

What to wear on a cruise: Cruise attire and cruise line dress codes

(Courtesy of Ashley Kosciolk, The Points Guy)

Have you ever had that nightmare where you're at work, in school or giving an important presentation, and you look down to discover you're wearing only your underwear (or worse, nothing at all)? If you're new to vacationing at sea, knowing how to dress for a cruise can be confusing — and just as potentially embarrassing if you're not prepared.

[Packing acceptable attire for a cruise](#) is simple if you remember a few general rules. Here, I'll break down some safe options if you're unsure, and I'll give an overview of the cruise dress codes for each of the “big eight” cruise lines.

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What do people wear on a cruise?

You can't go wrong with resort-casual clothing for sea days when you'll remain on board your ship. Although some lines will be more or less casual than that, it's a good baseline. But what is "resort casual"?

Khaki pants or shorts with loose-fitting, short-sleeve, button-down shirts or even nice, plain T-shirts work well for men. Women might opt for khaki shorts or palazzo pants with a nice top or a sundress. In most cases, nice jeans (dark wash with no holes) will work well also.

On most ships, this clothing will also be acceptable at night in the main dining rooms. For extra-fee restaurants, you might choose to dress up a bit more — perhaps collared shirts or long-sleeve button-downs for men and slacks with a blouse, or a dress, for women.

For formal nights, men will want to bring a collared, button-down shirt at the bare minimum. For something a little more snazzy, bring a jacket to wear over your shirt, with or without a tie. Some men opt for suits or tuxes. For women, pantsuits and dressy pants outfits are a great choice, as are party dresses or even ball gowns.

Jeans are not allowed in the main dining rooms on formal nights, and cut-off shorts, baseball caps and flip-flops are banned at all times during dinner in the main dining rooms.

Another key piece of clothing to bring is a bathing suit. Whether you're headed to a warm-weather destination and plan to laze by the pool or on the beach, or you're visiting somewhere chilly but want to take advantage of your vessel's hot tubs, it's an item you won't want to forget. Note that cover-ups are required for entry at all restaurants and dining rooms, with the exception of walk-up, poolside window-service venues.

For shore excursions — particularly those in more rugged or active destinations that require a lot of walking — comfortable, casual clothing and sturdy footwear are a must. Bring layers for cold climates and moisture-wicking fabrics for places where it's warm or where you expect to work up a sweat.

Finally, check to see if your cruise line has any special theme nights planned. If so, you might want to pack an outfit for the white party or '80s night.

Carnival cruise dress code

[Carnival](#) is one line where casual is the name of the game. Passengers will be just fine in jeans, T-shirts, tank tops, shorts and bathing suits for their days on board or ashore.

At night, nice jeans and nice tops are perfect for eating in the main dining rooms.

On Carnival cruise formal nights, known as “cruise elegant” nights, cruisers wear everything from slacks with nice shirts to tuxes and ball gowns. However, most passengers stick to clothes that fall somewhere in the middle.

Voyages of six nights or longer will have two “cruise elegant” nights, while those five nights or shorter will see only one.

Celebrity Cruises dress code

[Celebrity Cruises](#) maintains a dress code that’s best described as chic-casual. The demographic on board tends to be a bit more upscale than what you’ll find on Carnival, Royal Caribbean or Norwegian. That means khaki shorts with nice button-downs are more common than jean shorts and tank tops, although you won’t be out of place in the latter.

For dinner, you’ll want to dress it up even more, as the line has a smart-casual dress code at night in most restaurants, including the main dining room. Anything from unripped jeans to dress pants with nice blouses or button-downs is acceptable.

Are there formal nights on Celebrity cruises? Yes, there’s one on every sailing of six nights or fewer and two on voyages of a week or more, but they have a different name. “Evening chic” nights encourage passengers to go all out with tuxes and evening gowns. However, most men choose slacks with collared or button-down shirts and jackets, sans ties. Most women choose slacks and nice blouses, sundresses or party dresses.

Disney Cruise Line dress code

[Disney Cruise Line](#) is synonymous with children, and children like to be comfortable. With that in mind, just about anything goes in terms of dress on The Mouse’s ships, which tend toward casual in spite of their stellar service and high price point.

It’s not uncommon to see jeans, shorts, T-shirts or bathing suits during the day. Unlike most other lines, the same goes at dinnertime, with jeans and T-shirts just as common as dressier attire like slacks and button-downs.

Exceptions are the line’s “dress-up” nights — two on sailings of a week or more and one on shorter voyages. For those, DCL suggests that men avoid jeans and wear jackets. Women should go with dresses, skirts and blouses, or pantsuits.

Some of Disney Cruise Line’s added-fee restaurants, such as Remy — one of the most expensive alternative eateries at sea — require jackets for men and don’t allow jeans.

Each Disney sailing features a Pirate Night; cruisers wishing to participate should pack their best swashbuckling gear. As is standard at Disney parks, you’re also likely to see large numbers of costumes and mouse ears at all hours of the day.

Holland America Line dress code

Although the dress code on [Holland America Line](#) ships is technically “cruise casual,” you’ll rarely spot anyone looking disheveled or like they just rolled out of bed. Most passengers tend toward resort wear or, at the bare minimum, nice jeans with pressed T-shirts.

The casual dress code carries through to dinner, but HAL cruisers can often be found dressing up a bit more — collared shirts or button-downs (sometimes with jackets) and slacks for men and slacks with nice tops or dresses for women.

As for Holland America formal nights, on sailings shorter than a week, there will be one “gala night,” where travelers don evening or ball gowns, suits or tuxedos. Voyages of eight to 13 nights will see two gala nights, while any cruises of two weeks or longer will have three chances to dress to the nines.

MSC Cruises dress code

What to wear on [MSC cruises](#) largely depends on the crowd with whom you’re sailing. On Europe cruises, your fellow passengers are likely to dress up more often — even during the day — with skimpy resort wear and designer bathing suits gracing the pool deck as far as the eye can see. On those voyages, dinner is an even more fancy affair, with elegance as the norm. Expect to see glittering dresses and stylish pants and button-downs with dress shoes, even when it’s not formal night.

On cruises that depart from the U.S., expect a more casual vibe, with jeans, T-shirts and bathing suits ruling the day. At night, you’ll be fine with nice jeans and a collared shirt or a sundress, although you might want to dress up a bit more to match the ship’s ambiance.

Are there formal nights on MSC cruises? Absolutely. They’re called “gala dinners,” and they appear at least once per voyage, but the number can vary by itinerary. The dress code is strict, with the buffet the only place that will allow T-shirts and shorts. You’ll fit in best in a ball gown, cocktail dress, suit or tuxedo.

Norwegian Cruise Line dress code

[Norwegian](#) prides itself on allowing cruisers to dress as they please, providing a “come as you are” atmosphere during the day and at night. The most popular clothing is cruise casual, and passengers are free to wear whatever they’d like with an emphasis on comfort.

The only exception is at dinner, when a smart casual vibe encourages travelers to avoid torn clothes or outfits that are suggestive or skimpy.

In a nod to Norwegian’s laid-back style, NCL formal nights — dubbed “Dress Up or Not” nights — provide a chance for you to doll up. However, it’s not required, and you won’t be turned away from the main dining rooms if you choose not to participate. Passengers have been spotted wearing everything from jeans and T-shirts to ball gowns and tuxes, and all coexist in perfect harmony.

Princess Cruises dress code

[Princess](#)’ casual daytime mindset means you can wear the same types of clothing on board as you would during a day ashore — activewear, beachwear and jeans or T-shirts are totally fine.

Princess cruise formal nights are special because the line is one of the few industry holdouts in that it still has an official formal night. Its passengers enjoy a more traditional cruise experience, and they relish the romantic vibe that a formal night can provide. With that in mind, the line doesn't mention super-fancy garb like ball gowns or tuxes; instead, it advises suits or slacks with jackets for men and cocktail dresses or pantsuits for the ladies.

On voyages of less than a week, passengers should plan for one formal night, while sailings of a week to 13 days will have two, and cruises two weeks or longer will have three.

All other nights are listed as "smart casual," which means sundresses or pants with flowy tops for women and nice jeans or slacks with collared shirts for men will suffice.

Royal Caribbean dress code

As is the case with Carnival and Norwegian, [Royal Caribbean](#) is a casual line during the day. And, like Disney Cruise Line, it caters to a lot of families. Translation: Wear what allows you to have the most fun in the most comfort. Expect to see shorts or jeans with T-shirts or tank tops and bathing suits or beachwear almost exclusively during the daytime.

At night, you might want to put on something a little less comfortable, but it's certainly not required, unless it's a formal night. (Like Princess, Royal still has those.) What is confusing is that the line has three different dress codes, all of which are loosely enforced: casual, smart casual and formal. The ones that show up on your voyage will depend on the length of the cruise.

The only difference between the first two is that smart casual recommends pantsuits for ladies and jackets for the guys, but skirts or trousers with blouses or collared shirts are fine in both cases. Smart casual also strongly discourages jeans — even nice ones.

Royal Caribbean formal nights have the highest expectations for passengers, urging them to put on their finest cocktail dresses, evening gowns, suits or tuxes. As with the line's smart casual dress code, jeans are not allowed in the main dining rooms on formal nights.

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