

# Which cruise ship activities should you book ahead of time?

(Courtesy of Ashley Kosciolk, The Points Guy)

Picture it: You've planned your upcoming cruise for months. You [chose the perfect ship](#) and itinerary, rounded out your vacation wardrobe and weeded through endless lists of dining options and spa treatments. Then you board the ship and head to the excursions desk only to discover there's no more room on that once-in-a-lifetime adventure that was to be the crowning moment of your voyage.

Don't let this happen to you. If you're booked on a sailing and don't want to miss out, you can reserve many activities, experiences and restaurant meals ahead of time, either online or via the [cruise line's mobile apps](#).

Whether you're a planner or someone who likes to play your vacation by ear, you should absolutely consider booking certain cruise activities in advance. Discover what's available pre-cruise so you can better prepare for your next voyage.

## Dining reservations

One of the biggest components of any sailing is dining. Sure, you can opt for the main dining room or buffet each night. However, if you'd like to branch out and try one or two of your ship's [alternative eateries](#), you can reserve a spot ahead of time, before you even step on board.

If you wait until after you embark to book, you run the risk of being stuck with the earliest or latest dining times or — worse — being completely out of luck. This is especially true if you're sailing on a newer ship with eateries that aren't widely available elsewhere.

## Shore excursions

Got your eye on specific shore tours? Lock them in early, especially if you're setting off on a bucket-list journey to a place that you might not have a chance to visit again. Take it from me: There are few feelings worse than having the person at the [shore excursions](#) desk tell you "Sorry, but that tour is full."

Looking at something that's pricey, and aren't sure you want to pay that much? Here's a tip: Book it anyway. If you change your mind, you can usually cancel 24 to 48 hours in advance (depending on your cruise line's policy) and receive a full refund.

## Spa treatments

You can wait to reserve [spa treatments](#) until you're on the ship — unless you're aiming for something particularly special. Do you need to reserve a large number of manicures for a bachelorette party? Do you want your hair done on a certain day so it's perfectly coiffed for formal night? Are you yearning for a couple's massage to celebrate your anniversary? Book pre-cruise to make sure there's enough availability.

Otherwise, it could benefit you to wait until you've crossed the gangway. On port days, when everyone is ashore, spas often try to draw people in by discounting treatments received on those days. They might also offer specials or discounts if you book multiple treatments. These offers aren't available in advance.

## Theater shows

The 735-seat, outdoor AquaTheater on Royal Caribbean's Symphony of the Seas is home to aerial and water shows.

Although only a few cruise lines — [Royal Caribbean International](#), Norwegian Cruise Line, [MSC Cruises](#) and [Virgin Voyages](#) — require passengers to make free reservations for nightly entertainment, only Royal Caribbean and [NCL](#) allow reservations in advance of boarding.

For certain shows like Royal Caribbean's comedy shows and AquaTheater productions, as well as Norwegian's Broadway performances and Virgin Voyages' dinner theater, it's crucial to reserve seats. Otherwise, there is a very real possibility you'll end up not being able to see them. Despite multiple performances per sailing, seating can be limited.

(Tip: If you forget to reserve, show up 15 minutes ahead of time, when ships often release any reserved seats that haven't been claimed, meaning there could be room for you at the last minute.)

## Special occasion arrangements

Are you celebrating something special on board? If you're in need of anniversary flowers, a graduation cake or birthday decorations for your travel companion, it's best to order them in advance.

If arrangements can't be made online or via your cruise line's app, contact your travel agent or the line directly to make sure they know what you're expecting and that what you need is available.

All major cruise lines sell packages that can help you to save money, alleviate the stress of planning or both. Some of the most common are dining and [alcohol packages](#), as well as [internet packages](#).

The former two are generally a good value for people who drink a lot of soda, fancy coffee or alcohol, or who like to switch up their dining experiences. The last one is essential for anyone looking to stay connected while at sea. Booking any of these in advance could score you some savings versus purchasing the same packages once on your ship.

Less common but still offered are photo packages and [wedding packages](#). It's almost always unnecessary to pre-book photos, but wedding packages are only available with advance notice. What they include varies by cruise line, but example offerings might be flowers, a photo package, a ceremony for a set number of people and a few romantic in-cabin amenities like chocolate-covered strawberries and Champagne.

## Bottom line

Cruise lines offer lots of add-ons you can book prior to your sailing. In most cases, though, it only pays to do so if you're sure you'd save money by booking early or if your trip would be adversely affected should something not be available to you once you board.

Generally, it's a good idea to make restaurant and shore excursion reservations ahead of time, as well as any special arrangements you might need. Spa treatments and entertainment can often be left until you're on the ship and have a chance to see the daily schedule.