

OREGON COAST JOURNEY · FREE GUIDE

The Ultimate Cruise Planning Guide

Everything I wish every first-timer
knew
before they booked.

The insider playbook I use with my own clients — how to pick the right sailing, snag the best cabin, avoid the rookie mistakes, and pay less doing it.

A \$100 VALUE · YOURS FREE

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oregoncoastjourney.com

START HERE

Welcome aboard

Hi — I'm Melinda. I'm an independent cruise advisor, and I plan cruises to Alaska, the Mexican Riviera, Hawaii, and beyond for people every week. I built this guide because I kept answering the same questions, and I realized most people book their first cruise half-blind — overpaying, picking the wrong cabin, or missing the perks they were entitled to all along.

So here it is: the real playbook, no fluff. Read it start to finish or jump to what you need. And here's the part people don't expect — **everything I do as your advisor is free**. I'm paid by the cruise line, not by you, and I never charge a fee or mark up a fare. You get the same price you'd get booking direct (sometimes better), plus a human who catches the details.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Skim the table of contents, land on the sections that matter for your trip, and keep it handy while you plan.

When you're ready, the booking button on the last page takes you straight to live cruise fares — or just reply to any of my emails and I'll do the legwork for you.

What's inside

- 01 **Choosing the right cruise** — destination, line & season
- 02 **The cabin secret** — how to pick a room you'll love
- 03 **Booking smart** — timing, price protection & the advisor edge
- 04 **What's included** (and the extras that add up)
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- 07 **Destination spotlights** — Alaska, Mexico, Hawaii & the Oregon Coast
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SECTION 01

Choosing the right cruise

Get these three decisions right and the rest falls into place.

1. Start with the destination, not the deal

The cheapest fare on a route you don't care about is not a deal. Decide what you actually want to *see* first — glaciers and whales, warm beaches and tacos, volcanoes and waterfalls — then find the best price on *that*. Every region has a rhythm:

- **Alaska** sails May–September. Peak wildlife and warmth is June–August; May and September bring lower fares and fewer crowds.
- **Mexican Riviera** runs mostly October–April, escaping the summer heat and hurricane season.
- **Hawaii** cruises year-round; spring and fall are the sweet spot for price and weather.
- **Caribbean** is warmest and priciest December–April; late spring is the value window.

2. Match the cruise line to your style

Cruise lines are not interchangeable. A line built for families feels very different from one built for quiet couples. Before you fall for a photo, ask: who is this ship *for*?

- **Big, playful, family-friendly:** think water slides, kids' clubs, energy everywhere.
- **Classic & balanced:** a bit of everything, great for first-timers and multi-generation trips.
- **Refined & relaxed:** smaller crowds, elevated dining, more grown-up evenings.
- **Premium / luxury:** higher fares but far more included — drinks, gratuities, excursions.

This is exactly where a quick chat saves you. Tell me your vibe and travel party and I'll steer you to the two or three ships that actually fit — instead of you guessing from marketing photos.

3. Pick your season on purpose

"Shoulder season" — the weeks just before and after peak — is the single easiest way to pay less and enjoy more. Fares drop, ports are calmer, and the experience is often *better*, not worse. If your dates are flexible even by a week or two, tell me; I'll show you what moving them is worth.

SECTION 02

The cabin secret

Where you sleep shapes the whole trip — and costs more than it should if you guess.

There are four cabin types, and the right one depends entirely on how you'll actually use the room. Here's the honest breakdown:

Interior — the smart saver

No window, lowest price. If you're the type who's off exploring dawn to midnight and only sleeps in the room, an interior cabin can free up hundreds of dollars for excursions and dining. Pitch dark for great sleep, too.

Oceanview — a window on the water

A sealed window, no balcony. A middle-ground pick — natural light and a sea view without the balcony premium.

Balcony — the one people rarely regret

Your own private outdoor space. On scenic sailings — **Alaska especially** — a balcony is worth every dollar; you'll watch glaciers slide by in your robe with coffee. On warm-weather routes it's a lovely-to-have rather than a must.

Suite — space & perks

The most room plus priority perks (early boarding, better dining times, sometimes a concierge). Worth it if the extras match how you travel.

INSIDER CABIN TIPS

Pick a cabin **mid-ship and on a middle deck** for the least motion — key if you're prone to seasickness. Avoid rooms directly above or below nightclubs, theaters, or the pool deck. And check the deck plan for what's next door: a "quiet" cabin under the buffet is not quiet at 6 a.m.

My rule of thumb

Scenic, cool-weather cruise where the view is the point → **balcony**. Warm-weather, port-packed, always-out itinerary → **interior or oceanview** and spend the savings ashore. Not sure? That's a two-minute question for me.

Booking smart

When you book and who you book with can be worth more than any flash sale.

Book earlier than you think

The best cabins and the best prices tend to go *early*. Cruise lines rarely reward last-minute the way flights do — popular sailings sell out and prices climb as space shrinks. Booking 6–12 months out usually means more choice and better rates, plus time to pay it down.

Watch for price drops after you book

Here's a secret most people never learn: if the fare on your exact sailing drops *after* you book but before final payment, you can often capture the lower price or get onboard credit. Most travelers never notice. **I watch it for you** and file the adjustment — that alone can pay for your excursions.

\$0

MY FEE TO YOU

Same

PRICE AS DIRECT

+Perks

WHEN AVAILABLE

The advisor edge — why free help beats booking alone

When you book direct on a cruise-line website, you get a website. When you book with me, you get the same fare *plus* a person whose job is to make the trip go right. Here's what that looks like:

- I compare lines and sailings so you don't spend nights lost in tabs.
- I hunt for perks — onboard credit, free gratuities, drink or Wi-Fi packages, sometimes free upgrades.
- I re-price your booking if the fare drops before final payment.
- I'm your single point of contact if anything changes — one text instead of a call-center queue.
- It costs you nothing. The cruise line pays me; your price is the same or better.

THE ONE TO REMEMBER

Booking direct online and booking through me cost you the **same** — but only one of them comes with someone in your corner. There's genuinely no reason to do it alone.

SECTION 04

What's included (and what's not)

Cruises look all-inclusive. Knowing the line keeps your budget honest.

ALREADY IN YOUR FARE

Included

Your cabin · main dining rooms · the buffet · most casual eateries · room service (often) · pools & hot tubs · the gym · Broadway-style shows & live music · kids' clubs · most daytime activities.

COSTS EXTRA

Not included

Specialty restaurants · alcohol & specialty coffee · shore excursions · spa · Wi-Fi · gratuities · casino & bingo · premium fitness classes · photos · airfare & hotels.

The extras that quietly add up

The fare gets you aboard; these are what stretch the budget if you're not watching:

- **Gratuities** are typically added daily per person. Budget for them up front so they're not a surprise on your bill.
- **Drink packages** pay off only past a certain number of drinks a day — do the quick math for how you actually drink before buying.
- **Wi-Fi** is priciest bought onboard. If you need it, buy the package in advance.
- **Shore excursions** are the big one — see the next page for how to handle them.

PERK ALERT

Many of the extras above — gratuities, drink or Wi-Fi packages, onboard credit — are exactly the perks I try to get **bundled in free** when I book you. Always ask me what's available on your sailing before you pay for them separately.

A simple budget frame

Plan for your **fare + gratuities + one or two excursions per port + a little spending money**. Nail those four and you'll never be blindsided by the final bill. Want a personalized estimate for your sailing? Just ask.

The cruise packing list

The handful of items that quietly save your trip — most people forget at least three.

You don't need to over-pack. You need the *right* few things. These are the items my clients thank me for reminding them about — the ones you can't easily buy once you're aboard. (The links below are things I recommend; as an Amazon Associate I may earn a small commission at no cost to you.)

Don't-forget essentials

- [Magnetic hooks](#) — cabin walls are steel; these hang hats, lanyards, and wet swimsuits and free up space.
- [An over-the-door organizer](#) — the #1 space-saver for tiny cabin bathrooms.
- [Motion-sickness relief](#) — bands and non-drowsy tablets. Bring them even if you think you're fine; you'll be glad they're in the bag.
- [Packing cubes](#) — turn a chaotic suitcase into tidy drawers in a small cabin.
- [A waterproof phone pouch](#) — for tenders, beaches, kayaks, and rainy Alaska decks.
- [A power bank](#) — long port days drain a phone fast when it's your camera and map.
- [A lanyard for your key card](#) — your card is room key, wallet, and ID all day; a lanyard means you never lose it.

Pack for the climate you're sailing

- **Alaska:** layers, a [packable rain jacket](#), and [binoculars](#) for whales and glaciers. It's cooler than people expect — even in July.
- **Mexico & Hawaii:** [reef-safe sunscreen](#), a hat, sandals, and [water shoes](#) for rocky beaches and excursions.
- **Everywhere:** one nicer outfit for dinners, comfortable walking shoes, and a small day bag for port.

TWO CABIN RULES

Pack a **carry-on with your first-night essentials** (medications, swimsuit, a change of clothes) — checked bags can take hours to reach your cabin. And bring a **refillable water bottle** to fill before every port day.

Shore excursions

The days in port are the memories. Here's how to spend them well.

Your ship docks; the day is yours. You've got three ways to spend it, and the smart move is to mix them across your trip:

1. Book a guided excursion

The reliable choice for bucket-list activities — whale watching, glacier flights, snorkeling, ziplines, cultural tours. A good guide turns a few hours into the story you'll retell for years. You can book through the cruise line, but independent operators are frequently **the same tours for less**.

My go-to for excursions

I curate trusted, well-reviewed tours for my destinations so you're not gambling on a random listing. Browse the ones I recommend here:

[Browse Recommended Tours & Excursions →](#)

Powered by Viator — a Tripadvisor company. Free cancellation on most tours up to 24 hours before.

2. Explore the port on your own

In walkable, easy ports, a self-guided day is free and flexible. Just know your **all-aboard time** cold — the ship will not wait, and if you booked independently, getting left behind is on you (another quiet reason to have an advisor and a plan).

3. Just relax

Not every port needs a packed itinerary. Sometimes the best day is a beach chair, a local lunch, and a slow wander back. Give yourself at least one.

TIMING RULE

If you book an independent tour, always leave a **generous buffer** before all-aboard. Ship-sponsored excursions guarantee the ship waits; independent ones don't — so pick earlier tours and pad the end.

SECTION 07

Destination spotlights

Quick-hit guides to the routes I know best.

MAY – SEPTEMBER

Alaska

Glaciers, whales, eagles, and mountain towns. Book a **balcony** and a scenic glacier day. June–August for warmth and wildlife; May & September for value. Pack layers and rain gear — always.

OCTOBER – APRIL

Mexican Riviera

Cabo, Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta — beaches, tacos, and warm water when the north turns cold. Great value and easygoing ports. Reef-safe sunscreen and water shoes earn their place in the bag.

YEAR-ROUND

Hawaii

Volcanoes, waterfalls, and four islands in one trip without unpacking twice. Longer sailings, so a comfortable cabin matters. Spring and fall balance price and weather best.

ANY SEASON

The Oregon Coast

My home water. Whether you're cruising from the Pacific Northwest or road-tripping the coast, I share the beaches, whale-watching seasons, and drive-on sands most visitors miss — start at oregoncoastjourney.com.

CAN'T DECIDE?

Tell me your dream trip — I'll find the sailing.

One message with your rough dates, who's coming, and your vibe, and I'll come back with the two or three best options at the best price I can find. Free, always.

[Plan my trip with Melinda →](#)

SECTION 08

10 first-timer mistakes

Every one of these is avoidable once you know it's coming.

- **Booking the wrong ship for their group.** A party ship with toddlers, or a quiet ship with teens — match the ship to your people first.
- **Waiting too long to book.** The best cabins and prices go early, not late.
- **Skipping travel insurance.** One missed connection or illness can cost more than the trip. Protect it.
- **Cutting flight arrival too close.** Fly in the *day before* you sail — miss the ship and it leaves without you.
- **Ignoring gratuities in the budget.** They're added daily and surprise people at checkout. Plan for them.
- **Over-buying drink & Wi-Fi packages.** Do the math for how you actually travel before you commit.
- **Missing all-aboard time on an independent tour.** The ship will not wait. Pad your buffer.
- **Over-packing, under-preparing.** Skip the "just in case" pile; bring the smart few things from the packing list.
- **Not checking for price drops after booking.** Money left on the table. (I check for you.)
- **Booking alone to "save."** It costs the same as using me — you just go without help. There's no upside.

THE META-LESSON

Almost every mistake here comes down to one thing: **not having someone experienced in your corner.** That's the whole reason I do this — and it's free to you.

SECTION 09

Ready to sail?

Two easy ways to take the next step — both free, both no-pressure.

You've got the playbook. Here's how to turn it into a trip:

OPTION 1 · BROWSE LIVE CRUISE DEALS NOW

Book Direct & See Today's Fares

Search real, current cruise prices to Alaska, Mexico, Hawaii and beyond — the same booking engine I use, with my advisor support behind every booking.

[Browse & Book Your Cruise →](#)

Option 2 · Let me do it for you

Prefer a human? Tell me your rough dates, who's coming, and your dream destination — I'll hunt down the best sailing at the best price, perks included, and hand you a simple plan. No fee, no obligation.

[Get Your Free Cruise Plan →](#)

Or reply to any email from me — I read every one myself.

One more thing — free perks for sharing

If this guide helped, send it to a friend who's dreaming of a cruise. When you refer a friend and they book with me, **you both get rewarded** — a thank-you from me to each of you. Just have them mention your name when they reach out.

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