transparency over additional costs continue to hold the sector back. This is according to the findings of *Cruise Trade News (CTN)* and Mail Metro Media’s exclusive research into frequent and new-to-cruise travellers, supported by our survey of British travel agents and readers of *CTN* sister title *World of Cruising*.

While some past cruisers recognise the value of cruise, only 26 per cent of respondents to the survey think it’s more cost-effective than a land-based holiday, with more than half of new-to-cruisers saying price is their main barrier to booking. Additionally, only 23 per cent of 45-54-year-olds feel holidays at sea are good value for money. Perhaps most worrying of all, however, is that of those who said they are unlikely to cruise in the next two years, 34 per cent of them say it’s because they can no longer afford to.

This makes sense when you consider the adverse impact rising living costs, inflation and concerns over the economic outlook are having on household budgets, with the British Retail Consortium recently revealing that confidence in the UK economy is at an all-time low. The good news – for now at least – is that in the face of it all, consumers continue to protect their travel spend for fairly-priced holidays.



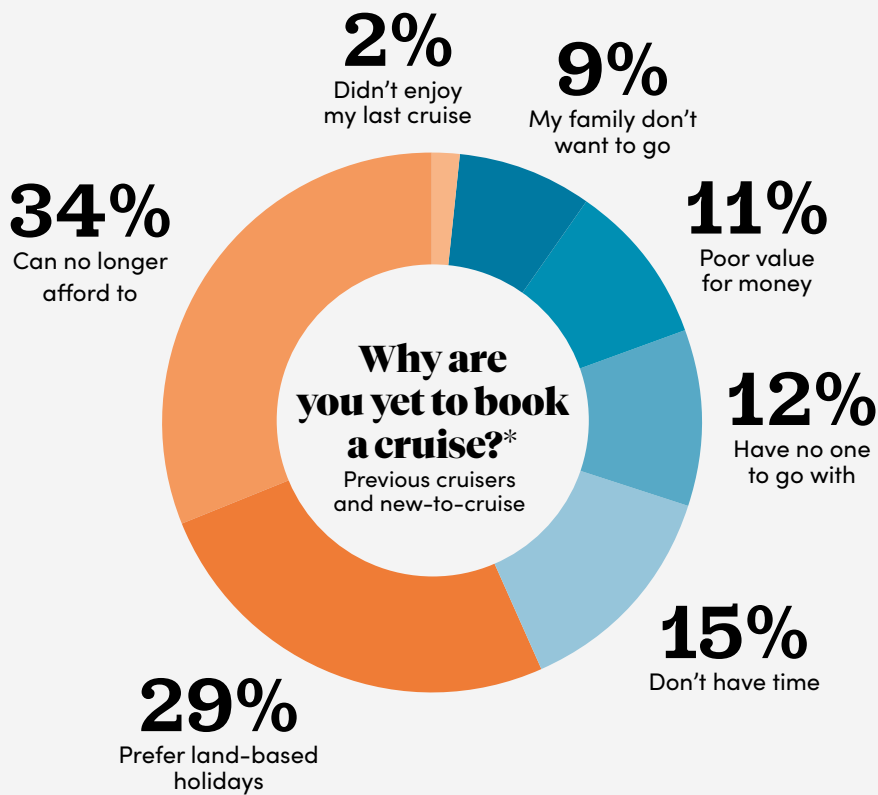
Over a third of those surveyed say they’d be willing to spend more than £1,000pp but no more than £2,000pp if booking a cruise today. Conversely, 21 per cent of new cruisers say they’d be willing to spend over £500 but less than £1,000, compared to 9 per cent of past cruisers, implying that the perception around the sector’s value isn’t cutting through.

The cruise industry is at an important tipping point, with 2024’s record-breaking booking figures suggesting that the sector is evolving from a state of resurgence. However, with just one in ten UK holidaymakers choosing cruise, the industry must fight harder for its position in the leisure travel marketplace.

### MISSING THE VALUE

We’ve long heard cruise advocates emote about the comparative affordability of destination-hopping itineraries, where guests can visit multiple ports without needing to arrange additional transport and accommodation. Regardless of how





surveyed by *Cruise Trade News* say the price of the sea fare is the biggest barrier to selling to new-to-cruise customers.

“There’s a perception that there are too many additional costs when booking a cruise,” says Sam Ballard, managing director of Leicester-based agency Club Voyages. “When we give our clients a fare, soon we’re asking them if they want to add gratuities, Wi-Fi or a drinks package and it can build up.

“It’s a case of me telling them the price of a cruise and then asking for an extra £500-£600. There is an element of frustration among clients when that’s

the case, and it would be much easier if we just gave them one price. That would make cruise easier to sell and more palatable to new-to-cruise customers.”

Hidden fees aren’t the only barrier to cruise, with our survey finding that old misconceptions are still at play. Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of new-to-cruise travellers say they’re concerned about seasickness and overcrowded ships, with a further 10 per cent worried cabins are too small. This tallies with agents, with 36 per cent of the trade we surveyed saying negative perceptions of the sector are the tallest hurdle.

“There is still a challenge with traditional misconceptions,” says Louise Hunter, head of cruise at Barrhead Travel. “It’s the same legacy issues we see about whether cruising is for all ages, what the onboard experience is like, and people who think they can’t properly experience a destination if they’re on a cruise. However, things have greatly improved and I think agents, cruise lines and the industry have worked well together to dispel these myths.”

#### READY TO TRAVEL

After emerging from the pandemic, travellers globally were hopping on

## Cruise sentiment

We compiled the survey’s comments and asked AI to summarise the key themes into short soundbites. Here’s what they had to say:



### Destinations

“I love visiting new places that you couldn’t reach any other way.”

### Convenience

“You visit lots of places without the hassle of packing and unpacking, while being well looked after.”

### Dining

“Access to world-class chefs and diverse cuisines makes cruises a treat for food lovers.”



### Affordability

“I think they could reduce the cost of excursions and drinks packages, as they tend to be very expensive.”

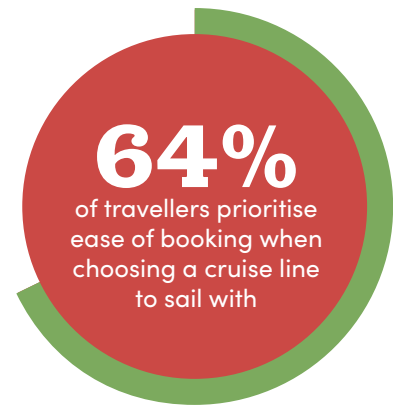
### Hidden costs

“Make cruise lines more transparent by showing exactly what’s included and don’t tack on hidden extras.”

### Additional services

“Cruise lines should have a survey for customers to complete ahead of the journey to help tailor the experience.”





planes, trains and cruise ships as soon as it was safe to do so, fuelled by pent-up wanderlust and a desire to make up for lost time. Encouragingly, that eagerness to travel is yet to subside, with 69 per cent of repeat cruisers saying visiting multiple destinations is one of the aspects of a cruise they enjoy most. New-to-cruisers agree, with 70 per cent favourable toward destination hopping.

Meanwhile, getting to enjoy a variety of dining options onboard is equally popular with repeat cruisers, with 57 per cent saying they value relaxing at sea during sailing days. Comparatively, 44 per cent of new-to-cruisers say the stress-free nature of only having to unpack once is one of the aspects they would enjoy most.

When it comes to deciding where to cruise next, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and Scandinavia top our survey's wish list, with 37 per cent of *World of Cruising* readers naming southern Europe as the place

they're most excited to sail to in 2025. Elsewhere, the Adriatic & Aegean, Australasia & the Pacific Islands and Alaska are emerging as potential future frontrunners.

"A cruise has always been an appealing prospect for would-be explorers, providing a hassle-free and enriching way to immerse themselves in worldwide destinations," says Iain Baillie, vice-president of international sales at Carnival Cruise Line.

Travellers are cruising for all manner of reasons, too. In January P&O Cruises revealed that a record number of weddings took place on its ships, with nuptials and vow renewals increasing by 12 per cent. Our survey suggests that we can expect to see more guests getting hitched at sea in 2025 and beyond, with 29 per cent of people saying cruises are a great way to celebrate special occasions.

"As cruising appeals to an increasingly younger generation, we're seeing a notable trend of more millennial

couples choosing to tie the knot at sea, given that they can combine a uniquely idyllic wedding day and dream honeymoon in one," says Paul Ludlow, president of Carnival UK & P&O Cruises.

When broken down by age, more than half (52 per cent) of 55-64-year-olds who've previously cruised say they're most excited to experience nature and wildlife. In the millennial bracket, 36 per cent of those aged 18-34 say accessing remote destinations is the best aspect, while 44 per cent of 35-44-year-olds most enjoy the uniqueness of cruising.

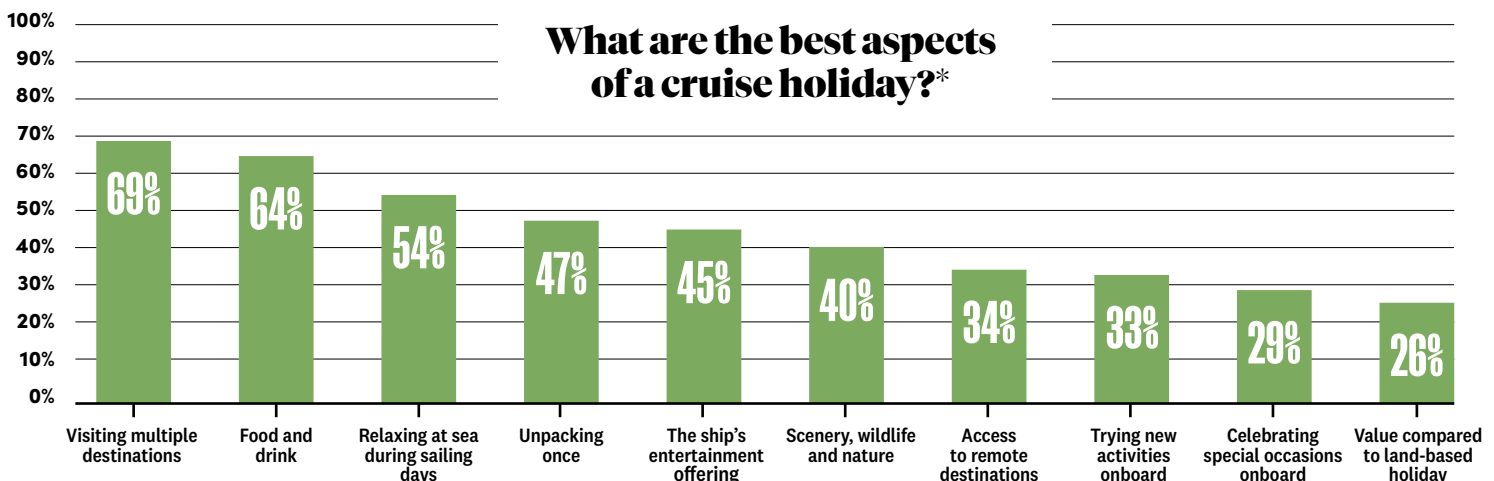
"Guests are seeking meaningful experiences. That's why we offer extended stays in key locations," says Janet Parton, VP of business development for the UK and Europe, Celestyal. "Guests can fully immerse themselves in the culture of each destination, rather than feeling rushed." ●

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

The Caribbean is a clear favourite with travellers planning their next trip; for millennials, accessing remote destinations is a key aspect of a cruise trip

\*Percentages relate to the total number of answers chosen, not number of participants.

**What are the best aspects of a cruise holiday?\***





# Sea change

**Confusion around price, operators and the onboard experience is turning holidaymakers away from the industry, posing the question: is it time to simplify cruise?**

“**It’s hard for people to visualise what a cruise cabin is like if you haven’t cruised before**”

never cruised before, they think it means no food. We need to go back to basics.”

Thorne argues that while marketing efforts are helping, customers still feel intimidated by cruise. “There’s so much information you need to give to a customer when they’re cruising for the first time. We need to find a better way if we want to keep seeing those bookings.”

Louise Hunter, head of cruise at Barrhead Travel, believes that being able to show real-life examples of the onboard experience can be a remedy for the confusion around cruise. “It’s hard for people to visualise or understand what a cruise cabin is like if you haven’t cruised before. Many new-to-cruise customers probably don’t realise the variety of cabin sizes and styles onboard.

“The visuals from the cruise lines have greatly improved over the last few years, particularly with virtual tours and social media content. I think customers would find it useful to see more illustrations of cabins in use – for example, a day-to- ▶

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** Younger generations are still struggling to grasp what the cruise experience is like; restaurant reservation processes vary considerably between cruise lines; most ships feature a wealth of amazing onboard activities



**58%**  
of new-to-cruisers say they’re planning on booking in the next 6-24 months

**I**t’s the question that keeps cruise lines up at night: “How do we get more new-to-cruise travellers onto our ships?”

Luring consumers away from the land-based holiday market has been one of the success stories of the industry in recent years. According to Cruise Lines International Association’s (CLIA) *2024 State of the Industry Report*, 27 per cent of cruisers who stepped onto a ship in the last two years did so for the very first time – up 12 per cent from the previous two-year period.

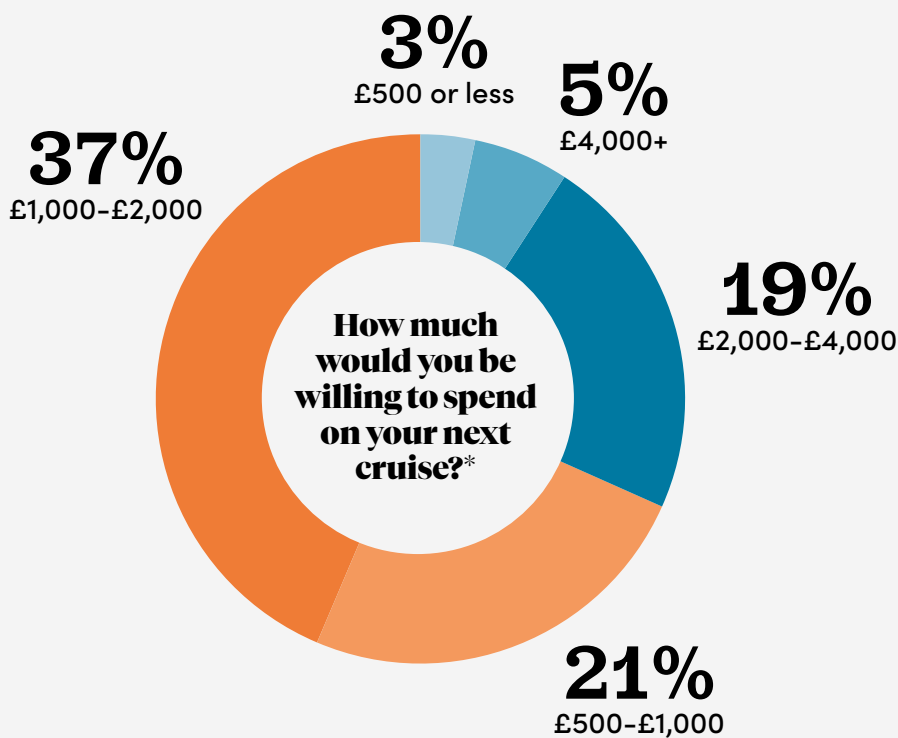
While most lines expect new-to-cruise numbers to grow in 2025, the dichotomy of having more inventory to sell and rising living costs squeezing consumers’ household budgets means growth is far from guaranteed. More worrying than that, though, is that confusion around both the booking process and the onboard experience is proving to be a significant barrier to reaching more land-based holidaymakers.

More than half (56 per cent) of new-to-cruise travellers we surveyed say they are either “not very knowledgeable” or “not at all knowledgeable” about cabin types, while 53 per cent are equally unclear about ships’ entertainment offerings. And in the case of the cruise lines themselves, half of those questioned lack the knowledge to differentiate operators within the market.

This isn’t helped by the fact that many lines have their own terminology for ship categories, while others have different processes in place for booking excursions and making restaurant reservations. Even designations for room types feel overly complex, with lines often using their own descriptions for similar cabins (balcony, oceanview, veranda stateroom, to name a few).

Compare this to booking a hotel room, where platforms like GIATA have standardised the process to help travel professionals instantly identify accommodation. It’s no surprise that when asked what would make a line more desirable to sail with, 63 per cent of new-to-cruisers say ease of booking.

“It’s really quite incredible the lack of knowledge many people have about cruising,” says Sandra Corkin, executive director, Oasis Travel. “When we give prices, we often say ‘cruise-only’. To us that means flights aren’t included, but whenever we say that to people who’ve



## “ Utilising different marketing streams to promote new ships has enticed younger travellers

away from agents entirely. A massive 91 per cent of 35-44-year-olds say they feel confident booking a cruise holiday in person.

There are still plenty of reasons for agents to be upbeat. After all, appetite for cruise is undeniably growing. Of the new-to-cruisers we surveyed, 58 per cent of them say they are planning on booking a cruise within the next 6-24 months.

What’s more, agents nationwide tell us that when the industry talks about cruise in the right way, the message often lands.

Hunter explains: “Influencer partnerships and user-generated content have been significant in changing perceptions. They’ve been a fantastic tool to help change perceptions around cruising.”

Ashley Hunt, director of Swindon Travel Hub, says his agency had “massive success” in getting first-time cruisers onboard in 2024, claiming that utilising different marketing streams to promote new ships has made the industry more enticing to young people.

He explains: “Most cruise lines now offer something that’s super cool, whether it’s Royal Caribbean with [kids’ neighbourhood] Surfside, go-kart tracks with Norwegian Cruise Line, or all the different dining options that come with a Virgin Voyages cruise. And when you’ve got the likes of Ambassador Cruise Line charging £50 a night on certain deals, that’s going to attract new people because it’s cheap.”

Another successful avenue into the new-to-cruise market has been partnering with external brands who have existing relationships with new-to-cruise consumers. Anna Perrott, senior partnerships and marketing director at luxury cruise retailer Panache Cruises,

night transformation to show the exact space a family of four would have to help them make more informed decisions.”

While this will undoubtedly be a concern for cruise operators, Corkin is upbeat, saying it presents a fantastic opportunity for agents to demonstrate their value. “There’s a huge number of people who wouldn’t want to book their first cruise online because they have so many questions; that presents a huge opportunity for us,” she says.

Hunter agrees, saying that explaining the differences between lines and their ships is a job for travel agents.

“That’s one of the reasons we’re seeing a real boom in cruise bookings,” she says. “Cruise is a complicated product – even more so if you’ve never cruised before. I think it’s important for lines to direct customers to agents so they can clearly explain the product and make genuine recommendations.”

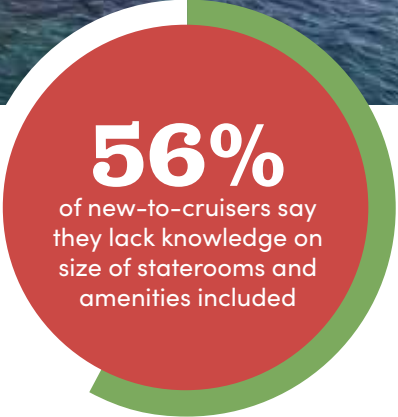
### PROVING AGENTS’ VALUE

Getting consumers to engage with the trade in the first place is proving increasingly difficult. In *Cruise Trade News’* agent survey, we asked if holidaymakers still appreciate the value of travel advisors. Nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) say yes, although 36 per cent say it’s getting harder to promote their worth to consumers. This tallies with our consumer survey, which found that only 19 per cent of new-to-cruisers rely on high-street stores for cruise inspiration.

This is compounded by the fact that just 4 per cent of 18-34-year-olds and 13 per cent of 35-44-year-olds say they would book in-store if they were to purchase a cruise holiday tomorrow. Of the *World of Cruising* readers we surveyed, 33 per cent say they never book cruises through travel agents, with 15 per cent saying rarely.

That’s not to say that Gen Z and millennial travellers are stepping





says the agency is working with names like British Airways Executive Club, Cathay Pacific and Harrods to push cruise to their audiences.

She explains: “We’ve had success with external partnerships, looking at their luxury databases to find new-to-cruise consumers. We’re targeting people that wouldn’t necessarily think of a cruise, and asking, ‘Do you love this luxury hotel? There’s something very similar at sea. Why not give it a try?’”

**TASTE IN CRUISE**

While new-to-cruise travellers are seeking more clarity around operators and their products, one thing that is easy to discern are what features of a holiday at sea they desire most.

Our survey shows that nearly two-thirds (60 per cent) of travellers who’ve never cruised before prefer leaving the ship and exploring as opposed to

16 per cent who prefer to relax onboard. Furthermore, 66 per cent say they’ll happily book a cruise if it allows them to discover a new destination, with only 7 per cent saying they would favour sailing to somewhere they’ve already visited. This sentiment is shared across higher age brackets too, with more than half (57 per cent) of 55-64-year-olds who’ve never cruised before saying they’re turned off by the idea of rarely leaving the ship, rising to 65 per cent for those aged 65 and over.

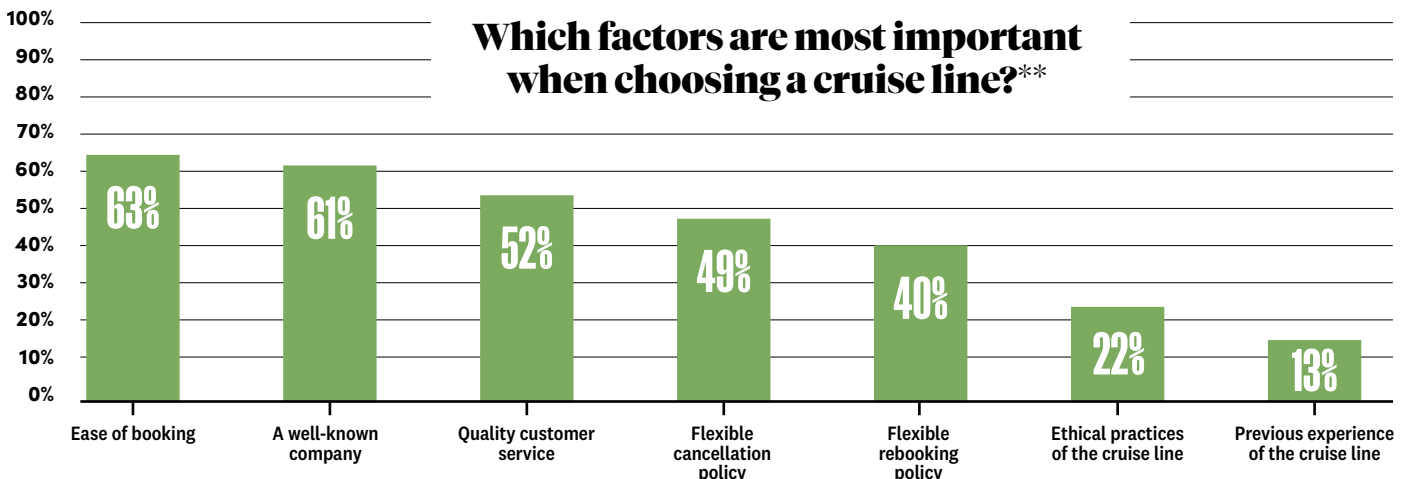
Once onshore, however, the prospect of having a limited time in-port to explore has proven to be a common barrier for the new-to-cruise market. This jars most of all with Gen Z and millennial travellers – AKA the ‘get-up-and-go generation’ – who like to experience the destination at their own pace. This is reflected in our research, with 55 per cent of 18-34-year-olds and 54 per cent of 35-44-year-olds saying they want flexible itineraries.

Hunt says that while some cruise lines are taking steps to address this, guests who want a more immersive experience are still better off booking a land-based holiday. “Many cruise lines are changing their itineraries to allow guests to spend more time with locals while offering unique cultural experiences,” he explains. “My opinion is that if you want to immerse yourself in a destination, you need to be there for several days. However, if you’d rather see a place in comfort, then you would book a cruise.”

There’s no arguing that passenger numbers are heading in the right direction, it’s evident that operators must simplify the terminology around the sector if it’s to continue to challenge the dominance of land-based holidays. ●

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT**

Gen Z and millennial travellers are attracted by cruise’s ability to carry them to new destinations; exclusive demonstrations and fine dining from celebrated chefs like Michel Roux are a major draw



\*Most popular answers. \*\*Percentages relate to the total number of answers chosen, not number of participants.



# NEW HORIZONS

While travellers' enduring love for the classic cruise hotspots grows stronger, our survey shows that holidaymakers are prepared to venture further in search of better value

**W**hile the Mediterranean and the Caribbean have been named as the most sought-after cruise destinations for 2025 and beyond, growing popularity in long-haul destinations and cooler climates, such as Australasia and Scandinavia, indicate a shift in consumer preference.

According to *Cruise Trade News* and Mail Metro Media's research, when asked to choose which destinations they're most excited to sail to next, 50 per cent of all respondents have the Mediterranean in their sights for their next – or first – getaway at sea, with 44 per cent opting for the Caribbean.

"Large volumes are still going to the Med just because of the sheer volume of product on offer and being able to sail out of Southampton," says Ashley Hunt, director, Swindon Travel Hub. "You can drive for 90 minutes, park your car and

then you can start your holiday. You don't need to run through an airport or have the stress of travelling."

While the Caribbean was another widely popular choice across the survey, the bulk of interest came from Gen Z and millennial travellers, with 56 per cent of 18-34-year-olds choosing the island paradise as their ultimate cruise destination, versus just 38 per cent of 65+ respondents.

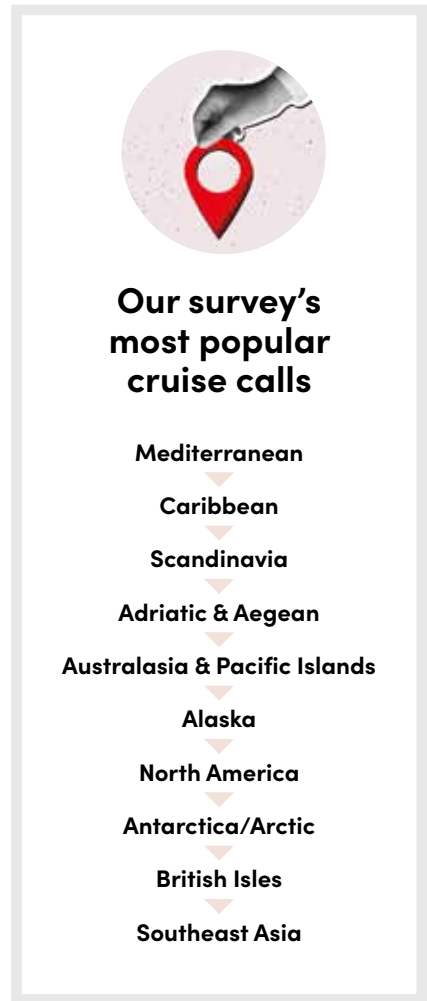
Travel advisor Emma Otter isn't surprised to see travellers' affection for the Caribbean continue in 2025. She explains: "With year-round sunshine, it has something to offer every cruiser, whatever their interests.

"They can choose fun filled adventures, such as zip lining in Jamaica, swimming with pigs in the Bahamas or imbibing Antigua's steep naval history. No Caribbean Island is the same and it certainly offers much than palm trees and white sandy beaches."

## DISRUPTORS AT THE DOOR

Our survey also gave us an insight into the destinations that could compete for top spot in the coming years, as well as the regions that are emerging onto the cruise scene the fastest. Nearly a third (32 per cent) of all respondents opted for Scandinavia as their preferred destination, with 38 per cent of the 55-64 age group and 35 per cent of over 65s saying they were most likely to book a cruise to the region.





**Our survey's most popular cruise calls**

Mediterranean

Caribbean

Scandinavia

Adriatic & Aegean

Australasia & Pacific Islands

Alaska

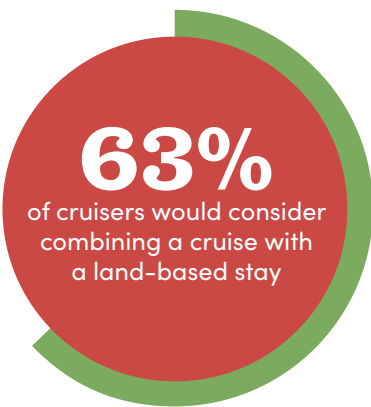
North America

Antarctica/Arctic

British Isles

Southeast Asia

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** Australasia is popular when price isn't an issue; the Mediterranean is still top of the list; the Caribbean is favoured by younger guests; Northern Europe attracts older travellers



21 per cent are happy to spend more than £500 but less than £1,000.

This reflects the possibility that consumers who are unexposed to cruising are less willing to part with their hard-earned cash, re-emphasising the need for agents to communicate the selling points of the cruise product in an effective, easy-to-understand way.

Managing director of Club Voyages Samuel Ballard believes more customers will opt for a long-haul cruise over a short-haul land break in 2025, saying travellers are willing to travel further to find better value.

“When you’re looking at a land trip to places like the Amalfi coast, they’re so expensive, and a lot of other regions in Europe are becoming very, very expensive too,” he explains. “Whereas, when you look at what you can get in Thailand, and even places around that like Bali, it’s incredible, and that goes for cruising in that region as well, and travellers will combine them.”

**SHIFTING SECTORS**

When it comes to types of cruise holidays, unsurprisingly, ocean sailings reigned supreme. Just under two thirds (61 per cent) of experienced sailors say they would most like to take an ocean cruise next, compared to 31 per cent opting for ultra luxury, 27 per cent an

“**One of the fastest emerging sectors is land-and-cruise**

Meanwhile, a quarter (23 per cent) of all 18-34-year-old respondents said they’re most likely to book a cruise to North America, the most of all age groups surveyed.

Curiously, when asked if money was no object, 44 per cent of those who have previously cruised say they want to sail to Australasia and the Pacific Islands. This is compared to 43 per cent of 18-34-year-olds, 29 per cent of 35-44-year-olds and 44 per cent of 45-54-year-olds.

Nearly half (46 per cent) of all new-to-cruisers would go to the Caribbean if money wasn't an issue, followed by 34 per cent for Australasia and the Pacific Islands. The hunt for value remains a priority for cruise-goers, with 36 per cent of those who have cruised before saying they're willing to pay between £1,000-£2,000. Another 36 per cent will pay between £2,000-£4,000. More than a third (37 per cent) of new-to-cruise respondents, meanwhile, say they would spend between £1,000-£2,000 and

around-the-world cruise and 26 per cent a river itinerary. One of the fastest emerging sectors, however, is land-and-cruise, where guests can extend their trip by tacking on a city break or rail journey before or after boarding a ship. When asked if they would consider combining a cruise with a land stay, 54 per cent of new-to-cruise say yes, rising to 63 per cent for those who've previously cruised.

Tracy Clenshaw, head of commercial for Fred. Olsen Travel, explains: “We’re seeing it with customers who have more confidence to travel, where combining the two gives them the best of both worlds. We’ve had success with Asia and the Golden Triangle, as well as South Africa, Mauritius and luxury rail journeys around Europe.”

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

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**The Seine, Paris & Normandy**  
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Riviera Travel terms and conditions apply. Prices correct at time of print. For more information email [agents@rivieratravel.co.uk](mailto:agents@rivieratravel.co.uk) †2025 river cruises include an unlimited quantity of drinks at lunch and from 6pm to midnight while on board (selected drinks available), for 2026 river cruises, the free all-inclusive drinks includes unlimited quantity of drinks from 10am to midnight while on board (selected drinks available).





# “River is growing by the minute”

THE SECTOR IS PERFECTLY POSITIONED TO ATTRACT INQUISITIVE TRAVELLERS WHO WANT TO GET UNDER THE SKIN OF LESSER-EXPLORED DESTINATIONS, SAYS **CLAIRE HILLS**, NATIONAL SALES MANAGER, RIVIERA TRAVEL

It's safe to say 2025 is shaping up to be a milestone year for the river cruise sector, as demand for sailings on the world's waterways continues to outpace our predictions. One driving force behind this increasing demand is the desire of customers to truly get under the skin of a destination – something river cruising is perfectly suited to meet.

Being able to unpack once, not having to worry about pre-cruise travel with our door-to-door service and stepping off the ship directly into the heart of cities such as Vienna, Paris and Porto puts lines like Riviera Travel in a unique position compared to other sectors of the industry.

Riviera performed strongly throughout 2024 and that, in part, is because our clients are looking for something a little different. It may be that they've ocean cruised before, or they're usually interested in touring, and now they've discovered a river cruise is the perfect blend of both.

The immersive experiences these customers are searching for aren't just captured shoreside, either. We offer talks about the destination with a Riviera cruise director to help guests immerse themselves in the regions



Riviera has seen an increase in the number of solo travellers

they're travelling to even before they've even stepped off the ship – something our customers have asked for more of as they continue to seek destination-rich experiences.

It's hard to pinpoint an exact location which has stood out for guests, as our entire destination network increased in popularity in 2024. For 2025, though, our Blue Danube itinerary, which visits culture-rich ports such as Budapest, Bratislava and Vienna, is selling very well, as is the Douro in Portugal, which is popular with fans of wine, hiking and warmer climates.

The River Seine and the River Rhône are also proving popular, having garnered immense exposure during the

Olympic Games in Paris last summer, once again proving that the destination is key when it comes to consumer's decision-making.

We've also seen an uptick in demand in long-haul river cruising, especially on the Mekong. It's so popular, in fact, that we'll be adding a new vessel to the river in 2026. Elsewhere, the Nile is another location which has really taken off and we can see it being a go-to choice for river cruisers in 2025.

To ensure all travellers have an opportunity to take a

destination-rich river cruise this year, we made the decision to boost our solo offering, as this is another market that's growing by the minute. We even launched our new Riviera Explorer trade training initiative, which was designed in part to help agents tap into the burgeoning number of solo cruise-goers. We will also offer sailings of four days all the way up to 29 days to give guests the opportunity to spend as much or as little time experiencing numerous destinations in one sailing.

However people decide to cruise in 2025, one thing is for certain: the destination will be crucial to their decision-making process. [rivieratravel.co.uk](https://rivieratravel.co.uk)



# YOUNG, WILD & FREE

It's a fact: cruise travellers are getting younger. Here, three travel agents reveal why more millennials, solo travellers and multi-generational families are getting onboard than ever before

**T**he popularity of cruising shows no sign of abating, which has resulted in a marked shift in passenger demographic.

If cruises were traditionally a popular option for retirees, this stereotype has been turned on its head, with cruise holidays now appealing to everyone from solo travellers and multi-generational families to Gen Z and millennial holidaymakers.

In fact, according to recent analysis by travel agent [cruise.co.uk](http://cruise.co.uk), the average age of cruise-goers has dropped from 66 in 2019 to 55, with the largest increase coming from the under 30s, while Seascanner – [cruise.co.uk](http://cruise.co.uk)'s sister company – found the average age of customers booking a cruise this year is 42. And they're not wasting any time, either, with 32 per cent of 18-34-year-olds we surveyed saying they plan on booking a cruise in the next six months, a higher percentage than any other age group. Meanwhile, 46 per cent of 35-44-year-olds say they've cruised in the last year.

So what's causing this shift in passengers? We speak to three travel agents to find out why cruise is appealing to three of the fastest-growing demographics: Gen Z & millennials, solo travellers and multi-gen families.



## GEN Z & MILLENNIAL TRAVELLERS

**Holly Simmonds**, product manager, [CRUISE2.com](http://CRUISE2.com)

### What is it about a cruise holiday that excites Gen Z and millennial travellers?

Gen Z and millennials are all about discovering somewhere unique. They want to tick as many countries off their travel wish-list as possible and cruise ships can help them do so quickly and efficiently.

### Which cruise lines does this type of traveller tend to favour?

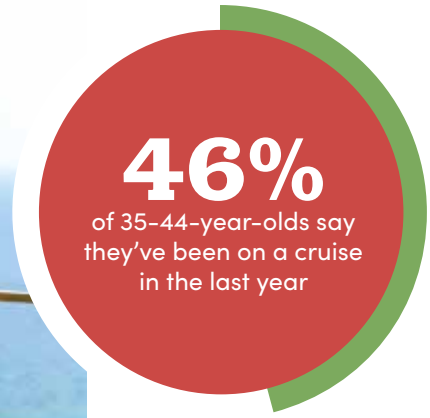
Due to their great marketing, a focus on 18+ passengers and gourmet food, Virgin Voyages is a big hit with younger travellers. Its relaxed, Ibiza-style poolside vibe onboard (plus an Ibiza overnight stop) has been a significant pull for Gen Z and millennial travellers.

### Which destinations and itineraries excite this demographic most?

The Mediterranean will always be a big driver for these customers, particularly the Greek islands and Croatia. We've also noticed Alaska becoming a more popular route with younger generations, particularly as cruising is one of the best ways to visit these hard-to-reach destinations.

### What marketing channels do you use to engage with these travellers?

There's been a big push from lines and agents to reach this demographic through social media marketing. Virgin Voyages has invested heavily in content creators on Instagram, sending them on inclusive



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Gen Z and millennials are desperate for new experiences; solo travellers enjoy the inclusivity of cruising; cruises offer something for every generation



trips to showcase their ships. With Gen Z and millennials typically being more tech-savvy, agents are taking advantage of communicating via WhatsApp channels and encouraging customers to tailor their holiday experience via apps – there’s no longer the need for phone calls or shop walk-ins. Platforms such as TikTok have also seen this demographic turn to short, snappy videos to influence their travel choices.



**SOLO TRAVELLERS**

**Dan Roche**, co-founder, Cruise  
**What is it about a cruise holiday that excites solo travellers?** Speaking from a river cruising perspective, cruises can be very inclusive, making it an attractive option for solo travellers. River cruises are also packed with activities and excursions, so one day you may be hiking through a historic town and the next cycling through a vineyard – most of which take place within a group and with a travel guide.

**Which cruise lines does this type of traveller tend to favour?** Riviera and Uniworld are standout lines for solo travellers. It’s usually down to personal preference, but two itineraries that are popular with this demographic are Uniworld’s Castles Along the Rhine and Riviera’s Rhine Cruise to Switzerland. Uniworld has recently introduced a women-only cruise, and I wouldn’t be surprised if we got more solo bookings for this one, too.

**Which marketing channels do you use to engage with these travellers?** Targeting solo cruisers can be tricky as many search and behave in the same way as someone searching for a cruise for two people or more, but we make an effort to signpost any specific cruises that have no single supplements on our website. We also always try to source the best deals for solo travellers with our cruise line partners.



**MULTI-GENERATIONAL FAMILIES**

**Kirsty Van Wyk**, KVV Luxury Travel (part of The Holiday Village Group)  
**What is it about a cruise holiday that excites multi-generational families?**

A cruise is one of the most perfect types of travel for multi-generational families. While there are plenty of opportunities onboard for family time, you can also go off and do your own thing. Many ships have dedicated adult-only areas as well as fantastic offerings for children. Lines such as Royal Caribbean can even take your children to dinner as part of its kids’ club. Cruises are also a fantastic option for those not wishing to fly, plus boarding time is often quick.

**Which cruise lines does this type of traveller tend to favour?** Disney Cruise Line is a brilliant option, with great adult areas throughout, as well as adult-only restaurants serving fantastic food. Celebrity Cruises is also ideal for this type of traveller, especially for those with teens as there’s so much to do on board.

**What destinations and itineraries excite this demographic most?** Mediterranean itineraries lasting a week to ten days are a popular option, as are those that head towards the Baltic Sea, incorporating the likes of Germany, Amsterdam and Denmark.

**Which marketing channels do you use to engage with these travellers?** For me, friends and family, word of mouth and referrals are a key driver for this demographic, and Facebook forums are also very popular. ●

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## “We must meet young people in the spaces they’re gathering”

THE KEY TO GETTING ZOOMERS AND MILLENNIALS ONBOARD IS TO TAP INTO THEIR PENT-UP WANDERLUST, SAYS **LUKE DAY**, SENIOR MANAGER, GLOBAL TRADE ENGAGEMENT, VIRGIN VOYAGES

**O**verfed, newlywed and nearly dead.” We’ve all heard that classic misconception about the cruise industry. The stereotype that you have to reach a certain age before you can qualify to get onboard has always conjured certain thoughts and feelings toward our sector.

If you look at the latest CLIA report, however, the tide is turning. A massive 31.7 million people cruised in 2023, with 27 per cent of them being first-time cruisers, which is a rise of 12 per cent on 2022. That’s an enormous number of new customers coming into the sector, with Gen Z and millennials making up 36 per cent of that total.

What’s inspiring this demographic shift? After living through a period where our freedoms and ability to travel were taken away from us, younger generations suddenly have this pent-up wanderlust and an eagerness to book that holiday they’ve always wanted to try. They’re ready to leap in with both feet.

It’s easy to see why cruise appeals to this generation. It gives them the ability to have multiple city breaks in a single trip, except their boutique hotel comes with them. It’s one of the reasons why the average age of Virgin Voyages guests is 10 years younger than other



A third of new cruise-goers in 2023 were Gen Z and millennials

cruise lines. We’ve taken the experiences people love on land and given them the ability to enjoy them at sea, whether it’s our award-winning dining, cabins that are installed with the latest smart technology or next-gen fitness and wellness venues.

There’s also a hunt for affordability right now and lines like Virgin Voyages are finding innovative ways to offer value that goes beyond the price point. For example, one of the barriers people might have toward cruising is the potential for hidden fees. We overcome that by being up front in terms of what you get in every Virgin Voyages fare, from eating and drinking in our restaurants and onboard Wi-Fi to entertainment and gym classes.

Appealing to younger travellers is also about meeting them in the places they’re gathering. For Gen Z and millennials, that’s on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where their spending habits are being influenced the most and where standard marketing messages no longer cut it. They want to see others having a great time to get an authentic understanding of their experience.

The nature of our ships means they encourage people

to post about their time onboard. The innate driver behind posting is being proud of where you’re going and wanting people to feel jealous of the incredible time you’re having, and spectacular guest areas like The Manor or our epic Scarlet Night pool party naturally encourage that behaviour. They look great, and therefore people want to share them with the world.

The cruise industry is definitely riding a wave of popularity right now as people understand that cruising is no longer exclusively for older demographics. It’s a holiday for anyone that loves award-winning food, epic entertainment and multiple city breaks where you only need to unpack once. [virginvoyages.com](https://virginvoyages.com)



# LOUD & CLEAR

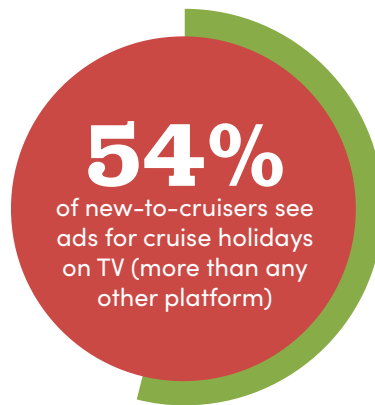
Where do consumers turn for cruise inspiration and which platforms have the biggest impact? We put it to our survey

## RESEARCH

### What sources do you tend to use when researching cruise holidays?

The most striking finding when we asked people how they research their cruise is how little ground modern forms of media are making on the more established platforms. Instagram, Meta (formerly Facebook) and TikTok remain relatively unfavoured despite their growing dominance in today's media landscape. There are signs that younger generations are turning more to this form of highly visual and immersive content, but even the very youngest respondents rank online agents and review sites higher. Clearly for all age groups, reviews are hugely important for those trying to find cruise information.

The fact that friends and family and in-person travel agents make our top five for cruisers and non-cruisers points to something interesting for the trade. Trust is undoubtedly a key factor in the research phase, so potential clients either turn to people they know well



or people they believe know what they are talking about. What is often missed in analysis of this sort is that every in-person agent is also a friend or family member, so this puts professional retailers with first-hand cruise experience in a hugely strong position.

## INSPIRATION

### What sources offer the greatest inspiration when thinking about cruise holidays?

The enduring popularity of review sites was reflected in the results of our survey, but what interested us most was how inspiration is sought differently once people become a cruise-goer.

Specialist websites like *Cruise Trade News*' sister title *World of Cruising* jump up the rankings for those respondents who have cruised before compared to those who have not. Specialist sites are the most popular source of inspiration (41 per cent) ahead of online agents, review sites and friends and family.

For non-cruisers, review sites came in fourth spot. These respondents were also less likely to cite cruise magazines and in-person travel agents as their go-to source of inspiration. Women were slightly more likely to prefer online travel agents than men who were most likely to take their inspiration from newspapers and review sites.

Respondents in our two youngest age brackets (18-34 and 35-44) are much more likely to use social media (TikTok, Instagram and Meta). Maybe

“**TV and newspapers dominate when it comes to where cruise adverts are seen**”

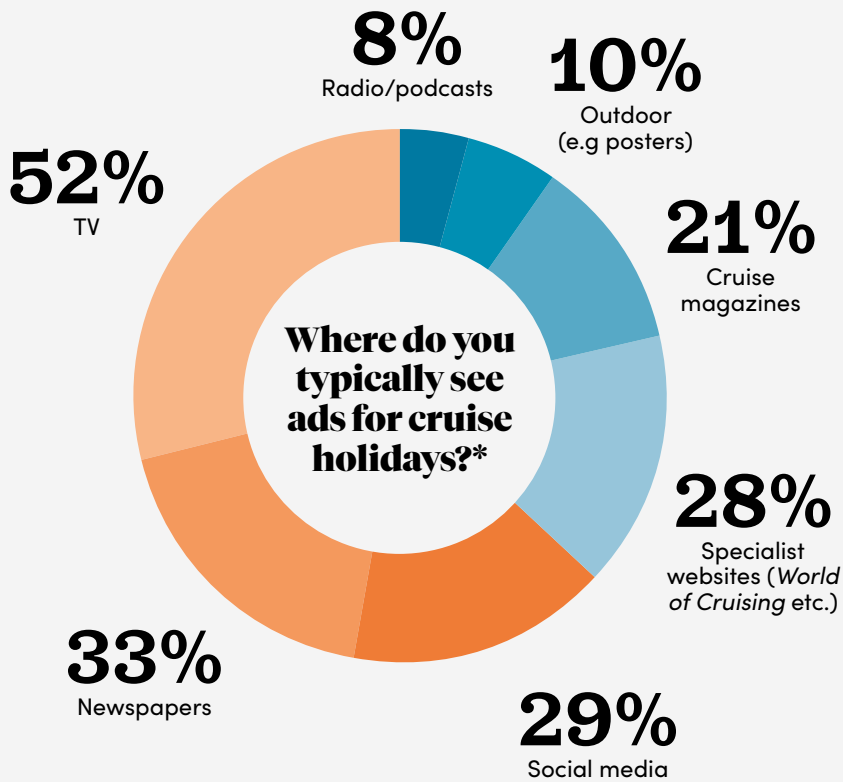
our survey results? Disappointingly, in-person travel agents, despite having access to potential clients, are not making much of an impact when it comes to new-to-cruise customers.

Agents were ranked lower than Meta and behind specialist websites, friends and family, online travel agents, review sites and newspapers, as the most likely place to read or hear about cruising. Meanwhile, newspapers performed strongly once again with our survey, ranking above online agents, review sites, Meta and specialist magazines.

This question did see social media, in general, rank more highly, with Instagram coming top for 18-34-year-olds and Meta joint top with specialist websites for 35-44-year-olds. This is pointing to a generational shift as this cohort moves up through the age brackets and into those more likely to consider cruise. Newspapers remain the place for 65+ to get their cruise information from, while for 55-64-year-olds it is online travel agents. ●

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** Channels like World of Cruising TV have a lot of reach with potential customers; younger generations turn to social media for inspiration when choosing a holiday

\*Percentages relate to the total number of answers chosen, not number of participants



“**Specialist websites are the most popular source of inspiration for cruise holidays**”

unsurprisingly given the nature of the platform, Instagram is particularly popular among this age range, ahead online and in-person travel agents.

The key cruise demographic of 55-64-year-olds get their inspiration mainly from online travel agents, friends and family, specialist websites and review sites.

**PROMOTION**

**Where do you typically see advertisements for cruise holidays?**

Without question the big finding for this section was that television dominates when it comes to recalling where advertisements for cruise were seen. The old ‘gogglebox’ came out top for all age categories and for men and women, except for 35-44-year-olds, 54 per cent of whom say social media is where they typically see cruise adverts.

Clearly the proliferation of prime-time TV campaigns from mainstream

operators like P&O Cruises, Princess Cruises, and MSC Cruises are having an impact. But we are also seeing more niche lines like Riviera Travel target TV viewers, as well as travel agents like Imagine Cruising, which has produced a highly acclaimed advert for the 2025 wave period.

As well as this, there are a number of cruise-selling channels like Cruise TV, Vision Cruise TV and Cruise 1st promoting deals on digital television channels. And, of course, *World of Cruising* launched its own inspirational shop last year.

Outside of television, the enduring impact of newspaper advertising continues to make waves with cruise-goers. A third of our survey say print is where they typically see cruise advertising, jumping to 44 per cent for 65+. What’s more, with recent data from Thinkbox showing that print outranks TV when it comes to ROI on ad spend by £1.30, the impact of travel advertising in newspapers is clear.

**AWARENESS**

**Where do you typically read or hear about cruises/cruise holidays?**

So who is doing the best job in spreading the word about cruising, according to

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## “You can’t sell anything if you’re only speaking to the *right* brain”

ADAM OLDFIELD, CEO & FOUNDER, FORCE24, SAYS CRUISE COMPANIES WHO KNOW WHEN TO APPEAL TO TRAVELLERS’ EMOTIVE AND ANALYTICAL MINDS SEE THE MOST ENGAGEMENT

Let’s say for a minute that you walk into a restaurant and I ask if you’d like a table. You say ‘yes’, and I proceed to lead you to your seat. We can all agree that that’s the right question at the right time. Once you’re at your table, I then ask if you’d like a drink or if you’d like to see the menu, but if I asked you again if you’d like a table I’d look like an idiot.

It’s funny how the question that had a 100 per cent chance of success two seconds ago now has a 0 per cent chance. The marketing journey is similar in that we start in one position and we move customers through the various different stages, which dictates the questions we should be asking them.

This idea is closely tied to the concept of left-brain and right-brain marketing. Your left brain is logical, analytical and linear, while your right brain is creative and emotional, and it operates at an alarming speed. There are some questions you can ask that the right brain will be able to answer without even thinking, while other questions will require a bit more horsepower. “Would you like a table?” for example, versus, “Would you prefer the steak or the salmon?”

The right brain sits at the very top of the marketing funnel, whereas the left brain is in the mid-to-lower segment. If you’re trying to sell a cruise, a simple question like “Are you a river or an ocean kind of guy?” is an effective trigger for the



A well-timed marketing message can make all the difference

right brain. After that, I can start to move further down the funnel and talk about things that are a little bit more practical. Say, for example, “What would you do with £300 of onboard credit?”

However, you can’t sell anything if you’re always speaking to the right brain so, as the user engages with your content and starts to learn more about your cruise product, you need to slowly switch your attention to the logical and analytical left brain.

The challenge for marketers is when you’re operating in a very linear fashion – like during wave season – and you’ve got a load of offers to batch and blast to a wide audience. If you’re only putting one message in front of your audience then you’re only engaging with those people who are looking

for a deal. Anyone who isn’t thinking about booking right now has been lost because they’re not interested. However, through segmentation and automation, you could get them to go on a mental journey by helping them imagine themselves on a Mediterranean cruise in the summer and appealing to the more emotive right brain.

This is where Force24 comes in. Our intuitive journey builder combined with our data segmentation ensure clients’ email marketing hits the right notes at the right time. With the average consumer receiving 120 emails and scrolling approximately 300 metres of touchscreen every single day, cutting through the noise with a well-timed message could make all the difference. ● [force24.co.uk](https://force24.co.uk)



# AUTOMATED EVOLUTION

As Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage soars, how can travel agents harness it to grow sales and improve customer success?

**A**rtificial intelligence won't replace you, but a person using it will, or so the modern aphorism claims. Despite the fear of AI taking people's jobs and becoming more clever, more efficient and ultimately more valuable than its human creators, the technology surrounding it is growing at a phenomenal pace.

Some of the more excitable predictions about AI's potential may

turn out to be somewhat overblown, but there's no doubt it is already having a significant impact. When asked by *Cruise Trade News* if their businesses have made steps to implement evolving technologies like AI, 35 per cent of agents say they are using it in their day-to-day work already, while 24 per cent said they aren't yet but are monitoring it closely. As if to prove our point, AI has found its way into this report (turn to page 40 to see how).

Clearly, travel, cruise and the world of agents and tour operators are already getting to grips with its transformative power. The question is how to harness it.

One company that believes it knows how is SystemsX, which started developing AI technology for Cardiff-based luxury cruise agent Art Of Travel. The firm is now offering Agent Assist through travel tech supplier Inspiretec and has a handful of live customers with others going through the process of adopting it.



Gareth Arnold, head of operations at SystemsX, says: “We’re not here to put AI directly in front of customers. It’s ultimately about assisting the travel agent to do a better job.”

While the rise of ChatGPT has caught many of the AI headlines, it is an open Large Language Model (LLM) platform – or in other words, a customisable AI model that can be used by anyone without paying licensing fees. As such, firms are advised not to use it due to the risk of sensitive customer data being placed in the public domain.

**AI FOR AGENT SUCCESS**

SystemsX uses a private LLM to draw in live accurate data from key sources like the Foreign Office, content providers, suppliers and email inboxes. This provides an agent with a ‘co-pilot’ that generates relevant recommendations based on inputted information in real time, while automatically generating follow-up tasks, reminders and emails.

Illustration by Phil Couzens

And because AI can be trained to write customer communications in the preferred style, time consuming tasks can be automated without becoming impersonal. The system can also be used to create marketing content and record calls, generating an assessment which can be used to appraise the agent and train colleagues.

This scrutiny can unsettle staff, but Arnold says clients are emphasising the positives of having an objective machine monitoring their performance rather than a human with biases.

“We’ve seen this with customers who have taken to the platform where they have carefully positioned this with their agents,” he said.

AI does potentially level the playing field, but the firms that use it for competitive advantage will be those that understand how best to use it to augment and expand their current capabilities.

“What you see today is amazing, but as AI evolves, the more amazing it will become. We’re only scratching the surface,” adds Liam Denston, head of development at SystemsX. ●

“**AI can be trained to write customer communications in the preferred style**

**AI in action**

Five ways your day-to-day can benefit, according to Jeremy Smith, founder of speech-assistant platform Neural Voice

**1 Automate routine reminders**

“Use intuitive reminders to keep on top of vital tasks and customer follow-ups.”

**2 Answer FAQs instantly**

“Save time answering common questions by training AI to address customer queries around the clock.”

**3 Simplify scheduling**

“Streamline appointments using automated scheduling assistance.”

**4 Enhance team communication**

“As projects evolve, keep your teams aligned and informed on-the-go.”

**5 Get instant insights from data**

“Quickly analyse complex trends to make well-informed decisions in an instant.”



**How is AI transforming the cruise industry?**

AI has the potential to revolutionise how travel professionals market and sell cruise holidays. Here are six ways it can help

**Personalised customer recommendations**

AI algorithms analyse customer preferences, travel history, and online behaviour to deliver tailored offers.

**Enhanced lead generation**

AI-powered tools identify high-quality leads by analysing data patterns, enabling professionals to focus on the most promising prospects.

**Optimised pricing strategies**

Dynamic models analyse market trends, competitor prices, and customer demand to adjust pricing in real-time.

**Chatbots and virtual assistants**

24/7 customer service handles queries, booking assistance, and itinerary changes efficiently, freeing up agents for more complex tasks.

**Predictive analytics**

Companies can forecast travel trends, customer preferences, and seasonal demand, enabling better planning and targeted marketing campaigns.

**Social media and content optimisation**

They can also analyse engagement metrics to refine social media strategies and identify effective marketing content.



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#3

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#4

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Our customer service scores are consistently among the highest in the industry (Google, Trustpilot, Tripadvisor).

#5

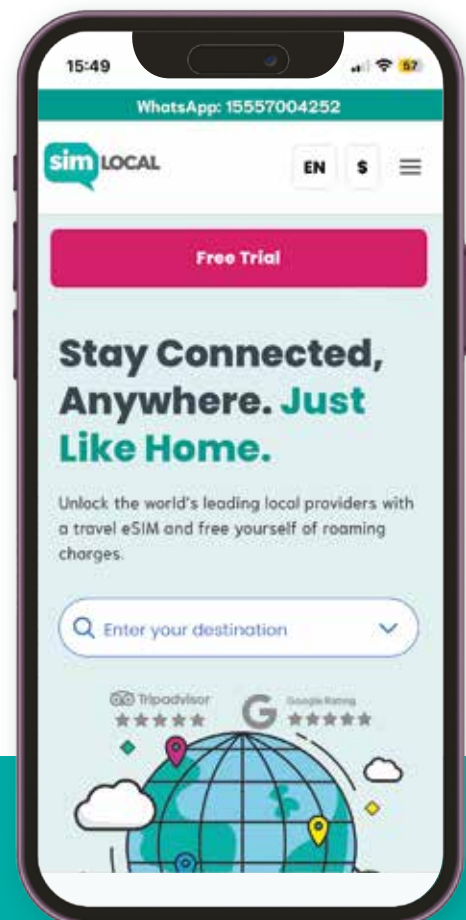
## Bespoke UNITE Technology

We deliver top-tier front and back-end service to our travel partners and customers through our proprietary UNITE platform.

#6

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## “Connectivity is now an absolute essential”

THE EMERGENCE OF ESIM TECHNOLOGY MEANS GETTING ONLINE WHILE ABROAD IS EASIER THAN EVER. **ANDREW MCCLELLAN**, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, SIM LOCAL, BELIEVES THIS PRESENTS A LUCRATIVE OPPORTUNITY FOR CRUISE LINES

**T**here was a time when travel SIMs were little more than a nice holiday life hack, where rather than paying a large amount of money to roam on your home network, they were an affordable way to get online while on the go. Today, however, connectivity is fundamental to the modern holiday experience.

When Sim Local first launched in 2011, most people relied on Wi-Fi or remained on flight mode for the duration of their holiday (unthinkable for today’s travellers). Our own research shows that 75 per cent of travellers see connectivity as absolutely essential, with local SIM cards being their primary method of getting online.

And it’s not just about accessing essential documents or emergency services when needed. It’s about connecting to maps, making bookings on the go, staying in touch with loved ones and – perhaps most importantly – sharing experiences on social media. As a result, Sim Local has evolved from being a convenient holiday extra to providing an essential service at an affordable price.

This has coincided with the emergence of eSIM technology, which



McClellan expects eSIMs to outsell regular SIMs in 2025

first took off when Apple put eSIM capability into the iPhone around six years ago. Since the pandemic, we’ve seen a massive uplift in usage among travellers, to the point where, for the first time, we’re expecting to sell more eSIMs than physical SIM cards this year.

There are lots of companies operating in the market, but quality can be hit and miss. What we do differently is we sell plans in more than 100 countries from the biggest operators in the region. If you’re in France, for example, we’ll get you onto an Orange plan or an EE plan

if you’re visiting the UK. We also offer products that work across multiple countries.

This presents a great opportunity for lines who want to enhance their guests’ experience. Having seamless access to social media while ashore so guests can post about their holidays (which in turn increases the amount of user-generated content that lines can use for marketing purposes) are obvious benefits, but there’s potential to open up new revenue streams, too. For example, we can link eSIM technology to the Wi-Fi on board to keep guests connected at all times or allow guests to buy an eSIM through the line’s app, a purchasing opportunity that’s currently bypassing most cruise lines.

Granted, cruise-goers’ awareness around this technology is slightly behind other sectors. However, much like the eSIM market, the cruise industry is at a tipping point with a demographic shift now underway, so I expect this to change. With improvements from Apple and Google in recent years, purchasing and installing an eSIM is now as simple as buying travel insurance or adding an extra bag to your flight. ● [simlocal.com](http://simlocal.com)



# PIT-STOP PORTS

Travellers are demanding more from their cruise itineraries, putting pressure on lines to make the most out of whistle-stop shore visits

**F**or all the talk of brand-new ships and their record-breaking waterslides, Broadway-style productions and sprawling spa facilities, one thing is for certain: destinations are still king for cruise-goers. While it's true that guests enjoy sailing to ports of call in the comfort afforded to them by a modern ship, using cruise holidays as a way to discover a variety of different cultures is one of the key factors driving interest in the sector.

More than two-thirds of our survey (69 per cent) say visiting multiple destinations in a single trip is the aspect of a cruise holiday they value most, while 34 per cent enjoy being able to visit remote or less accessible destinations. Furthermore, 58 per cent of respondents tell us they would rather leave the ship and explore new destinations, as

“**The challenge is satisfying experience-hungry travellers with a limited time in port**

opposed to the 19 per cent who say they would rather spend their holiday relaxing onboard.

This, of course, is no surprise to the journey planners in charge of crafting cruise itineraries. However, the challenge for them is satisfying experience-hungry travellers who only have a limited amount of time in port.

Geoff Ridgeon, head of sales, Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines, says that as well as limiting the number of people in their tour groups, travelling to certain destinations at specific times of the year also ensures guests get more bang

for their buck. “Our guests are really keen on cultural immersion, which is something we gleaned from our customer surveys,” he says.

“They want to go to the very best places at the very best times. For example, we’ll visit the Kiel Canal during September to see the Tall Ships Race which, when tied in with other activities, helps guests feel more immersed in the destination than if they were doing an ordinary sightseeing tour.”

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Travellers with large appetites for enriching holiday moments are increasingly turning to cuisine to give them a true taste of the local culture. According to a 2023 study from Eurostar, six out of ten holidaymakers go abroad just for the food, with 36 per cent of respondents feeling that eating in local, independent restaurants provides



the most “authentic” experience of a region’s cuisine.

The same goes for Fred. Olsen’s guests. Not only does the line prioritise culinary experiences on land, but it also ensures there’s a healthy supply of local rum on its island-hopping Caribbean itineraries or bottles of Aquavit when voyaging down the Norwegian fjords.

“We try to replicate this in our shore tours too,” says Ridgeon. “For example, in Lisbon, guests can join a local chef to learn how to make *pastel de nata*, while our own chefs hold cooking demonstrations around local dishes so guests can learn to make them when they return home. And we always have ‘destination dining’ in the main restaurants to bring a flavour of the region on board.”

### ICE-COLD IMMERSION

Destination enrichment becomes even more important when sailing to remote parts of the world. Expedition

## “Guests want to learn about exotic, far-out destinations in a visceral, hands-on way

cruise lines like HX, who specialise in transporting guests to places like the polar regions, Alaska and the Galápagos Islands, are aware that guests want to learn about these exotic, far-out destinations in a visceral, hands-on way – much like the explorers who came before them all those centuries ago.

Alex McNeil, chief expedition officer at HX, explains: “Curiosity remains at the heart of why people explore; human nature hasn’t changed. What has evolved though is how we deliver for these curious guests.

“At HX, we’ve leaned into this shift by offering more formalised educational programmes. These initiatives ensure

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** Guests want authentic experiences that bring them closer to a destination’s culture; a trip to the Kiel Canal can be tied in with the Tall Ships Race; HX encourages its passengers to take part in Citizen Science activities

that even as travel has become more accessible, guests leave with a deeper understanding of the history, culture and environment of the destinations we visit.”

This shift to more enriching destination experiences has led to the emergence of Citizen Science projects, where environmentally minded superheroes can swap their capes for anoraks to help experts conduct important research in the field.

For example, on HX’s Highlights of Antarctica cruise, guests can assist researchers by counting penguins to help researchers keep track of colony numbers. Overall, HX supports more than 20 research projects, including eight Citizen Science programmes, with the line estimating that passengers contributed more than 16,000 items of data in 2024 alone.

“There’s been a big increase in community-led and science-based projects that guests can take part in,” McNeil adds. “Programmes like Citizen Science are especially popular now, as travellers want to give back to the places they visit. As a result, our excursions are designed to be mindful and responsible, ensuring they benefit the local communities and environments.”



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## “Guests want a feeling of belonging when they travel”

AS TRAVELLERS GROW HUNGRIER FOR IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES, FRED. OLSEN CRUISE LINES' HEAD OF SALES **GEOFF RIDGEON** REVEALS SOME OF THE WAYS OPERATORS CAN OFFER MORE ENRICHING HOLIDAY MOMENTS

**G**uests today are looking for more than just sightseeing. They want to connect with local people, get a deeper understanding of their culture and develop a feeling of belonging and appreciation for the places they're visiting. More than that, though, they want to learn directly from those who are actually living it.

There are several things we've done to create more immersive experiences, one of which is offering some small group tours of no more than 15-20 people. After all, how can you truly immerse yourself in a destination when you're hosting 200 people on a single tour?

Take one of our Oslo excursions, for example, where guests can head to Hvitsten, a small village on the Oslofjord and the home of the Olsen family and our founding members. There, guests can visit the Fred. Olsen museum and see the church that Fred Olsen's great, great grandmother, Bolette Olsen, gifted to the village in 1908. We also offer tours to farms to allow guests to meet the locals whose families have lived there for generations so they can invite them into their community for an afternoon. And for guests eager to lace up their boots and step off the beaten track, they can



Guests enjoy more adventurous modes of transport

embark on a hike to Norway's Briksdal Glacier with a local geology professor.

We also like to provide alternative ways of getting around the destination to give guests another insight into the region. As well as offering coach tours to key attractions, we utilise transport like 4x4s and tuk tuks and we even offer RIB boat rides when the location allows. It offers something a bit more exhilarating than sticking to the usual tourist routes, while also allowing our guests to delve even deeper into the destination.

Immersion is also about ensuring the onboard experience is linked to the regions we sail to, which is achieved through our Signature Experiences programme. As well as placing speakers onboard, such as environmentalists and geologists who are experts in their field, we also invite locals who can speak to the guests about what living in that destination is really like.

On our Mediterranean sailings, guests visiting Cartagena, Spain can enjoy a private wine tasting onboard that's led by the ship's sommelier who ventures ashore to source varieties that are unique to the region. We also host seafood nights where our executive chef creates dishes using produce caught that very day to give guests an authentic taste of the local culture.

Before offering all this, however, our approach starts by understanding what guests want from their cruise so we can help them achieve it in a way that feels personalised. We want to ensure our guests make those personal connections that conjure emotional and meaningful memories. That's what we mean when we talk about destination immersion. **o**  
[fredolsencruises.com](http://fredolsencruises.com)



# SNOWBALL EFFECT

The cruise industry is entering a crucial period on its quest toward a greener future. We highlight five lines who are leading the way when it comes to offering eco-friendly solutions

**W**henever the travel industry's environmental impact comes into focus, the cruise sector often finds itself in the firing line. But Mel Connell, head of marketing for sustainability organisation Cleaner Seas Group (CSG), believes the industry is entering a "pivotal moment", with cruise "waking up to the important role it can play in minimising the causes of pollution, as well as meeting consumer demand for greener holiday options," she says.

Whether consumers think cruise lines are currently doing enough is another story, however. Only 39 per cent of the travellers we surveyed agree cruise is the 'greenest' way to holiday, while over half of 18-44-year-olds think lines aren't doing enough to limit their environmental impact. Meanwhile, more than two-thirds of travellers agree that cruise companies should better highlight what they are doing to

“**The reality is that cruise lines are making strides toward cleaner initiatives**”

tackle sustainability. The reality is that cruise lines are making strides toward cleaner initiatives, evidenced by these five operators whose forward-thinking solutions could provide a roadmap to a greener future.

**1 HOLLAND AMERICA LINE**  
Holland America Line (HAL) has embarked on a long-term biofuel test on its flagship *Rotterdam* ship, leveraging 100 per cent low carbon intensity biofuel while sailing within the Norwegian Fjords. What does that mean precisely? The ship will operate one of its four engines using low carbon intensity oil derived from organic waste produced from fats, oils and grease leftover from feedstock

processing, which is hoped to yield an estimated 86 per cent reduction in life-cycle greenhouse gas emissions.

“We are excited to demonstrate a next-generation fuel source that can help us toward our pursuit of net zero emissions,” says Gus Antorcha, president, HAL.

**2 MARELLA CRUISES**  
In 2024 Marella Cruises began trialling a new microplastic filter on board *Marella Explorer*. In partnership with Cleaner Seas Group, the line installed two Indikon filters onto the ship's crew laundry system to help prevent marine life from being harmed by microfibres produced from plastics.

The line is also working with the University of Surrey to monitor and measure the microplastics captured on board the ship, which CSG will use to adapt its technology.

“By working with Cleaner Seas Group during this six-month trial as an industry first initiative, we believe that it will support future studies on protecting our



**52%**  
of 18-34-year-olds think cruise companies aren't doing enough to limit their environmental impact

oceans,” says Olivia Wells, sustainability manager, Marella Cruises.

**3 HURTIGRUTEN**  
The cruise line has invested in a specially designed reactor which can convert edible food waste into compost that can then be used to grow vegetables for the ship’s restaurants.

The initiative starts with sorting food waste from Hurtigruten’s Coastal Express ships, which sail year-round along the coast of Norway. The waste is then transported to Stamsund Harbor, where it undergoes transformation through a compost reactor, which converts edible food waste into compost within 24 hours. The compost is then transported to Myklevik Gard to enhance soil quality and grow food that will eventually end up on the menu of Hurtigruten’s ships.

Last year the line became the first travel brand to receive the Made in Norway trademark – an initiative by the Norwegian government and Innovation Norway that celebrates the most sustainable companies.

“  
**Using microwave-assisted pyrolysis, rubbish on board is turned into energy**

**4 ROYAL CARIBBEAN**  
Heads turned last year when Royal Caribbean launched the world’s largest cruise ship, *Icon of the Seas*, out of the Port of Miami – and not all for the right reasons. The vessel came under scrutiny for the impact it could have on the environment, with the mainstream media running headlines such as “Can the world’s biggest cruise ship really be sustainable?” and “Are ‘green’ cruise ships good for the climate?”.

However, with its six dual-fuel engines that can run off liquefied natural gas (which is believed to produce 40 per cent less carbon dioxide than coal), shore power connectivity and waste heat capture systems, which harness and repurpose excess engine

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** Cruise lines must help tackle climate change; Hurtigruten is converting food waste into compost; that then enhances soil to grow more food; *Marella Explorer* has installed laundry filters to capture microfibrils

heat, the behemoth vessel is greener than it may seem. It also uses AI to optimise its routes to boost efficiency, as well as air lubrication systems that coat the hull with microbubbles to help reduce friction. And by using microwave-assisted pyrolysis, rubbish produced on board is turned into energy.

**5 AMAWATERWAYS**  
Despite operating on a much smaller scale to its ocean-bound counterparts, river cruise line AmaWaterways takes its responsibility to sustainability just as seriously, operating an innovative 10-engine configuration designed to reduce fuel consumption.

As well as this, its Africa-based ship *Zambezi Queen* uses a water jet propulsion system which protects the Chobe riverbed. It has also installed water-saving taps and showers, biodegradable detergents and soaps and a five-stage water purification plant.

*AmaMagna*, meanwhile, offers solar panels on all stateroom balconies, as well as energy-saving LED lights, insulated windows and power locks to plug into a port’s power supply. For personal audio devices used during shore excursions, the line partnered with Quietvox, which makes its audio boxes from biodegradable rice paper bags that run on rechargeable batteries. ●





# SHIP SHAPE

Travellers' growing desire for wellness and rejuvenation has inspired lines to reimagine the onboard experience

**T**here was plenty for cruise enthusiasts to get excited about in 2024, with a conveyor belt of new souped-up ships hitting the waves at an impressive rate. Royal Caribbean grabbed the headlines with the launch of two behemoth vessels: the 7,600-passenger *Icon of the Seas* and 5,688-passenger *Utopia of the Seas*, which entered service in January and July 2024, respectively. Last year also saw historic British line Cunard unveil its first new ship in 14 years, with a sold-out *Queen Anne* sailing on its maiden voyage in the summer.

Meanwhile, the 728-guest *Silver Ray*, Silversea's second Nova class ship, made its debut in June 2024, while luxury river cruise line Uniworld turned heads in spring with *SS Victoria*, offering the largest suites on Europe's rivers. Lines aren't showing signs of slowing down, either, with nearly two dozen new ocean and river ships slated for 2025.

While these vessels operate at opposite ends of the size scale, they all share one thing in common: each

one has been designed to put health and personalisation at the heart of the guest experience. "Guest priorities have undeniably shifted and there's now a stronger emphasis on personal wellbeing and meaningful travel," says Jeremy Clubb, founder of Rainforest Cruises & Antarctica Cruises.

## WELLNESS AT SEA

Fuelling the need for onboard rejuvenation is the fact that travellers increasingly view holidays as an opportunity to recharge.

Last year the value of the global wellness tourism sector surpassed £645bn, with data gathered by trend forecaster Virtuoso revealing that 94 per cent of travellers incorporate some form of selfcare into their holiday routine. It's a trend that hasn't gone unnoticed by the cruise industry.

Clubb observes: "Travellers now crave space, both physically and mentally, which is why wellness offerings like onboard spa services, yoga sessions and mindfulness workshops are more in demand than ever."

Take Seabourn, for example, which has partnered with celebrity doctor Andrew Weil to develop a guest wellness programme in which mindful living coaches, yoga instructors and meditation practitioners conduct seminars and classes throughout the voyage. Then there's Explora Journeys, which as well as boasting more than 1,000sqm of spa facilities on *Explora I*, offers guides to in-suite meditation and sleep-boosting soundtracks. Guests can also find pillow menus in their rooms and partake in immune boosting and sleep retreat programmes.



94%

of travellers incorporate some form of selfcare into their holiday\*



Gary Snyder, associate principal of Florida-based design firm Arcadis, which has worked with Royal Caribbean Group for more than 15 years, says the emphasis on wellness stretches beyond the need for spin and yoga classes. “You’re also getting a more diverse choice of dining,” he says. “Ships used to be all about the all-you-can-eat buffet, but now guests can readily get a fruit smoothie or a vegan sandwich. It’s about trying to create an overall feeling of wellbeing to offer a more relaxing journey.”

## WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Designing a ship that hits the right notes with an increasingly diverse travel set is the next big challenge for cruise lines, which is why many of the larger operators are segregating theirs into distinct neighbourhoods.

Spearheading this ‘ship within a ship’ concept is Royal Caribbean, with *Icon of the Seas* comprising eight themed neighbourhoods, from child-friendly Surfside to The Hideaway, a luxury hangout exclusive to adult guests. Snyder believes that allowing guests to discover unique spaces throughout the ship keeps them engaged and enhances brand loyalty. “Ships used to be homogeneous all the way through,” he says. “Now that the demographic is getting younger and we’re seeing more

## “Ships used to be homogenous. Now, they appeal to different people

multi-generational families onboard, lines are designing unique areas that appeal to different people.

“You’re going to get bored of going to the same two or three places on a week-long cruise, but if you’ve got seven or eight different distinct locations on the ship, that makes for a more memorable journey. These exclusive neighbourhoods have been very successful and I don’t see them disappearing anytime soon.”

Royal Caribbean isn’t the only one adopting this approach, with Norwegian Cruise Line’s *Norwegian Aqua* and MSC Cruises’ *MSC World America* – both of which are preparing to launch this year – also featuring their own neighbourhoods.

“Since the demographic of our guests is so diverse, we feel everyone should find a home across the ship,” says Antonio Paradiso, vice president international sales, MSC Group. “*MSC World America* will be divided into seven distinct districts, each with their own atmosphere, facilities and experiences. We hope that this new concept will allow guests of all ages to create a holiday that feels uniquely theirs.”

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** Virgin Voyages has hit the fitness class trend hard; relaxation is a priority on *Seven Seas Grandeur*; Viking’s spa is inspired by Scandi design; while *Explora I*’s spa takes its design cues from luxury hotels; zones for children are a key offering on *Wonder of the Seas*

## BOUTIQUE BOLTHOLES

Cruise lines often like to describe their ships as floating hotels, but never has this been truer than today. That’s because designers are increasingly taking their cues from the luxury hotel market, moving away from the old image of stuffy ships with kitschy interiors and toward more refined, design-led features and aesthetics.

“Guests want to feel like they are sailing on their own private yacht while benefitting from the luxury of choice and space that a ship affords,” explains Antonio Di Nenzo, director, architecture and design at Explora Journeys.

Explora Journeys tapped into this trend by partnering with esteemed yacht designers Martin Francis who, according to Di Nenzo, took inspiration from the boutique hotel market to reimagine the outline and onboard features of both *Explora I* and *Explora II*. “By incorporating subtle use of light, colour and privacy, the ships’ design demonstrates a steer towards European rather than American sophisticated luxury, prioritising functionality, comfort and aesthetic appeal.”

\*According to data gathered by trend forecaster Virtuoso



### STAR ATTRACTION

“Onboard entertainment will be kicked up a notch with the help of next-gen projection mapping, where actors can interact in real-time with holograms and animations, bringing audiences’ favourite fantasy characters to life.”

Jack Carter, editor, *Cruise Trade News*



# CRUISING TO TOMORROW

Curious as to what cruise ships will look like in 50 years’ time? Us too, which is why we made some predictions and asked AI to bring them to life



### INTUITIVE FITNESS

“In 50 years’ time we’ll see cruise lines transform their onboard fitness offerings, with AI-powered personal trainers offering tailored workouts. After a quick full body scan, machines will be able to automatically programme times, weights and distances.”

Will Payne, deputy editor, *Cruise Trade News*





**CABIN COMFORTS**

“AI robots will find their way into guests’ cabins, with futuristic tech able to intuitively order room service, fold away clothes and ensure there’s a hot bath waiting after a long, fulfilling shore day.”

**Lee Hayhurst, editorial director, Real Response Media**



**5 NOT-TO-MISS SHIPS FOR 2025**

**1 Norwegian Aqua**  
**Launching: March**

How does whizzing down the world’s first rollercoaster-come-waterslide at sea sound? Soon, you’ll be able to, thanks to the futuristic Aqua Slidecoaster on Norwegian Cruise Line’s newest vessel, the 3,571-guest *Norwegian Aqua*. Thrill seekers can also let gravity take the reins by plunging down a 10-storey spiral slide called The Drop.



**2 Riviera Radiance**  
**Launching: March**

Riviera Travel’s 178-guest *Riviera Radiance* (above) will launch in March and will feature a host of never-before-seen features for the line, including its largest-ever suites. *Radiance* will have three decks as well as a trio of dining options, while its premium accommodation, The Grand Suites, will be the operator’s largest at 32sqm.

**3 MSC World America**  
**Launching: April**

MSC Cruises’ sister ship to *MSC World Europa* will feature seven ‘districts’ with 13 dining venues and 21 bars, seven pools, 13 hot tubs and an MSC SportsPlex with bumper cars and roller skating.

**4 Brilliant Lady**  
**Launching: September**

Industry disruptor Virgin Voyages will launch its fourth and final Lady ship from New York in autumn. *Brilliant Lady* will feature more than 20 restaurants and cafés and a collection of wellness spaces ranging from a yoga perch to a mermaid-inspired spa.



**5 Kochi Pandaw**  
**Launching: October**

The 10-cabin vessel (above) will be the line’s fourth ship in India and feature wrap-around promenade decks. It will operate a seven-night return itinerary from Kochi, India visiting Thanneermukkom, Nattakam, Kavalam, Allapuzha, Thottapalli and Perumpalam.



## “Guests want ships that go beyond the ordinary”

THE KEY TO AN UNFORGETTABLE ONBOARD EXPERIENCE IS PERSONALISATION, SAYS **GARY ANSLOW**, VICE PRESIDENT UK & IRELAND, NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE

**G**uests today are not only eager to travel but are seeking experiences that go beyond the ordinary. Our new Prima class, designed by our partners at Fincantieri shipyard in Italy, has been created to address these evolving needs, resulting in more open spaces, elevated design and attentive service.

Take Mandara Spa & Salon and Pulse Fitness Centre on *Norwegian Prima*, for example.

Working with architecture firm, Rockwell Group, we were the first to introduce the charcoal sauna at sea, where we've curated an extensive wellness thermal journey, which takes guests through a plethora of saunas, vitality pools, experiential showers and an ice room.

The demand for spa sailings and wellness holidays is undoubtedly on the rise. However, while our ships offer powerful, high-tech treatments, a luxurious spa and a state-of-the-art gym, we think that exploring new destinations, discovering new wines and cuisine and having time to spend with oneself and with loved ones are also part of the wellness journey.

With that in mind, if there's one word I'd choose to define NCL's approach to wellness, it would be balanced. That's



Norwegian Cruise Line says demand for wellness travel is growing

why we offer our guests a plethora of choice so they can create a cruise holiday that feels personal to them. Indeed, step onboard and you'll find something for young families, multi-generational families, couples, solo travellers or luxury-minded guests who travel in The Haven by Norwegian, our premium 'ship within a ship' complex.

However, it's important that today's ships also provide spaces for guests to come together, which is why the Penrose Atrium is my favourite part of our Prima class vessels. The area is a hub of restaurants, bars and boutiques and is buzzing with life from dusk till dawn. It's a statement-making space that includes a contemporary take on a sweeping staircase, with manipulated geometries, concealed strip lighting and

asymmetrical balconies. The twinkling stars that embellish the chandelier, meanwhile, are a nod to the night skies by which ancient sailors used to navigate.

Design-wise, we are always looking to go the extra mile, and our restaurants reflect this – from the floor-to-ceiling windows in upscale venue Palomar to the extravagant Japanese artwork adorning the walls in our Teppanyaki eatery. Then there's Syd Norman's Pour House, with a calculated-

yet-chaotic, grungy design lined with cinder blocks and illuminated by industrial lighting. We've also got something for the adventure seekers, premiering the world's first hybrid rollercoaster and waterslide, the Aqua Slidecoaster. Meanwhile, the new Glow Court, a digital sports complex with an interactive LED floor, offers a variety of activities by day, before transforming into a nightclub.

Collaborating with renowned designers, including AD Associates, Piero Lissoni, Rockwell Group, SMC Design and Studio Dado, ensures that the design of our ships resonates with guests who appreciate beauty, art and a carefully crafted ambiance that enhances their journey. ● [ncl.com](http://ncl.com)

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