

What to pack for a family cruise

A view from [Kara Williams](#)

September 29, 2014

Tropical, Travel Tips, Family, Cruise, Beach, All-inclusive

Bring along key items to ensure your family cruise sails smoothly

After spending 10 weeks this summer with my kids aboard a [Semester at Sea](#) ship, and with three family cruises (to Alaska and the Caribbean) under my belt, I've discovered a few must-pack items that have helped our ocean journeys go more smoothly.

Here, then, in no particular order, are some of my suggestions about what to pack for a family cruise.

Toiletries and medicines. Of course you're going to pack your favorite shampoo and kids' fever reducer when you travel out of town for several nights with your children. But it also is important when vacationing by cruise ship to bring along all of those over-the-counter necessities, since on-board sundry shops can be expensive.

Walkie-talkies. Especially on mega cruise ships, such as big ships that carry more than 5,000 passengers, you'll want to have some sort of device to keep track of family members on board. You probably won't use expensive ship Wi-Fi or cell-phone data for emails or texts on the open seas, instead, two-way radios can work well to keep in touch. Family members can use these when they want to split up to enjoy different activities but stay in contact throughout the day. Just be sure to bring chargers or extra batteries, as well.

Post-It notes. When my family traveled with my mom and mother-in-law on a [Holland America Line](#) ship to Alaska, we stuck notes in the cracks of the grandmas' doors to let them know where they could meet us. If your family uses this old-fashioned form of "text" messages, Post-It notes on the doors would be a good way to make sure the missives are seen.

Highlighter. It sounds silly, but a simple highlighting pen is great for marking the daily printed list of shipboard activities and events. On our most recent [Carnival Cruise Lines](#) and [Disney Cruise Line](#) vacations, my daughter was in charge of highlighting the things we wanted to do together as a family. On big cruise ships such as those from [Royal Caribbean](#), there are so many things to do that you'll need help keeping track of them all.

Magnets. On our family cruises, I have found it helpful to have clip magnets to keep the ship's printed daily schedule of events handy in the cabin. On my summer-long educational voyage (not "cruise!") with Semester at Sea, we also used extra-sturdy magnets to hold up a towel that covered our cabin window to keep out Scandinavia's "midnight sun" when we were trying to go to sleep at 10 p.m.

Hand sanitizer and/or Clorox wipes. Cruise ships are notorious petri dishes for viruses. Thankfully, it's *de rigeur* these days to have hand-sanitizer stations at the entrances to dining rooms on cruise ships, and stewards clean your cabin daily. Still, it wouldn't hurt to do your own swiping of door knobs and remote controls throughout the duration of your cruise. Toting a small bottle of hand sanitizer in ports isn't a bad idea either.

Power strip. Electrical outlets in cruise-ships cabins can be scarce, and if you're a family who's into your gadgets, you'll want a small power strip or extension cord for charging iPads, cameras, and other gear simultaneously overnight. Some cruise ships forbid the use of these, so check with your cruise line before taking the time to pack one.

Formal clothing. Review the dress code for your cruise; some require "formal wear" on certain evenings if you plan on eating in the main dining room, but "formal" means something different for everyone. If you want the whole family to "get fancy," this doesn't mean you need to purchase a suit for your 7-year-old son. Long pants, closed-toe shoes, and a collared shirt should suffice.

Sweatshirt, sweater, or wrap for all. Even when you're sailing in the Caribbean, expect to get goosebumps in the air-conditioned areas of the ship. If you're easily chilled by forced air (like I am!), pack a couple of long-sleeve shirts or sweaters. In fact, I'd throw in a rain jacket for everyone, too, especially if you're heading to Alaska or traveling during thunderstorm season.

Hanging toiletry bags and/or shoe bags. In cramped cabin bathrooms, hanging toiletry bags are great space savers. Similarly, if you tend to pack lots of stuff, you might run out of room on shelves and drawers for storing everything. With this in mind, a folding, flexible shoe bag designed to hang from a closet rod can provide more storage space—not only for shoes but also for rolled T-shirts and underwear.

Laundry detergent. If you're a light packer and want to do some hand-washing of undergarments or socks, consider bringing a small bottle of laundry detergent to rinse out items in your cabin's bathroom sink. Typically all cabin showers have clotheslines.

Water bottles and day pack for shore excursions. Every time we left the ship this summer, we took with us at least two backpacks (Mom and Dad typically carried them) and four water bottles filled with ice water. Refiling water bottles saved us a ton of money on drinks in ports, and we used this strategy on the ship to stay hydrated. Day packs held rain jackets, maps, and snacks—plus souvenirs we bought along the way.