

As seen on MSNBC

For discounted cruises

Fifteen top cruise brokers (or “cruise consolidators”)

Budget Travel

Here, the potential for savings is even greater than it is for airfares. In its use of discount “consolidators,” the aviation industry is a “piker” by comparison to the cruise lines.

Today, in the world of cruises, a mammoth number of berths and cabins are heavily discounted when sold by the nearly 80 large consolidators that in turn receive discounts from the cruise lines. One cruiseship executive, in a recent appearance before a group of travel agents, actually told them to use the cruise prices set forth in his company’s catalogue as “only reference points”—meaning, the prices from which discounts were given!

If you were to be seated for the evening meal at an eight-person table aboard one of the major cruiseships, you’d probably find that three of your table-mates had each paid \$1,900 for their cruise, while two others had paid \$1,600, and three had paid \$1,200. And yet all were occupying exactly the same category of cabin, and receiving precisely the same shipboard privileges.

In the field of cruising, only the chump pays full price. We hate to use such vulgar language, but there’s no other way to capture the current chaos in the pricing of cruises. Consolidators get discounts, large consortiums of travel agencies get discounts, large chain agencies get discounts, and only the chump pays full price.

Frequently, you yourself may be able to find the companies offering these under-the-counter discounts by simply looking for firms that have a maritime term in their titles—they will either identify themselves as a company selling nothing other than cruises (“ABC Cruises”), or else call themselves “Ship Ahoy” or “Anchors Aweigh,” or

by some other cloying term. Chances are that such specialists in the cruise activity will also be sources of discounted prices.

But to be sure of obtaining the sharpest discount from the most experienced of cruise consolidators (they sometimes call themselves "cruise brokers"), you may find the following 15 representative companies useful:

Cruise Value Center is the largest family owned cruise consolidator in the industry. Its agents are knowledgeable and its prices are competitive in all markets and for all the major cruise lines.

Cruises of Distinction is a 20-year-old Michigan-based outfit that claims to sell virtually every cruise on the market at discounts between 40 percent and 70 percent off published rates. Its "cruise-grams" alert customers to special offers.

Spur-of-the-Moment Cruises. Owned by the ebullient Duke Butler, it's been known to give up to 50 percent off on last-minute bookings, somewhat less on cruises reserved two or three months ahead.

CruisesOnly. A giant Florida-based company, now part of a discounting conglomerate of cruise brokers (National Leisure Group, which owns 800/CRUISES as well). Visiting its Web site is like entering a mammoth cruise shopping center.

White Travel Service. A feisty independent, operating out of West Hartford, Connecticut. Has particularly good rates and a staff of experienced counselors who provide helpful advice when time permits. It currently has no Web site but hopes to have one up and running sometime during the summer.

GalaxSea Cruises & Tours. Fourteen-year-old California company whose stock-in-trade is last-minute sailings, with typical savings of 40 percent to 50 percent off published rates. GalaxSea is particularly strong on Alaska, the Panama Canal, Hawaii, and Mexico.

Cruise Direct. This upstart is already making a name for itself by ferreting out substantial discounts on Caribbean and Alaskan cruises.

The Cruise Brothers (800/827-7779 or 401/941-3999, <http://www.cruisebrothers.com>) Now celebrating more than 30 years of selling discount cruises, this family-owned consolidator offers bargains for destinations ranging from Africa to Alaska. The company

has a network of close to 300 agents across the country, and its partnerships with Shoretrips, Club Med, and Superclubs give registered users extra savings at those companies. It currently boasts more than 375,000 customers.

The Cruise Guy. This Web site by cruise expert Stewart Chiron lists the top five cruise deals (plus one bonus one) of every week - "a small sample of a huge inventory of possible discounts," Chiron says. The Web site has been up since 1995 and is now part of The Leisure Pros travel group. Though you can't order tickets online, you can book discount hotel and airfare deals through links to hoteldiscount.com and tpitickets.com.

Cruise.com is the Internet's largest cruise specialist, serving more than 500,000 customers since it began in 1998. The company, owned by Omega World Travel, Inc., always offers users five to 10 percent off of a cruise line's lowest rate and promises to beat all other consolidators by \$25-\$500. Customers can also get special discounts with some of Cruise.com's affiliates, such as airdeals.com.

Adventure Travels. About five years ago, this Florida-based business began its own discount cruise division. Though you can't book your cruise online as of now, you can search for bargains on 15 cruise lines and sign up to receive weekly emails about discounts.

Orbitz. What started as an airfare discounter has rapidly expanded to car rentals, hotels and of course, cruises. Use the Orbot to search for bargains by cruise line, destination, length, departure or specials, and your results conveniently show rates for interior, oceanview, balcony and suite options. Recently won a Forbes' Best of the Web award for its user-friendly set-up, which includes deck plans and a ratings system from Fielding Travel Guides.

Expedia. Using the Cruise Wizard to search by destination, month, length, price, line and/or ship, find cruises to both exotic lands and your standard Caribbean ports. Helpful features include reviews from both customers and Cruise Critic, as well as the ability to compare any number of cruises in an easily digestible manner. Sign up for its free biweekly e-mail newsletter to receive updates on cruise deals.

Travelocity. Travelers can scope out this very detailed site by using the search engine or reading reviews (provided by customers and once again, Cruise Critic). The site is brimming with information about ship features and about cruising in general (click on the Cruise Features

article link). Photo gallery and deck plans are impressive and show you if you're getting your money's worth.

Priceline has an under \$500 section that offers about 100 reasonably-priced cruises — an easy way to search for a steal. If you're feeling spontaneous, you may be able to find some cheaper rates under its last-minute cruises section. Though the site allows you to compare rates for many cruises, its layout isn't as user-friendly as others. Visit the media gallery for professional ship photos. Ratings provided by Fielding.

Cruises-n-more. This six-year-old consolidator prides itself on its knowledgeable agents, who go through weekly training to learn about the newest cut-rate deals. The company specializes in Hawaii, Alaska and Caribbean cruises (though you can find destinations to everywhere around the globe) and also compiles its own all-inclusive vacation packages. Fifty-five years old or over? Check out the Senior Specials for more bargains.