



Cruise Gratuities Explained

Daily service charges, drink and dining gratuities, cash tips, and realistic cruise budgeting

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Cruise gratuities are one of the most misunderstood parts of vacation pricing. A traveler may see a cruise advertised at an attractive fare and later discover daily service charges, beverage-package gratuities, specialty dining service charges, spa gratuities, and optional tips for porters or tour guides. None of these items is especially difficult by itself, but the terminology and timing can make the total feel confusing.

This guide explains the most common types of gratuities, how they are charged, who they generally support, when prepaying may help, and how to include them in your vacation budget. Policies differ by cruise line, ship, itinerary, fare type, and date, so always review the exact terms attached to your reservation.

KalviTravel Tip: Compare the complete vacation cost, not only the advertised cruise fare. Daily gratuities and service charges can add hundreds of dollars to a family cruise.

What Are Daily Cruise Gratuities?

Most mainstream cruise lines apply a daily gratuity or service charge for each guest. It is typically charged for every night of the cruise and posted to the onboard account unless it was prepaid before departure or included in the fare.

Cruise lines use different names, including:

- Daily gratuities
- Crew appreciation
- Hotel service charge
- Daily service charge
- Onboard service gratuity

The charge is designed to recognize the crew members who provide hotel, dining, and behind-the-scenes service throughout the voyage. Instead of requiring travelers to tip every employee individually, the cruise line distributes the charge according to its compensation or gratuity system.

The exact distribution formula is generally controlled by the cruise line. Travelers should avoid assuming the entire amount goes only to the stateroom attendant and assigned dining-room team.

Who Benefits From the Daily Charge?

Cruise lines commonly describe daily gratuities as supporting crew members in areas such as:

- Stateroom service
- Main dining rooms
- Buffet and casual dining
- Culinary support
- Guest service or hotel operations
- Other behind-the-scenes positions that contribute to the passenger experience

A passenger may interact directly with only a few employees, but many crew members support the vacation. Food is prepared, dishes are cleaned, cabins are supplied, public areas are maintained, luggage is handled, and service operations run throughout the day and night.

Because cruise-line distribution methods vary, ask the cruise line rather than relying on assumptions from social media.

How Much Are Daily Gratuities?

Rates vary by cruise line and can change. Suites and higher-category accommodations may have a higher daily amount because of additional service or dedicated suite personnel.

As one current example, Royal Caribbean lists an automatic daily gratuity of \$18.50 per guest in standard staterooms and junior suites and \$21 per guest in suites as of August 1, 2026. That example should not be applied to other cruise lines or future sailings without verification.

The basic calculation is:

Daily rate × number of guests charged × number of cruise nights

For example, at an illustrative rate of \$18 per person per day:

- One person on a seven-night cruise: \$126
- Two people on a seven-night cruise: \$252
- Four people on a seven-night cruise: \$504

This is why gratuities should be included in the budget from the beginning.

Are Children Charged Daily Gratuities?

Many cruise lines charge daily gratuities for children, although the minimum age and exceptions vary. The reason is that children still receive cabin service, dining service, food preparation, cleanup, and other hotel services.

Do not assume an infant, toddler, or third and fourth guest is exempt. Check the current policy for the exact cruise line and reservation.

For a family, this can significantly change the total. If four travelers are charged on a seven-night cruise, the gratuity total may be roughly twice the amount paid by a couple.

Prepaying Versus Paying Onboard

Many cruise lines allow guests to prepay daily gratuities before sailing. Otherwise, the charges are normally added to the onboard account during the cruise.

Advantages of Prepaying

Prepaying may help because:

- More of the vacation is paid before departure
- The onboard account begins with fewer expected charges
- Budgeting feels simpler
- A future rate increase may not affect prepaid gratuities, depending on the cruise line's terms
- Group leaders can communicate a clearer total

Advantages of Paying Onboard

Paying onboard may help because:

- You keep the funds until the cruise
- Onboard credit may be applied to eligible charges
- You avoid adding another payment before final payment
- Your fare or promotion may later include gratuities

The best choice is usually about cash flow and budgeting rather than service quality. Prepaying does not ordinarily mean the crew receives a larger amount, and paying onboard does not mean you are less appreciative.

Can Daily Gratuities Be Changed or Removed?

Policies vary considerably.

Some cruise lines describe the daily charge as adjustable through guest services if the guest has a service concern. Others treat it as part of the fare or a mandatory hotel service charge that cannot be removed. Certain countries, fare types, or booking markets may include gratuities automatically.

Before making a change, speak with guest services about the service issue. This gives the ship an opportunity to correct the problem. Removing an entire daily charge may affect crew members who had no connection to the concern.

A service problem involving one interaction is normally better addressed directly and promptly than saved until the end of the cruise.

KalviTravel Tip: If something is wrong, politely report it while the cruise line still has time to fix it. Waiting until the final morning can make a useful solution much harder.

Does Paying Daily Gratuities Mean You Should Never Tip Cash?

No additional cash tip is required simply because you received good normal service. The daily gratuity system is intended to cover regular hotel and dining service.

Some passengers choose to give an extra cash tip when a crew member provides exceptional service. Examples might include:

- A stateroom attendant handles a special request consistently
- A dining-room server manages allergies or mobility needs with exceptional care
- A crew member helps solve a difficult travel problem
- A suite attendant or butler provides substantial personalized service

Extra tipping is personal. It should be based on appreciation, not pressure from other travelers. A written compliment naming the employee on the cruise survey can also be meaningful because recognition may affect awards, evaluations, and career opportunities.

Beverage Gratuities and Service Charges

Beverage purchases often carry a separate automatic gratuity or service charge. This is different from the daily hotel gratuity.

Depending on the cruise line, a percentage may be added to:

- Individual alcoholic drinks
- Specialty coffees
- Bottled water
- Soda
- Beverage packages
- Mini-bar purchases

If a drink package is purchased, the service charge may be collected when the package is bought. A promotion advertising a package as included or free may still require payment of gratuities based on the package value or cruise-line formula.

Royal Caribbean, for example, states that an 18 percent gratuity is added to beverage purchases and certain dining purchases. Other cruise lines use their own rates.

When comparing package prices, determine whether the displayed price already includes the service charge. A package shown at a daily price may cost more at checkout after gratuity is added.

Specialty Dining Gratuities

Specialty dining can be handled in several ways:

- The cover charge may include a service component
- A percentage gratuity may be added at purchase
- A dining package may add a service charge during checkout
- A receipt may include a line for an optional additional tip

A blank tip line does not always mean the staff received no gratuity. Review the receipt and the cruise line's policy before tipping twice unintentionally.

When the meal is included in a promotion, the promotion may still require a service charge. This is common with marketing phrases such as free dining or included dining credit.

Spa, Salon, and Personal Services

Spa and salon services usually have a separate automatic gratuity or service charge. This may apply to:

- Massages
- Facials
- Hair services
- Nail services
- Barber services
- Certain fitness or wellness appointments

The receipt may also provide a line for an extra tip. Check whether the automatic percentage has already been included.

Spa services on ships may be operated by a contracted company, so their policies can differ from the cruise line's general hotel gratuities.

Room Service and Food Delivery

Room-service tipping varies by cruise line and by whether a delivery charge is imposed.

Possible arrangements include:

- Complimentary continental breakfast with optional tipping
- A per-order delivery fee
- A service charge added to the order
- Selected suite delivery included in the fare
- An optional cash tip to the person delivering the order

A room-service fee is not always the same as a gratuity. Check the menu or order screen. When no gratuity is included, some travelers choose to tip a few dollars for delivery.

Shore Excursion Guides and Drivers

Cruise-line daily gratuities normally do not cover shore excursion guides and drivers. Excursion tipping is usually optional and based on the quality, length, and personal nature of the service.

Consider:

- Was the guide knowledgeable and engaging?
- Did the driver handle difficult traffic safely?
- Was the excursion private or a large group?
- Did the team provide extra assistance?
- Are gratuities customary in the destination?

Carry small bills in appropriate currency when you expect to tip. U.S. dollars are accepted in many Caribbean cruise destinations, but not everywhere and not always at a favorable exchange rate.

Porters at the Cruise Terminal

Porters who take checked luggage at the terminal are usually not included in cruise gratuities. Tipping customs differ by port, but many U.S. travelers give a small cash tip per bag.

A porter should not demand money or threaten that luggage will not arrive without a tip. If behavior seems improper, seek assistance from port or cruise-line personnel.

Keep passports, medication, electronics, valuables, and boarding documents with you. They should not be handed over in checked luggage regardless of the tip.

Hotel Shuttles, Drivers, and Airport Transportation

Tips for transportation are separate from cruise gratuities. Depending on location and service, travelers may consider tipping:

- Hotel shuttle drivers
- Private transfer drivers
- Taxi drivers
- Rideshare drivers
- Luggage handlers
- Valet attendants

Check whether a private transfer quote already includes gratuity. Some companies include it; others display a suggested percentage or allow an optional tip.

Casino Dealers, Bartenders, and Other Crew

Bartender gratuities may already be included in each purchase or package. Casino tipping practices differ by game and region. Youth staff, entertainment staff, officers, and medical personnel may have policies that restrict or discourage tipping.

When uncertain, ask guest services. Do not pressure a crew member to accept cash if the position's rules prohibit it.

Gratuities on Luxury and Premium Cruise Lines

Some cruise lines advertise gratuities included in the fare. This can make budgeting easier, but included gratuities do not always cover every service.

Separate charges may still apply to:

- Spa services
- Premium beverage purchases
- Shore excursions
- Private guides and drivers
- Porters
- Butler or guide recognition beyond the included amount

Included gratuities also should not be confused with an all-inclusive promise that everything on the trip is covered.

Gratuities in Different Booking Markets

Cruise pricing and gratuity practices can vary based on the country where the reservation was made.

Consumer pricing laws, customary service charges, taxes, and cruise-line marketing differ around the world.

Two guests on the same ship may have booked under different terms. One fare may include service charges while another shows them separately.

Use the confirmation and terms for your booking rather than relying on a screenshot from another traveler.

Understanding Promotions That Say Gratuities Included

A promotion may include only the daily hotel gratuity, not beverage, dining, spa, excursion, or transportation tips. It may apply only to the first two guests, selected cabin categories, or particular fare codes.

Questions to ask:

- Which gratuities are included?
- Which guests are covered?
- Does the benefit apply for every night?
- Are suite gratuities fully included?
- Are beverage-package service charges separate?
- What happens if the booking is changed or repriced?

Save a copy of the promotion terms and booking confirmation.

Group Cruise Planning and Gratuities

Gratuities deserve special attention in group travel. A low advertised per-person price can cause confusion if members later learn about required or expected charges.

A group leader or travel advisor should communicate:

- The current daily gratuity rate
- Whether it is prepaid or charged onboard
- Whether children are charged
- The estimated total per cabin
- Which packages add separate service charges
- The final payment deadline for prepaid options

For church groups, reunions, clubs, and extended families, clear communication prevents the organizer from appearing to have hidden costs.

Building a Realistic Cruise Budget

Create a gratuity section in the vacation budget with separate lines for:

1. Daily hotel gratuities
2. Beverage package or drink purchase gratuities
3. Specialty dining service charges
4. Spa or salon gratuities
5. Room-service delivery or optional tips
6. Shore excursion guides and drivers
7. Terminal porters
8. Hotel and airport transfers
9. Extra recognition for exceptional service

Some of these are expected charges and others are optional. Separating them helps travelers make informed decisions.

Sample Couple's Budget

For a seven-night cruise, a couple might estimate:

- Daily gratuities: rate $\times$ 2 guests $\times$ 7 nights
- Beverage service charges: included at package checkout or added to drinks
- Porters: small cash amount for checked bags
- Excursion tips: based on number and type of tours
- Transfer tips: based on transportation arrangements

Sample Family Budget

A family of four should verify whether all four guests are charged daily gratuities. Add package service charges only for guests who have the package, according to cruise-line rules.

The total can be significant, but it should not be a surprise when planned in advance.

Common Misunderstandings

“The Cruise Fare Includes All Tips”

Usually not on mainstream cruise lines unless the fare or promotion specifically says so.

“The Daily Charge Is Only for My Room Attendant”

Cruise lines commonly distribute it among multiple service teams.

“A Free Drink Package Has No Cost”

Some promotions require payment of service charges or gratuities.

“A Blank Tip Line Means Nothing Was Included”

The receipt may show a blank line even when an automatic charge was already applied.

“Children Do Not Pay Gratuities”

Many cruise lines charge children. Verify the age policy.

“If I Prepay, I Must Still Hand Out Envelopes”

No. Extra cash is optional unless the cruise line states otherwise for a specific service.

“Removing Gratuities Only Affects One Employee”

The charge may support a broader crew distribution system.

Frequently Asked Questions

When Do Daily Gratuities Appear on the Account?

They may post each day, in groups, or as a prepaid item before sailing. Check the onboard account regularly.

Can Onboard Credit Pay Gratuities?

Often, refundable or nonrefundable onboard credit can be applied to eligible onboard charges, but restrictions vary. Prepaid gratuities generally cannot be paid with onboard credit that is not available until sailing.

Are Gratuities Refundable if I Cancel?

Prepaid gratuities are generally refundable when a cruise is canceled under applicable terms, but timing and methods vary. Verify with the cruise line or travel advisor.

What if I Upgrade to a Suite?

The higher suite rate may apply. If gratuities were prepaid, the cruise line may collect the difference.

What Currency Should I Use for Cash Tips?

Onboard, U.S. dollars are commonly accepted on cruises departing the United States. In ports, local currency may be more appropriate. Small, clean bills are useful.

Should I Tip at an Included Main Dining Room Meal?

Normal dining service is generally covered by the daily gratuity system. Extra tipping is optional for exceptional service.

Do I Tip at a Bar When an Automatic Percentage Is Added?

No additional amount is required. You may add more for exceptional service if desired.

Is a Service Charge Legally the Same as a Tip?

Terminology and legal treatment vary by cruise line and jurisdiction. Review the cruise line's description rather than relying only on the word used.

Can I Give a Gift Instead of Cash?

Crew members have limited cabin space and must follow company policies. Cash and specific positive recognition are often more practical than bulky gifts.

Money-Saving Tips Without Shortchanging Service

Gratuities are not usually the best area to reduce costs after booking. Instead:

- Include them in the original cruise comparison
- Look for promotions that genuinely include daily gratuities
- Compare drink packages after service charges are added
- Avoid buying packages you will not use
- Prepay when it protects against a published increase, if the terms allow
- Use a realistic excursion and transfer budget
- Review the onboard account for duplicate or incorrect charges

Saving money should come from choosing the right fare and extras, not from being surprised by service charges and trying to remove them at the end.

The Bottom Line

Cruise gratuities are manageable when travelers understand that several different charges may exist. The daily hotel gratuity supports broad service operations. Beverage, specialty dining, spa, room-service, excursion, porter, and transportation tips may be separate.

Ask three questions about every package or service:

1. Is a gratuity or service charge already included?
2. Is an additional amount automatically added?
3. Is anything further optional?

Then put the expected total into the vacation budget before sailing.

Gratuities should not feel like a hidden penalty. They are part of the real cost of cruise service. Clear planning allows you to enjoy the vacation, recognize excellent crew members appropriately, and avoid an unpleasant surprise on the final statement.

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 - Onboard Service Gratuities](#)[Royal Caribbean - Beverage Package Gratuities](#)[Norwegian Cruise Line - Cruise Fare Inclusions](#)[Carnival Cruise Line - Service Gratuity Information](#)

Why Book With KalviTravel

Personal planning matters: A cruise is more than a ship and a price. Cabin location, fare rules, drink and internet packages, gratuities, travel protection, airport timing, and port logistics can all change the final cost and the quality of your vacation. KalviTravel helps you compare the complete trip, understand the fine print, and choose options that match the way you actually travel.

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