

# So Many Ports, So Little Time

The midnight buffet line isn't the only crowded place you'll find on a Caribbean cruise. Wait until you step off the gangway into the ports of call.

Last year, the islands' five most-visited ports saw more than 11 million cruise passengers disembark for shopping, organized excursions or self-guided wandering, according to the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO).

With so many people on the prowl, how do you decide what to do? We talked to cruise and island experts to ascertain the ports' top eating places and activities, including do-it-yourself and ship-sponsored excursions. Activities such as catamaran booze cruises and Jeep tours can be expensive if purchased through your cruise line; keep in mind that many excursions can be arranged on your own in advance or at dockside kiosks once you get off the ship. Or design your own outing.

Note: While Puerto Rico saw nearly 1.4 million cruise passen-



CHICHEN ITZA COURTESY MEXICO TOURISM BOARD

gers, according to the CTO, its major port, San Juan, is the embarkation point for many cruise ships and thus isn't included here. —Elissa Leibowitz Poma

PORT	VISITORS	MUST DO	WHERE TO EAT	DO-IT-YOURSELF	SHIP EXCURSIONS
<b>Nassau, Bahamas</b> 800-224-2627 www.bahamas.com	<b>3.4 million</b> cruise passengers a year (includes some to Freeport)	The <b>duty-free shopping</b> on Nassau's Bay Street is known for luxury goods like crystal, perfume, leather and liquor. For hand-woven hats, baskets and dolls, visit the <b>Straw Market</b> .	<b>Bahamian Kitchen</b> (Trinity Place off Market Street) is considered one of downtown's top eateries, especially for local dishes like peas and rice and spiced grouper. Visit the <b>market at Potter's Cay</b> (at the bridge to Paradise Island) for conch soup and conch fritters. For a splurge, choose a rare vintage at the luxe <b>Graycliff</b> hotel/restaurant (West Hill Street).	Many Nassau day-trippers buy day passes for some attractions at the behemoth <b>Atlantis Resort</b> on Paradise Island. The pass doesn't include access to the pools. Buy them at booths near the debarkation point and in the Atlantis casino . . . For a different high-rolling scene, go to Cable Beach's <b>Crystal Palace Casino</b> .	Half-day trips to <b>Blue Lagoon Island</b> — a small, private oasis with water sports — include beach lounging, live music and dining. Some tours stop at a dolphin interaction center . . . Nab a much-desired tee time at par-72 <b>Cable Beach Golf Course</b> . . . View sealife without getting wet on a <b>glass-bottom boat tour</b> .
<b>Cozumel</b> 800-446-3942 www.visitmexico.com	<b>2.9 million</b>	Cozumel has a few ruins, but for a full-day trip, trek to the bigger <b>Mayan sites</b> on the Mexican mainland (See Ship Excursions at right)	Try the well-priced Mexican meals at <b>La Choza</b> (Avenida 10 and Calle Salas). After a day of shopping, the terrace tables and margaritas at <b>Pancho's Backyard</b> (Avenida Rafael Melgar 27) are much appreciated. The upscale <b>Pepe's Grill</b> (Avenida Melgar and Calle Salas) serves seafood and steak.	Dive shops run trips for <b>scuba</b> enthusiasts of all skill levels. <b>Snorkel</b> equipment can be rented from beachside stands . . . The island has some well-priced <b>duty-free shopping</b> , particularly at Los Cinco Soles, a large shop where you can knock out all your souvenir purchases in one swoop.	Getting to the ruins requires a 40-minute ferry ride, then three hours on a bus to <b>Chichen Itza</b> or an hour to <b>Tulum</b> . If you can, opt for Chichen Itza, among the world's most preserved sites . . . Take a half-day <b>off-road tour</b> of the island in an all-terrain vehicle or a Jeep.
<b>St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands</b> 800-372-8784 www.usvitourism.com	<b>2 million</b>	Take in the <b>colonial Dutch architecture</b> , beautifully preserved in Charlotte Amalie. Also check out the 17th-century <b>fort</b> and the <b>St. Thomas Synagogue</b> , one of the oldest in the New World.	<b>Herve</b> (Government Hill) serves mid-priced French-Caribbean food. Reopens this month. <b>Bonnie's by the Sea</b> (at the Elysian Beach Resort) has a pig roast every Sunday at 5 p.m. Those who ferry over to St. John will want to dine on fried flying fish at <b>Morgan's Mango</b> (Wharfside Village).	For beaches, head to <b>Magens Bay</b> on St. Thomas or <b>Trunk Bay</b> on St. John . . . In Charlotte Amalie, <b>Fort Skytsborg</b> is said to be the castle that Blackbeard used to look out for seaworthy enemies . . . Take a 10-minute ferry ride to <b>Water Island</b> , a mostly undeveloped tract explorable by bike or on foot.	Get in the water for a couple of hours, be it in a <b>submarine</b> , on a <b>catamaran</b> or via an <b>underwater motor scooter</b> . . . Not sure which sport to do? Spend a half-day <b>kayaking, hiking and snorkeling</b> during one outing.
<b>Cayman Islands</b> 212-889-9009 www.caymanislands.com	<b>1.4 million</b>	The Caymans are among the top places in the world for <b>scuba diving</b> and <b>snorkeling</b> . Explore coral formations, underwater walls and sheltered caverns aswarm in fish of all colors.	Order a burger, duck into the sea for a quick snorkel, then ascend when your food is ready at <b>Rackham's Pub</b> (North Church Street). The <b>Reef Grill at Royal Palms</b> (Seven Mile Beach) is a reputable seafood restaurant on the beach. In West Bay, the rustic <b>Cracked Conch by the Sea</b> (North West Point Road) serves turtle steaks. Closed for renovations until November.	<b>Seven Mile Beach</b> , 10 minutes from George Town, is considered one of the Caribbean's top beaches. Crowds are small, too . . . <b>Pedro St. James Castle</b> is a restored stone palace on a bluff . . . Tourists like going to the town of <b>Hell</b> , merely to postmark their postcards and snap a photo.	Snorkel or scuba dive at <b>Stingray City</b> , in the North Sound. Most outings range from two to six hours, including a few stops . . . Condensed <b>scuba classes</b> , including a short dive, are popular among cruise passengers with just a few hours to spare . . . Landlubbers can <b>horseback ride</b> on north coast beaches.
<b>St. Maarten</b> 800-786-2278 www.stmaarten.com	<b>1.3 million</b>	See the best of both worlds on the isle's <b>Dutch</b> (St. Maarten) and <b>French</b> (St. Martin) sides. The French part's main town (Marigot) has more charm than Philipsburg (Dutch), where ships dock.	In Marigot, <b>Claude Mini-Club</b> (Boulevard de la Mer) sits among palms and has crayfish and Creole dishes. Reopens this month. <b>La Vie en Rose</b> (Boulevard de France and Rue de la Republique) has French cuisine in a 1920s Parisian setting. In Philipsburg, mingle with the jet set and dine on shrimp at affordable <b>Chesterfields</b> (Great Bay Marina).	Stroll from <b>cafe to cafe</b> and browse the <b>shops</b> in Marigot, which feels like a southern European coastal town . . . The French side is also home to <b>Orient Beach</b> , where you can rent windsurfing equipment and sunbathe nude . . . The neighboring island of <b>Anguilla</b> is accessible by a 20-minute ferry ride.	Participate in a scaled-down version of the <b>America's Cup regatta</b> on one of three boats . . . Access hidden coves by <b>mountain bike</b> on a ride along the coast and through the hills . . . If St. Maarten isn't exclusive enough, tour <b>St. Barth's</b> , which can be reached in less than an hour aboard a hydrocruiser.