

Families Afloat

Families love to cruise, and for good reason. Parents and kids can spend as much time together as they want. And then parents can take the opportunity to relax while letting their children loose in chaperoned programs. Kids of all ages are no doubt enchanted by the elaborate children's and teen facilities offered on most cruise ships nowadays.

Be sure to book your family cruise early — as far as a year in advance — to ensure that there are enough quad and adjacent cabins aboard a ship during high seasons, like summer and Spring Break. The cruise may be available, but the quads and adjacent cabins may not be.

Here's a sampling of the types of children's programs and facilities offered by major cruise lines.

Carnival Cruise Lines offers fun, twisting water slides and water parks on most ships, as well as programs and facilities for kids based on age—Camp Carnival for youngsters, Circle “C” for the 12-to-14-year-old age group, and Club O2, designed for the 15-to-17 age group.

Camp Carnival offers a schedule of activities in indoor and outdoor play areas, as well as an expanded children's menu. Camp Carnival activities are held from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. under the watchful eyes of the ship's youth staff, who also conduct babysitting services.

Circle “C” facilities are in place on 17 of Carnival's 22 ships, with the balance of the fleet expected to have these facilities completed by 2010. The focal point of Circle “C” activities are custom-designed clubs with a dance floor with high-tech sound and lighting system, along with 42-inch plasma-screen TVs displaying movies and music videos, a touch-screen jukebox and more.

The fleetwide Club O2 was developed with the Coca-Cola Company and includes teen directors and 1,000- to 1,800-square-foot teen clubs with a dance floor with a DJ, sound and lighting system and large-screen plasma TVs. There's a “Coke-tail” lounge offering Coca-Cola products and non-alcoholic specialty drinks.

Costa Cruises' newest ships offer children's facilities of more than 3,000 square feet. The “Squok Lido”—named for the line's colorful mascot—includes a swimming pool for kids and a

play room. For older kids, staff assistants organize activities at the Teen Club, as well as outdoor games on the decks and in the multi-sport court. Costa also offers free in-port supervision for children, ages 3 to 12, of parents going on excursions, and babysitting, which is free of charge from closing time to 1:30 a.m. for groups giving 24 hours notice.

The three newest ships (Costa Pacifica, Costa Luminosa and Costa Deliziosa) offer PlayStation activity areas. PS3 activities and games are also arranged on the giant movie screen overlooking the pool for the PS3 pool parties.

Costa has some Kids Sail Free offers this Caribbean season.

Disney Cruise Line recently revamped its children's program with the Oceaneer Club and Oceaneer Lab, allowing kids to customize their cruises based on interest, regardless of age. Among the more than 100 activities available are So You Want to be a Pirate and Ratatouille Cooking School. For infants, a new service allows parents to pre-order baby supplies on line.

Another new program, "Dine and Play," available at second dinner seatings, expedites the meal for the kids (ages 3 to 12). And, from April 24 through May 26, Disney Cruise Line is offering a "Kids Sail Free" promotion. Children ages 17 and under traveling with two full-fare adult passengers in the same stateroom sail free (excluding government taxes and fees) on select 10- and 11-night Mediterranean cruises.

Disney also is expanding and improving its kids programs. The Disney Dream, due out early next year, will take the Oceaneer Club and Oceaneer Lab a step further with special spaces designed for those programs.

Holland America Line's Family Reunion Program offers reduced group rates for families booking eight staterooms. The plan includes fountain soda cards, a family photo per stateroom, lunch in the alternative Pinnacle Grill and one stateroom upgrade from an outside to a veranda stateroom. The Club HAL program has been expanded to include ages 3 to 12. All ships also have a teen program and a club called The Loft for 13- to 17-year-olds. Kids ages 8 to 12 have an area featuring arcade games, karaoke, family-safe Internet access and Sony PlayStations.

MSC Cruises encourages family bookings through its Kids Sail Free offers for children ages 17 and under sharing a stateroom with two full-fare-paying adults. On each MSC Cruises sailing,

the program staff caters to the specific needs of all ages. Activity leaders organize age-appropriate activities, with ages 3 to 6 in the Mini Club, 7 to 12 in the Juniors Club and 13 to 17 in the Teenagers Club. MSC Poesia has a Stone Age dinosaur play area, while MSC Fantasia offers igloos and life-size polar bears in Il Polo Nord, a North Pole-themed play area. Newer ships feature 4D cinema, as well as a Formula 1 racing simulator and, on MSC Splendida, two mini bowling alleys.

Norwegian Cruise Line has announced Nickelodeon at Sea, a three-year partnership under which select NCL ships will feature Nickelodeon-themed entertainment and programming year-round. Beginning in April on the Norwegian Jewel and this summer on the new Norwegian Epic, activities will include character meet-and-greets, poolside entertainment, dance parties and game shows like “SlimeTime Live!”

Existing features of Kid’s Crew, which is available fleet-wide, include the “Officer Snook Water Pollution” program, with “Officer Snook” (a cartoon fish) as its mascot. For dining, NCL offers the Kid’s Café, with a kids’-height buffet, on most ships. NCL also offers amenity packages for kids for less than \$40 per child.

Princess Cruises’ fleet-wide child and teen programs offer a range of activities that vary by ship. On the line’s smaller vessels, children’s programs operate when 20 or more children ages 3 to 17 are on board.

Among the programs’ features are educational activities, like Jr. Chef@Sea, a hands-on food preparation workshop; the California Science Center’s “Science on the Seas” program, available aboard most Princess ships; and the “Junior Ranger/Teen Explorer” program, developed in conjunction with the National Park Service.

In Alaska, a new, 12-night “Family Fun” cruise-tour features a jet boat ride, panning for gold, and a Denali National Park tour. The itinerary consists of a seven-night “Voyage of the Glaciers” cruise and a five-night land tour.

Royal Caribbean International’s new Oasis of the Seas features a 28,000-square-foot complex that includes Kids Avenue, which connects children with Adventure Ocean spaces and play areas. It also features the Royal Babies and Royal Tots nursery, as well as teen areas, including Fuel disco and The Living Room, which are also available on other ships in the fleet.

Fleet-wide, Royal Caribbean has enhanced its youth program and added other family options including the new My Family Time Dining program, which expedites dinner for children. The new “Babies 2 Go” program, allows parents to order baby food and supplies online for delivery to their staterooms. And a new Crown & Anchor Society Youth Program is available for kids under 18, who earn credits for future cruises and receive perks like coupon booklets for shipboard discounts.

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