



Cruise Drink Packages: Are They Worth It?

How to compare package rules, gratuities, port days, and your real drinking habits

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The Real Question Is Not "How Many Drinks Can I Have?"

Cruise drink packages are marketed as convenience, value, and freedom. For some travelers, they deliver all three. For others, the package becomes an expensive challenge to consume enough beverages to justify the cost. The right decision depends less on what the package advertises and more on how you actually spend a vacation.

The useful question is: Will the package cost less than the beverages and convenience I would otherwise buy, after including service charges, port-day habits, package rules, and beverages already included in the cruise fare?

A traveler who enjoys specialty coffee in the morning, bottled water during the day, cocktails before dinner, wine with dinner, and a nightcap may find the package valuable without feeling pressured. A traveler who drinks mostly complimentary water, coffee, and iced tea may never approach the break-even point. Couples can reach different answers, but some cruise lines require all adults in the same stateroom to purchase an alcoholic package when one adult buys it.

Prices and terms change frequently. Cruise lines use dynamic pricing, promotions, itinerary-specific taxes, ship-specific menus, and package limits. Treat any online price example as a snapshot, not a promise.

Scott's Take: A drink package should support the vacation you already want. It should never make you feel that you have to drink more to win.

What Counts as a Drink Package?

Cruise lines usually offer several beverage tiers.

Alcoholic beverage package

This generally includes beer, wine by the glass, cocktails, spirits, and a range of nonalcoholic beverages. A maximum menu price per drink may apply. Premium items above the limit may be excluded or charged at the difference, depending on the line.

Refreshment or zero-proof package

These packages may include premium coffee, tea, bottled water, soda, fresh juice, mocktails, smoothies, and energy drinks. They can be valuable for travelers who do not drink alcohol but purchase several upgraded beverages each day.

Soda package

A soda plan typically covers fountain beverages. It may use a souvenir cup, bar service, or both. Canned and bottled soda may be excluded.

Water, coffee, or specialty packages

Some lines sell bottled-water deliveries, coffee cards, wine packages, or bundles tied to dining and internet.

The name of a package does not tell you the details. Two premium packages can have different limits, brands, venues, private-island rules, and service charges.

What Beverages Are Already Included?

Before calculating package value, identify what the cruise fare includes. Mainstream cruise lines commonly provide tap water, basic brewed coffee, tea, and selected juices or flavored drinks in certain dining venues. Availability changes by line and time of day.

If those included drinks satisfy you, a package may be unnecessary. If you regularly purchase bottled water, espresso drinks, soda, fresh juice, mocktails, or alcohol, the calculation changes.

Remember that a package can have value beyond alcohol. A traveler might buy two specialty coffees, three bottles of water, a soda, a mocktail, wine at dinner, and an evening cocktail. Those purchases accumulate quickly. Another traveler may carry a reusable bottle, drink buffet coffee, and purchase one glass of wine. Their totals are completely different.

Ask which included beverages are available in the main dining room, buffet, café, private destination, and room service. Packages often exclude minibar and room-service beverages.

Build a Realistic Daily Beverage List

Do not begin with the package price. Begin with a normal vacation day.

Write down what you would probably buy if no package existed:

- Morning specialty coffee
- Bottled water for an excursion
- Soda or sparkling water at lunch
- Poolside cocktail or beer
- Pre-dinner drink
- Wine with dinner
- Evening cocktail
- Mocktail, smoothie, or energy drink

Then estimate menu prices using current cruise-line examples from your sailing. Multiply by the number of sea days and port days separately. Port days often involve fewer onboard purchases because travelers are ashore for hours.

Use conservative estimates. If the package only works when you assume eight alcoholic drinks every day, but your normal pattern is three, the package is probably not a financial fit.

The Break-Even Formula

A simple calculation is:

Total package cost, including gratuity and taxes, divided by the number of cruise days equals the daily package cost.

Then compare that daily cost with the retail total of beverages you would actually buy.

Suppose a package costs \$80 per day before an 18 percent service charge. The true daily cost is \$94.40. If your realistic purchases total \$65, the package costs more. If they total \$110, the package may save money. The exact figures vary, and some cruise lines display service charges differently.

Do not forget embarkation day. Most packages are sold for the full voyage even though guests board partway through the day. Certain ports or state laws may affect when alcohol can be served or which drinks are available.

The break-even point is not only financial. Some guests willingly pay slightly more for predictable budgeting and freedom from checking each menu price. That convenience has personal value, but it should be identified honestly.

Gratuities and Service Charges

The package price shown during shopping may not be the final amount. Cruise lines commonly add a service charge or gratuity to beverage packages. Royal Caribbean, for example, states that an 18 percent gratuity is added to beverage-package purchases except where prohibited by law. Other lines use their own percentages and terms.

Some promotions call a package included while requiring prepaid package gratuities or service charges. Norwegian Cruise Line's Free at Sea promotion is a familiar example of a bundle whose marketing value should be evaluated together with required charges and fare differences.

When comparing options, record the complete checkout price. Do not compare one line's pre-gratuity advertisement with another line's final total.

A package gratuity generally covers routine service for included beverages. You may still tip extra for exceptional service, but you should understand what is already included before adding cash automatically.

The Stateroom Purchase Rule

Many cruise lines require every adult of legal drinking age in the same stateroom to purchase the alcoholic package when one adult buys it. The purpose is to prevent sharing.

Exceptions may be available when another adult does not drink because of pregnancy, recovery, religion, medication, or personal choice. The line may require the non-drinking adult to buy a nonalcoholic package instead. Policies and documentation vary, and exceptions are not guaranteed.

This rule can change the value dramatically. One adult may easily justify the package while the other drinks very little. Calculate the combined cost for the stateroom, not just the active drinker.

Children and underage guests may have different package requirements. Never assume the online cart has applied the best configuration; review every guest and charge.

Packages Cannot Be Shared

Drink packages are assigned to an individual guest and are generally nontransferable. Ordering beverages for friends, passing a drink to another adult, or using one guest's card for multiple people can violate the terms and lead to package cancellation without refund.

A package is not a group tab. If several friends are traveling, each person needs the appropriate package or must pay per drink.

Parents should also understand that nonalcoholic packages are assigned individually. A soda cup or package credential is not intended for the whole family.

The package rules are part of the purchase. Read them rather than relying on advice from a social-media group where policies may be outdated or confused with another cruise line.

Port Days Change the Math

On a sea day, you may purchase beverages from breakfast through late evening. On a port day, you might leave at 8 a.m., spend seven hours ashore, and return for dinner. The package still costs the full daily amount.

Count port-intensive itineraries carefully. A five-port Caribbean cruise has fewer onboard hours than a cruise with three sea days. Private islands and cruise-line destinations complicate the calculation because some packages work ashore and others do not, or work only at selected venues.

Alcohol purchased in port is usually not part of the ship package. Bottles bought ashore may be held until the end of the cruise. Local beach-club packages are separate expenses.

If your favorite port days involve all-inclusive resorts or excursions that include beverages, the onboard package may duplicate spending.

Beverage Price Limits and Exclusions

Alcoholic packages often set a maximum price for each included drink. Royal Caribbean's Deluxe Beverage Package, for example, currently describes a per-drink value limit and discounts on certain bottled wines. Carnival, Norwegian, MSC, and other lines use different inclusions, brands, and limits.

Common exclusions include:

- Bottles of wine or liquor
- Drinks in souvenir glasses
- Minibar and room-service beverages
- Specialty events, tastings, or classes
- Certain premium brands
- Large-format beverages or buckets
- Beverages at independent venues
- Merchandise and tobacco products

Some lines charge the full price when a drink exceeds the limit; others charge the difference plus gratuity. Verify the current rule.

Coffee shops, fresh-juice bars, milkshake venues, and private destinations may have special exclusions. Unlimited does not mean every beverage in every location.

Daily Alcohol Limits and Service Responsibility

Some cruise lines impose a maximum number of alcoholic drinks within a day; others do not publish a numerical package limit but still enforce responsible-service rules. Carnival's program is known for a daily alcoholic-beverage limit, while other lines reserve the right to refuse service based on intoxication or behavior.

A numerical limit is not a goal. Alcohol affects people differently, and sun, dehydration, medication, motion, and disrupted sleep can increase risk. Drink water, eat regularly, and know when to stop.

The ship's staff can deny alcohol service even when the package is active. Package purchase does not remove age laws, safety rules, or guest-conduct standards.

Travel protection typically does not turn preventable intoxication-related problems into covered events. Read policy exclusions.

Wine Drinkers Have a Different Calculation

Travelers who mainly drink wine should compare the by-the-glass selection with bottle packages and permitted carry-on wine. A general beverage package may include wine only up to a menu-price threshold. Your preferred wine may cost more or be available only by the bottle.

Some lines allow each eligible adult to bring a limited amount of wine or champagne at embarkation, with corkage rules varying by venue and fare. Other alcohol is usually prohibited. Policies can change and differ by departure port.

A bottle of wine shared over dinner may be less expensive than two full beverage packages. Conversely, a traveler who enjoys wine plus coffee, water, and cocktails may find the broader package valuable.

Ask to see current sample menus and wine lists, recognizing that availability changes by ship and itinerary.

Nonalcoholic Packages Can Be the Better Value

Zero-proof packages deserve a separate calculation. Premium coffee, fresh juice, soda, bottled water, smoothies, energy drinks, and mocktails can produce a high retail total without alcohol.

They may suit teenagers, pregnant travelers, people taking medication, guests in recovery, and anyone who wants predictable beverage spending. However, every item is not necessarily included. Protein shakes, specialty café food, room-service beverages, or souvenir containers may be excluded.

A soda-only plan is less expensive but narrow. Families should compare how much soda each person actually drinks and whether the package is required for every child.

Do not assume a nonalcoholic package is automatically cheap. Compare the final price with realistic purchases.

Convenience Versus Consumption

Packages provide emotional convenience. Guests can try a new cocktail, order sparkling water, or leave an unfinished drink without feeling that each choice wasted money. They also create a predictable onboard budget.

The downside is psychological pressure. Some people count drinks, order beverages they do not want, or continue drinking because they paid for access. That behavior reduces the quality of the vacation.

The healthiest approach is to decide based on your normal pattern, then forget the break-even calculation onboard. If the package is purchased, use it naturally. If paying individually, enjoy what you want without treating each menu decision as a financial emergency.

When a Drink Package Often Makes Sense

A package is more likely to work when:

- You purchase several beverage types throughout the day
- The itinerary includes multiple sea days
- You value a predictable budget
- You enjoy specialty coffee, bottled water, and nonalcoholic drinks in addition to alcohol

- Both adults in the cabin have similar habits
- The pre-cruise sale price is materially lower than onboard pricing
- The package works at the private destinations you will visit

It can also make sense for a celebratory group when everyone understands the rules and cost.

When Paying by the Drink Often Makes Sense

Individual purchases are often better when:

- You drink little or no alcohol
- One adult drinks and the other does not
- The itinerary has long port days
- You are satisfied with included beverages
- You prefer bottled wine rather than several glasses or cocktails
- You have loyalty benefits or suite inclusions
- Your fare already includes a beverage bundle
- You would feel pressured to consume more

A prepaid onboard credit can provide budgeting convenience without a package, although credit rules and refundability vary.

How Major Cruise-Line Approaches Differ

Royal Caribbean

Royal Caribbean sells alcoholic, refreshment, soda, and water options. The line requires eligible adults in the same stateroom to purchase the alcoholic package when one does, subject to current exception procedures. Package prices vary, and gratuity is added.

Carnival

Carnival offers CHEERS! alcoholic and zero-proof products, plus soda options. Its rules include per-day limits, price thresholds, and stateroom purchase requirements. Review the current Q&A for itinerary exclusions and service charges.

Norwegian Cruise Line

Norwegian often bundles beverages through Free at Sea. Evaluate the fare, required gratuities, included guest eligibility, and package terms together. Included does not always mean no additional charge.

MSC Cruises

MSC sells tiered beverage packages and frequently promotes drinks-and-Wi-Fi bundles. Inclusions and availability can vary by market, itinerary, ship, and promotion.

The names and details change. Always price the actual sailing rather than choosing based on a line's general reputation.

A Five-Minute Decision Worksheet

Write the final package cost for every required guest. Divide by cruise days. Then list a realistic sea day and port day.

Sea-day estimate

- Coffee: _____
- Water: _____
- Soda or juice: _____
- Alcohol or mocktails: _____
- Total: _____

Port-day estimate

- Coffee: _____
- Water: _____
- Evening beverages: _____
- Total: _____

Multiply by the number of each type of day. Add any gratuities and taxes. Compare the result with the package total. Then ask whether predictable spending is worth paying a reasonable premium.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the package cheaper before the cruise?

Often, but not always. Cruise lines promote varying discounts. Record the current checkout price and monitor the planner if the line permits cancellation and repurchase.

Can I buy it halfway through the cruise?

Some lines permit limited onboard purchase windows and prorating; others require full-voyage purchase. Do not rely on this strategy without checking the rule.

Does the package work on private islands?

Sometimes. Coverage differs by line and destination. Verify the specific island and venues.

Are gratuities included?

A gratuity or service charge is commonly added to the package price. Promotions may handle it differently. Read the final invoice.

Can I cancel the package?

Pre-cruise cancellation may be allowed before a deadline. Onboard refund rules are more limited. Check current terms.

What if I become ill and cannot use it?

Packages are generally not priced according to actual consumption. Refunds for illness or unused days are not guaranteed.

Can teenagers buy a zero-proof package?

Usually, subject to the line's age and stateroom rules. Compare soda and broader nonalcoholic options.

The Bottom Line

A drink package is worth it when the complete cost is reasonable for the beverages and convenience you would genuinely use. It is not worth it simply because it is marketed as unlimited or because other travelers insist it is essential.

Calculate the full stateroom cost, include service charges, separate sea days from port days, and read the rules for private destinations, price limits, sharing, and exceptions. The best package is the one that matches your vacation rather than changing your behavior.

Sources and Current Policy References

Policy and source review date: August 1, 2026. Cruise-line prices, package terms, and policies can change. Verify the current terms for the specific sailing before publishing or relying on a price example.

[Royal Caribbean - Beverage Package Overview](#)

[Royal Caribbean - Deluxe Beverage Package](#)

[Royal Caribbean - Beverage Package Gratuities](#)

[Carnival - Drink Packages](#)

[Norwegian Cruise Line - Free at Sea](#)

[MSC Cruises - Promotion Terms and Package Examples](#)

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