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CRUISE

## Cruising Is Returning This Year, Here's What to Know

*The CDC has announced it's working with cruise lines to resume sailing as early as this summer. Here's what that means for you.*

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More than a year after **COVID-19** virtually stopped most cruises, the industry has been in flux, with many large cruise ships anchored in international waters awaiting finalized clearance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control to resume sailing from U.S. ports, or making alternate plans to sail from international destinations instead. But last week, the CDC released

further clarification to the Conditional Sailing Order that's [been in effect since October 2020](#), allowing cruising to resume on a firmer timeline. Once the agency reviews cruise line plans for adherence, large ship cruises could resume from U.S. ports as early as July.

In a letter the CDC sent to U.S. cruise executives, the agency stipulated that if cruise lines can demonstrate at least 95 percent of customers and 98 percent of crew are vaccinated, they can skip plans for the time-consuming “simulated” test voyages that were in place as the next step to proving to the CDC that conditions were safe for sailing again, the [Washington Post reported](#) in April.

It's important to note that cruise departures never entirely ceased during the pandemic—ships carrying fewer than 250 passengers have been allowed to operate, for example, and several lines resumed operations internationally beginning last summer, with few reported cases onboard. As the industry makes moves to resume on a wider scale, operations will be different from before. From new safety protocols to larger impacts on itineraries, here's what to expect as we prepare to welcome back cruising in 2021.

*We're reporting on how COVID-19 impacts travel on a daily basis. Find our [latest coronavirus coverage here](#), or visit our [complete guide to COVID-19 and travel](#).*

## New and varied itineraries

One benefit cruise lines have over other types of trips is their ability to [physically move and be nimble](#) if plans need to change. While cruise lines work with different countries and ports to address local needs and safety issues, it's meant a wave of new itineraries and destinations on the horizon.

Ships that might have been prevented from operating at U.S. homeports, for example, could be moved to embark U.S.-originating passengers at foreign ports. Prior to the CDC's updated guidelines, some cruise lines—including Viking and Royal Caribbean—had taken advantage of their ships' registries in Bermuda or The Bahamas and redeployed those vessels to sailings within those countries for much of the upcoming summer season, free of U.S. restrictions.

Norwegian and Celebrity are taking a similar approach with Mediterranean sailings this summer, sticking close to Greece, Turkey, and Croatia—all of which have easier entry requirements for international visitors. Other countries that have reopened to (vaccinated

and/or COVID-tested) international visitors that also allow cruising include Iceland, Mexico, and French Polynesia.

Meanwhile, small ships that have still been able to operate have opened up a new era of interest in sailing U.S. waters. American Cruise Lines, Victory Cruise Lines, and American Queen Steamboat Company, for example, have rolled out more sailings on the Mississippi River, and added itineraries sailing the Great Lakes, Pacific Northwest, and East Coast for travelers who want to explore waterways closer to home.

## Vaccinations and testing are essential

A key part of the CDC's updated guidelines allows cruise lines to forego the onerous simulated voyages and lengthy notification periods that had been part of the original order—on the condition that they meet the requirements that virtually all passengers and crew on each sailing are fully vaccinated (many cruise lines have already created **their own vaccination requirements**). The guidelines also allow vaccinated passengers to present results from faster, cheaper antigen tests prior to boarding instead of the more involved PCR test, although individual cruise lines may elect to impose more stringent requirements.

There may also be fewer children onboard sailings this summer, as vaccines are not yet approved for children under 16. Some cruise lines will allow unvaccinated children to sail with a negative PCR test, while others will not allow any unvaccinated passengers regardless of age. It's important to read and reach out to the cruise line directly when booking a sailing, to be sure you're meeting all of their protocols in order to sail.

In addition to following specific cruise line requirements, it's also vital that guests review the vaccination and testing requirements for entering the country from which they're departing if they're traveling to a cruise that sails outside the U.S.

## The economic impact and sailings

Like many other travel sectors, the cruise industry is poised for a strong comeback **based on pent-up demand** and untapped travel budgets carried over from 2020—prior to the pandemic, it was set to be a record year for guests taking cruises. But in that time, there's no ignoring how

much of an effect the halt in operations had on port communities and the economy at large—an ongoing issue that will continue to impact when and how we cruise.

The Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) estimates that in 2019 the cruise industry contributed \$9 billion in direct spend in Florida alone, generating just under 160,000 jobs—both at multiple cruise lines headquartered in the state, and in support industries. But many of those jobs were either furloughed or eliminated due to the halt in operations, meaning the industry could be facing a staffing shortage in certain locations where it sails.

Alaska has made it clear that the loss in cruise sailings **effectively wiped out last year's tourism season**, and both Florida and Alaska—respectively the largest and fifth largest benefactors of cruise industry dollars—filed suit against the CDC for a more expedient return. The legal case might now be moot, but the economic anxieties remain, particularly for Alaska, which is seeking a waiver to federal laws requiring foreign-flagged cruise ships (i.e., most of them) to call at a foreign port on every itinerary—a requirement that would prevent most large ship operations to Alaska **until Canadian ports reopen to cruise ships** in early 2022.

With the CDC go-ahead, cruise passengers will soon be able to embark on large ship departures, however modified, to once again enjoy vacations at sea. But these factors will continue to impact where we can travel and when, especially as the summer travel season begins.

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