

## Travel Tales

# Tips on Last Minute Cruising

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

Last minute cruising is the technique of getting a great price on a cruise by making your reservation just 30 to 90 days before the sailing. If you have a target cruise line, check what its deadline is for beginning to drop prices; the average date is 60 days before sailing. At that point, the cruise line becomes highly motivated to sell off the remaining cabins, since an empty cabin is a loss that can never be recouped. Hence the oft-used term “distressed cruising” – the cruise line is nervous and distressed. Remember, the cruise line usually has a massive mortgage on the ship of \$500 to \$750 million it is trying to pay off. Using the last minute cruising technique, it is possible to save up to 80 percent off published brochure rates.

If you have a second home near the Miami/Ft. Lauderdale area, or can get there quickly, you have the best access to excellent last minute sales, since there the cruise volume, as measured by the number of passengers sailing, is the highest in the world. For 2012, it is forecast that Miami will host about 4.0 million cruise passengers, while Ft. Lauderdale/Port Everglades will host about 3.6 million, for a staggering total of 7.6 million cruise passengers sailing from south Florida. Secondary but still attractive markets are New York, Los Angeles, Vancouver BC and Southampton, England.



*The Nieuw Amsterdam of Holland America Line is the kind of vessel that you can get aboard via “last minute cruising.”*

Some of the highest savings are in unusual places unknown to the set that is focused just on the Caribbean and Alaska. For example, 60 days from the day I am writing this, a 12-day voyage from Bombay (Mumbai) to Singapore in a suite on *Seabourn Legend*, one of the top cruise ships in the world, has a published brochure rate of a whopping \$26,075 per person. Yikes! Would you pay that much? No way. But what if the rate was discounted by 86 percent, down to \$3599?

That sounds better! This fare includes all drinks, all meals and gratuities, but not airfare. The source is [www.vacationstogo.com](http://www.vacationstogo.com).

Note that these types of cheap fares are often listed as “subject to availability.” Be sure to demand that exact advertised fare and cabin, and don’t allow yourself to be “bumped” up in fare or “switched” to a different sailing or a lesser cabin for the same price.

In undertaking your last minute cruising, don’t choose the newest and most popular ships. Don’t choose really attractive “theme” cruises with big name speakers or famous chefs on board. Don’t choose maiden voyages or voyages where two famous ships cruise in company. Don’t try to go at the height of the season. All these voyages are likely to sell out (even in this bad economy), leaving you stranded. At best, you may get aboard but get an unattractive cabin near the engine room or in the pitching bow.

In terms of timing, try to avoid any holiday weekend when the typical passenger family may have a day or two off work that will allow them to escape on a cruise without having to use as much vacation leave. Also avoid periods like June, July and August when the kids are out of school and families are more likely to book a cruise. Good target times for a cheap last-minute cruise are the “dead zone” right after New Year’s, and the months of February, March, September and October. The best months will vary depending on the target cruise area. For example, if you are trying for an Alaskan cruise, focus on the “shoulder season” when the weather is colder, in April, May, October or November. Pick a cruise that has a longer length than the typical family cruise of one week or ten days, or an unusual repositioning cruise. Of course I don’t have anything against families, I am just trying to play the laws of supply and demand to maximize your negotiating leverage.

One useful technique is to buy a “run of the ship” or a “guarantee” cabin. With this ticket you are guaranteed a cabin on the ship, usually specified as an inside cabin or an outside cabin, but you don’t know the cabin and its location until the sailing date. Thus you are more likely to have an obstructed view, small window or porthole, or be in a noisy location. If careful you may achieve significant savings, and if the ship is not full, you can try for an upgrade by approaching the purser as soon as you get on board. (Being a ship’s purser is the last job on Earth that I would want!)

According to my sources, it probably doesn’t pay you to use the cruise line’s air department to try to save money on last minute (or other) air fares. “You’re thinking about the 1980s,” said one experienced cruise consultant who has 28 years in the industry, but preferred to remain anonymous. “In those good old days, the cruise lines would block a large group of seats for passengers, get a discounted fare, and pass all or most of that discount on to the passengers. That usually doesn’t happen anymore. Now you pay the standard airfare plus an extra fee for the cruise line handling.”

Many cruise lines have last minute discounts available, depending on which state or province you live in. For example, the Royal Caribbean website ([www.royalcaribbean.com](http://www.royalcaribbean.com)) says that “residents of particular states....may be eligible for Exclusive Rates.” The site then asks you to enter your US state or Canadian province. This odd discount is offered due to the marketing theory that it is good to have a wide dispersion of passengers coming from a wide geographic area, since they will provide “word of mouth” marketing among their friends and neighbors.

If you have multiple residences in different states, try to obtain your last minute fare using these states. I tried this in pricing a last minute fare on *Allure of the Seas* for a Caribbean cruise, using my primary Maryland home and my winter abode in Alabama. I was confident that the Alabama rate would be cheaper, since relatively few Alabamians go cruising. In fact, the price for the “Maryland” cabin was \$140 cheaper than the exact same “Alabama” cabin, for the same cruise! Perhaps the Royal Caribbean computer software wanted to have more affluent Marylanders cruising. If you do this, bring a utility bill or other proof of residence on the cruise with you.

In researching your last minute cruises, build a relationship with a cruise travel agent certified by the Cruise Line International Association (CLIA; [www.cruising.org](http://www.cruising.org)). Explain your plan well in advance, then call him/her every few days during the run-up to your target cruising period. Also study the following websites, and see if your CLIA agent can beat the last minute deals offered on them: [www.cruisecompete.com](http://www.cruisecompete.com); [www.cruise411.com](http://www.cruise411.com); or [www.vacationstogo.com](http://www.vacationstogo.com). If you can’t get a lower actual price, see if you can get an “on-board credit” or “shipboard credit.” These are credits that can be applied to your shipboard account to offset the cost of excursions, drinks and other purchases; they usually are in the range of \$100 to \$300.



*The Star Clipper and the Star Flyer of Star Clippers line offer discounts for last minute “distressed” cruising.*

For last minute cruising, you obviously need to be able to pack your bags and take off at just a few days or weeks notice. Don’t let the suspense of “distressed” travel distress you – treat it like an adventure, and savor the fact that you saved a bundle as you walk up the gangway.

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Lew Toulmin has sailed on every ocean, and lives in Silver Spring.

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