

# Travel Tales

by

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## Avoiding the Dreaded Single Supplement

Back in the good old days of the 1950s, most ocean liners had a few single cabins available for their single customers. The builders of those ships realized that, yes, there actually were single people in the population! But since then all cruise ships have standardized on double cabins, and payment is virtually always based on double occupancy. Single persons occupying a double cabin alone are generally forced to pay a single supplement, which is usually 50 to 100 percent of the price of the unfilled half of the cabin. In cruising lingo, these latter figures would be described as a “single supplement of 150 to 200 percent.”

One way to avoid the single supplement is to try to find an actual single cabin, like ships had sixty years ago. Norwegian Cruise Lines (NCL) has led the way in reviving this concept, first by installing 128 single cabins (called “studios”) on *Norwegian Epic*, then four studios on *Pride of America*, and 59 studios each on the new *Norwegian Breakaway* and *Norwegian Getaway*. Each studio is an inside cabin, with 100 square feet, a full sized bed that takes up most of the cabin, a chair and very small desk, small refrigerator, and a separate sink, shower and toilet, and (amazingly) a large porthole with one-way glass, that looks out onto a corridor.



*Norwegian Epic* of NCL has led the way in offering single cabins, but at a price!

Of course, the key question is, “Is a NCL studio as cheap as the double occupancy rate for one person, for a similar cabin?” Generally, the answer is “No,” but the excess cost (or “premium”) depends on the voyage. For example, on the day I was researching, I found a seven day voyage leaving the next day (!) on *Breakaway*, from Florida to the Bahamas, in which the studio price was \$849 and the double occupancy rate for one passenger in a similar inside cabin was \$798. Thus the effective “single supplement” for the studio was only \$51 (\$849 minus \$798), a modest six percent premium. Quite reasonable.

By contrast, on a seven day voyage on *Breakaway* in June 2014 from New York City to Bermuda, the studio rate is \$1549, while the double occupancy rate for one passenger in a similar inside cabin was \$949, a substantial difference of \$600, or 63 percent! This is ten times higher than the six percent premium paid for the sailing to the Bahamas. What is going on? Clearly the cruise line owners and their expert computer programs, which are designed to maximize revenue, have decided that the Bermuda-bound cabin, many months in the future, is much more likely to be sold at a high price. By contrast, the “distressed” Bahamas cabin leaving tomorrow must be sold at a very small premium, to attract a last minute buyer and avoid the financial disaster of sailing with an empty cabin.

For the high Bermuda price, you might consider paying just \$350 more than the price for the small studio, and instead get a full inside double cabin for \$1898. You would have more space, and could just leave the second bed empty.

NCL partially justifies these premium prices by stating that singles in the studios have exclusive key card access to a nearby special singles lounge, which has a bar, quiet reading area, large TVs, and concierge. But the real reason for much higher prices on non-distressed trips is revenue maximization.

NCL is planning on installing single cabins on its two upcoming vessels, *Norwegian Escape* and *Norwegian Bliss*, although the exact number has not yet been revealed.

Royal Caribbean International is following NCL’s lead, and has installed 28 studios on its new *Quantum of the Seas*. Twelve of these studios have a balcony, while (amazingly) the inside cabins have a “virtual outside view” – a very large, almost floor to ceiling flat TV screen that shows the changing, real landscape outside! The inside cabins are 99 square feet, while the balcony singles have 119 square feet. These single cabins are extremely popular, and on some sailings 18 months in the future, are already sold out. Furthermore, the cabins are actually rising in price, with the current singles price for most future sailings being five to fifteen percent higher than the original listed price.

Some other lines are starting to see the advantages of single cabins. P&O Lines currently has eighteen single cabins aboard *Azura* (six interior and twelve with balconies) and will refurbish its vessel *Ventura* in the spring of 2014 to add eighteen single cabins. Fred. Olsen Lines, a very traditional British line, has 64 single cabins on its *Balmoral*, 40 on *Braemar*, and 42 on *Boudicca* and on *Black Watch*. Saga Cruises has 58 singles on *Saga Sapphire*, 92 on *Saga Ruby*, and 60 singles on *Quest for Adventure*. The vessel *Aegean Odyssey* of the Voyages to Antiquity line has 16 single cabins. (And some lines have lower single supplements, especially if you pay early.

Try Star Clippers, Crystal, Regent Seven Seas and Seabourn cruise lines. Star Clippers sometimes waives the single supplement altogether, for selected sailings.)



*Star Clipper and Star Flyer of Star Clipper Lines*

Despite the new single cabins, it is still fair to say that 99 percent of the non-suite cabins in the cruising fleet are doubles, and that the cruise industry has a long way to go before it satisfies the needs of the many singles in the population. If you are keen to snag one of these few studio cabins at a reasonable price, try some of the vessels listed above on repositioning cruises or in the off season, or for voyages over twelve days. Try for “distressed” sailings less than 90 days off. You might get lucky.

Given the fact that there are not many single cabins available, one other way to beat the dreaded single supplement is to stop being single, at least for the length of the voyage. Through various singles organizations, you can be matched up with a room-mate who is the same gender as you, and has the same smoking preference. When you share a cabin with this (hopefully compatible) stranger, you will qualify for the low double occupancy rate. (Bring earplugs in case roomie snores!)

For example, Singles Travel International ([www.singlestravelintl.com](http://www.singlestravelintl.com)) has organized a group of singles to sail on *Norwegian Epic* in January 2014 for seven days, from Barcelona to Naples, Florence, Majorca and back to Barcelona, for only \$1339 (per person) for a “share and save” fare for a balcony cabin. If you purchased that cabin yourself, with no roommate, you would have paid \$2549, an effective single supplement of 190 percent. STI also provides its members with several ice-breaker and meet-and-greet events, and three formal parties on board.

So, what can we conclude from all this analysis? First, after a sixty year absence, single cabins are gradually coming back, but they are generally more expensive than the double occupancy rate for one person. Second, you can get a better deal on a single cabin if you find a “distressed” cabin sailing soon, or if you search out an off season voyage. But third, it will be hard to find that good deal, since the number of single cabins remains quite small, compared to the total

number of cabins in the fleet and the high demand. Fourth, while you wait for the supply curve to meet the demand curve, you may wish to explore a singles cruise. Fifth and last, if you get really lucky on that singles cruise, you may not need that single cabin in the future!

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