



FEDERAL MARITIME COMMISSION

Cruise Vacations: Know Before You Go



About the Federal Maritime Commission

The **Federal Maritime Commission** (FMC) is an independent U.S. government regulatory agency that oversees cruise industry financial responsibility requirements. Specifically, federal law requires cruise lines which embark passengers from U.S. ports and have berth accommodations for 50 or more passengers to have secured financial coverage to reimburse passengers in the event of nonperformance of transportation and to provide compensation when a passenger suffers death or injury on the high seas.

The FMC also helps cruise passengers and cruise lines resolve disputes that may arise before or after a cruise vacation. While the FMC does not have formal authority over cruise line service issues, FMC does offer free mediation and *ombuds* services to assist parties in resolving disputes.

Avoid Rough Seas

Cruise vacations can provide an economical and enjoyable vacation experience for countless passengers each year. While most cruise passengers enjoy their vacation, sometimes problems do occur.

The FMC's Office of Consumer Affairs and Dispute Resolution Services (CADRS) receives numerous complaints each year from cruise passengers. Some examples of common complaints include:

- Passenger cancellation penalties
- Air and ground transportation problems
- Problems with documentation and identification needed for boarding
- Passenger dissatisfaction with the size, location, and/or quality of cabins
- Changes to a cruise itinerary
- Concerns involving special accommodations for persons with disabilities



Know Before You Go

Read and Understand the Ticket Contract

Make sure that you read and understand the cruise line's ticket contract before you purchase your cruise. Because the government does not regulate the terms and conditions of cruises, your ticket contract governs your rights and responsibilities with respect to your cruise and related services provided by the cruise line.

Your ticket contract contains important information including, but not limited to:

- Cancellation policies and penalties
- Air and ground transportation disclaimers
- Information regarding assistance for special needs
- The cruise line's disclaimer of responsibility for itinerary changes
- A list of prohibited articles that may not be brought on the ship
- Additional fees for tips and cruise line activities
- Information regarding availability of and costs for medical services
- The place and procedure for filing claims against the cruise line

Most cruise lines have a copy of the ticket contract on their website, or you can ask your travel agent to provide you with a copy.

Insurance and Travel Protection Plans

Cruise passengers are often surprised to learn that they may not be entitled to compensation if they are forced to cancel their cruise due to illness or if they miss a cruise due to flight or ground transportation delays. To avoid such problems, consider purchasing travel insurance. Carefully read the terms and conditions of your insurance plan to ensure that you understand the coverage and deductibles associated with your plan. Because insurance is regulated by individual states, insurance policies and regulation may vary. You may also want to contact your state insurance department to verify that your insurance provider is properly authorized to sell insurance and that there is no history of complaints associated with your provider.



Documentation

You may be denied boarding the vessel if you do not have appropriate travel documents. While an official passport is generally required for travel to foreign destinations, some destinations may permit the use of your official birth certificate issued by the Vital Records Department in your State of birth. Certain destinations may require passengers to obtain a visa to visit a particular port of call. To ensure that you have the correct travel documents, contact the U.S. Department of Homeland Security toll-free within the United States at (877) 227-5511, or visit their website at www.cbp.gov.

Accommodations

Make sure you are comfortable with the size and location of your stateroom. Many cruise lines provide a chart on their website that describes accommodations offered including room size and location. For example, if you are looking for a quiet room, you may want to avoid booking a cabin that is in close proximity to the ship's casino or other entertainment forums.

You may also wish to check whether there are lifeboats or other items that may obstruct the view from your cabin window or porthole. Normally these features are marked on the accommodations chart.

Consult your ticket contract ahead of time to learn about the cruise line's policies on reassignment of staterooms.

Special Needs

Cruise vacations can be excellent choices for travelers with disabilities, but choosing the right cruise line is important. Cruise lines must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, but there may be a distinction between cruise lines in amenities and programs for passengers with special needs. Before you start planning your cruise, here are some helpful points to consider and to ask the cruise line:

- Find a travel agent that specializes in travel for people with disabilities.
- Ask if the cruise line has a special needs brochure.
- Most cruise lines have alert kits for guests with hearing impairments, which can be fitted to any cabin.
- Service dogs are permitted on all ships, but may not be allowed to disembark at all ports.
- While ships themselves may be accessible, the same may not always be true for tenders, ports and shore excursions.

For additional information and assistance regarding the ADA, please contact the U.S. Department of Justice, ADA Information Line, at (800) 514-0301 (voice) or (800) 514-0383 (TTY). You may also visit www.ada.gov/infoline.

Where to get help

FOR ASSISTANCE OUTSIDE OF THE UNITED STATES, CONTACT THE U.S. EMBASSY OR CONSULATE

General – Federal Maritime Commission, CADRS: 1-866-448-9686 (toll free)

Passengers with Disabilities – Department of Justice ADA Information Line:
(800) 514-0301 (v); (800) 514-0383 (TTY)

Travel Documents – Department of Homeland Security: (877) 227-5511

Vessel Safety – U.S. Coast Guard, Office of Commercial Vessel Compliance:
(202) 372-1251

Health/Sanitation – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Vessel
Sanitation Program: (800) 232-4636

Assistance for victims of crime – Federal Bureau of Investigation:
866-828-5320

How Can the Federal Maritime Commission Help Me?

In the event that you experience a problem with your cruise, the FMC's CADRS staff may be able to help. CADRS mediates disputes between cruise passengers and cruise lines on a voluntary basis at no cost to you.

For questions about the Commission's regulations concerning financial responsibility for cruise line's nonperformance or passenger death or injury, please contact the FMC's Bureau of Certification and Licensing at:

(202) 523-5818 (phone) | (202) 523-5830 (fax) | pvo@fmc.gov

Additional Federal Government Resources

Safety:

United States Coast Guard, Office of Commercial Vessel Compliance (CG-CVC), www.uscg.mil/hq/cgvcv.

Onboard crime:

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), www.fbi.gov.

Health/Sanitation:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Vessel Sanitation Program, www.cdc.gov/nceh/vsp.

Cruise Preparation Checklist

- Read and understand the cruise line's ticket contract
- Contact the cruise line for information and assistance regarding special needs
- Note any cancellation deadlines/policies
- Note and budget for additional fees for cruise activities, etc.
- Consider purchasing travel insurance and review its terms and conditions
- Make sure you have the proper travel documents for your cruise
- Ensure that your air or ground travel allows for timely arrival for embarking on your cruise
- Ensure that you are comfortable with the size, quality, and location of the stateroom you select
- Do not pack prohibited items
- Make sure to pack all your necessary medications

WWW.FMC.GOV



Contact Information

To request assistance with a cruise line, please contact CADRS:
(888) 448-9586 (toll free) | (202) 523-5807 (local) | (202) 275-0059 (fax) | complaints@fmc.gov

For more information about the FMC, please visit www.fmc.gov

