

# Golf Event

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## Sail Away

By Jen Jones

Find out why golf-oriented cruises are making waves in the event planning sector.

For vacationers seeking a “one-stop shop,” cruises are the logical getaway of choice. From entertainment to dining to sightseeing, cruise lines specialize in bringing the proverbial mountain to Mohammed. Yet in the past, golfers have rarely been able to duly indulge their passion. Most cruises spent a great deal of time at sea, and didn’t dock at port long enough to do justice to local courses. Luckily for golf aficionados and event planners, a growing breed of “golf cruises” is paving the way to experience seafaring golf like never before.

“The cruising population has traditionally been non-golfing,” says Michele Knipp, director of marketing for Elite Golf Cruises, Sunrise, Fla. “Being trapped on a cruise ship for 10 days with no golf was simply unacceptable [to them]. We’re trying to change that.”

Indeed, change is in the air. Miami-based Norwegian Cruise Lines’ “Golf Hawaii” program offers the industry’s first on-board pro shop, replete with premium Callaway equipment for men, women, children and seniors. For those who prefer a dose of culture with their golf clubs, Kalos Golf sails the seas of Europe and New Zealand—with plentiful stops at courses like Germany’s Brunnwies, set in the Bavarian countryside. (Golfers have been known to convene in the half-timbered clubhouse to enjoy German brew and Wieswurst.) No matter what type of itinerary your event calls for, the golf cruise industry is primed to deliver.

“The really exciting thing about [the marriage of] golf events and cruises is that cruise lines are totally focusing their energies on it right now,” says Knipp. “They’ve identified this market as the ‘new millennium’ kind of thing. [As a result], they’re very savvy about program planning and planners’ needs.”

## All Aboard

Though the two leisurely pastimes seem to logically go hand-in-hand, themed golf cruises have just begun popping up throughout the last decade. (NCL’s Golf Hawaii was founded in 2004, while Elite Golf Cruises and Kalos Golf set sail during the mid-90s). From three-day jaunts to 14-day escapes, from the Caribbean to New Zealand, golf cruises now exist to accommodate all types of events, and budgets.

Sue Pierce, vice president of Chapel Hill, N.C.-based Kalos Golf, partly attributes the boom to—who else?—the baby boomer generation. “The baby boomers are retiring in good health; they’re not all about sitting on the sun deck eating 10 meals a day,” she says. “Golf cruises are much more experiential [than traditional cruises]. I think the popularity of more active cruising will only continue to grow.”

The convenience factor is also a large part of the appeal, according to Andrew Stuart, executive vice president of marketing, sales, and passenger services for NCL. Once on board, attendees have very little to worry about. Most cruises offer “valet” service for clubs, lifting the burden of transportation. Round-trip transportation and cart rentals are typically provided. “People only have to unpack once; all food and entertainment is included,” he says. “The key draw is the sheer variety of golf we’re able to offer in a hassle-free way—four islands and 15 golf courses in seven days.”

Indeed, most golf cruises allow attendees to embark on a whirlwind tour of the world’s best 18-hole championship courses. Itineraries are designed to maximize the golf experience. For instance, cruise lines such as Silversea and Kalos Golf offer excursions to former Ryder Cup site Valderrama in Spain’s Andalucia region. (Says Pierce, “It’s the benchmark of Europe. It’s wonderfully challenging, in pristine condition and it’s a joy to play.”) NCL Golf Hawaii vacationers can hop a 45-minute ferry ride to Lanai, where the Challenge at Manele awaits. Housed at the Four Seasons Manele Bay resort, the Challenge is a Jack Nicklaus signature golf course and offers breathtaking views.

Even when out to sea, numerous on-board golf activities are provided. Those interested in perfecting trouble spots can take advantage of private clinics hosted by resident PGA pros or performance psychologists. Bad weather? Hold a mini-tournament in the golf simulators on ships like Royal Caribbean and Princess Cruises. (“You can play Aruba in the morning, Pebble Beach in the afternoon and still be in time for dinner,” laughs Knipp.)

### Just Add Water

Just as cruises strive to be one-stop shops for vacationers, the same philosophy applies for event planners. The all-inclusive nature eases much of the stress of arranging for food, beverages and entertainment. Says Knipp of Elite Golf Cruises, "We aim to do everything meeting planners used to have to do for themselves or contract out. They're starting to see the value of converting from land-based programs, which entail so much extra planning."

To streamline the process, many golf cruises employ group services consultants and sales staff. These specialists assist planners in designing custom itineraries, booking reservations and facilitating event needs (i.e. group dinners and cocktail parties, private decks for awards ceremonies, long-drive contests). "The devil is in the details, and we try to take the logistical worries away from our clients," says Kalos Golf's Pierce.

When choosing a golf cruise for your event, keep in mind the following considerations:

- **Itinerary:** Besides the length, cost and locale of the cruise, it's important to consider the flexibility of the itinerary. Golf Hawaii's philosophy is "Freestyle Cruising," which means no set meal times, an array of restaurant options and relaxed dress codes. (Says Stuart, "Groups can go off and enjoy things according to their different tastes. It's a flexible trip for people whose only commonality is golf.")
- **Number of attendees:** If seeking an intimate event setting, smaller ships may be just the ticket. Kalos Golf's luxury riverboats and masted windjammers hold 40-some cabins; past groups have been known to reserve entire boats. Companies like Kalos and PerryGolf can provide custom group itineraries for a truly personalized experience.
- **Corporate accommodations:** Is the ship well equipped to handle business meetings or other corporate events? Many newer cruise ships have been designed with such groups in mind, offering breakout rooms, enhanced media capability, conference centers and boardrooms. (Case in point: Built in 2005, NCL's Pride of America ship boasts a majestic glass-encased auditorium overlooking the water.)
- **Incentive policies:** Depending on the size of your group, attractive comps may exist. On Elite Golf Cruises, a free cabin is offered for every 16 passengers. Larger groups may also receive a free cocktail reception or similar event.
- **Merchandising opportunities:** Will your event need branded merchandise? Some cruises will work with planners to provide welcome gifts, in-room trinkets, tournament prizes and/or incentive awards. (For those groups bringing their own trophies or prizes, planners may want to inquire about shipping arrangements.)
- **Non-golf options:** What does the cruise offer for attendees who need a break or have less enthusiastic family members in tow? Explore the various options, ranging from "golf widow" clinics to spa discounts to local excursions. Those who want to burn off those calories from last night's feast can also take advantage of features like Royal Caribbean's three-story rock climbing wall.

One aspect that event planners should be especially prescient about is proper lead time. Though specifics for each cruise line vary, a general rule of thumb is to make arrangements at least three months before the event. Six months is ideal for events taking place in tropical climates like Hawaii and the Caribbean during the high season (typically January through March). International cruises book quickly and may require a year or more of advance planning.

When initially booking, planners should provide a rough estimate of guests so that tee times can be tentatively blocked. Around two months out, it's important for planners to provide a relatively concrete head count. If possible, information should also be gathered about which attendees are bringing clubs and which will need to rent equipment.

Smaller groups may have slightly more leeway. For the Golf Hawaii program, 10 to 20 open tee times are blocked at affiliated golf courses each day—along with the reserved tee times. The cruise line gives 24-hour notice to each course as to whether those spots will be occupied. Hence, a smaller group may be able to snag space closer to the event date.

"The golf courses are willing to work very closely with us since we bring them so much business," says NCL golf specialist David Janikowski, adding that Golf Hawaii has welcomed groups ranging from a 20-member Oklahoma country club outing to an incentive group of 110 DaimlerChrysler Corporation employees.

Whether you have a group of 15 or 150, a golf cruise just may be the ideal escape. Go forth and tee—at sea!

### For More Information

**Elite Golf Cruises** (Partners with Carnival, Celebrity Cruises, Holland America, Princess Cruises and Silversea)  
[www.elitegolfcruises.com](http://www.elitegolfcruises.com)

FYI: Take advantage of Elite's "comprehensive golf academies" aboard Carnival, Celebrity Cruises, Holland America, Princess Cruises and Silversea Cruises.

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**Golf Hawaii** (Norwegian Cruise Lines)

[www.ncl.com/golf](http://www.ncl.com/golf)

FYI: Go island-hopping between 15 golf courses. "We offer golf from beginning to end, and everything in between," says NCL's Andrew Stuart, executive vice president of marketing, sales and passenger services.

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**Kalos Golf**

[www.kalosgolf.com](http://www.kalosgolf.com)

FYI: Spend days golfing or exploring countries like Austria, Germany and Sweden. Often, the culture follows passengers on board—from wine tastings hosted by Austrian vintners to locally flavored concerts.

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**PerryGolf**

[www.perrygolf.com](http://www.perrygolf.com)

FYI: Select from destinations ranging from South Africa to Ireland with PerryGolf's luxury vacation packages. Design your itinerary with golf courses and excursions of your choosing.

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