**Plan Now for Summer Cruise Options**

Yes, it’s the middle of winter but if you’re thinking about going on a cruise this summer, now is the perfect time to start planning your trip.

Cruises continue to be a popular choice for travelers. Caribbean cruises are the top international vacation “destination” booked for 2016, according to the annual survey conducted by Travel Leaders Group of its travel agency owners, managers and agents. European river and Mediterranean cruises are also in the top 10. And an Alaska cruise is in third place among 2016’s top domestic vacation destinations.

That popularity translates into more choices for consumers ­– newer and bigger ships sailing to more destinations, as well as new excursions and onboard activities and a wider range of accommodations to meet the needs of couples, families and solo travelers. Booking early means getting the best fare and choice of accommodations.

The first few months of the year have traditionally been known in the cruise industry as “wave season,” when cruise lines offered their best deals to entice passengers. While the industry has shifted toward year-round marketing, winter remains an excellent time to look for the best deals and availability.

Depending on the cruise line and voyage, there may be offers covering accommodations, potential upgrades on cabin types, specialty dining and excursions, as well as on the price of the total package.

Passengers who book trips on Royal Caribbean can save up to several hundred dollars on cruises scheduled for June, July and August that sail to numerous locations throughout the Caribbean, along the Mediterranean and to Alaska. Special offers for European and Alaskan cruises include up to $300 in onboard credits, a buy one, get one for 50 percent off deal and discounts for friends and family.

Princess Cruises is offering savings on trips to all of its destinations, with more than 700 voyages to choose from, including throughout the Caribbean, Mediterranean, northern Europe and Hawaii. Special offers include discounts on staterooms and for the third and fourth guests, as well as double the amount of onboard spending money.

Holland America Line is offering free stateroom upgrades and discounts on shore excursions for select trips. Among the cruise line’s trips are 7- and 14-day Alaska voyages, as well as land and sea journeys that include a visit to Denali National Park. Alaska is definitely a place where you want to take a shore excursion, to view the state’s spectacular wilderness and glaciers up close.

Crystal Cruises, which has 60 itineraries visiting 77 countries, is offering its best fares on all 2016 voyages to passengers who book by the end of February, including the luxury line’s unprecedented 32-day trip from Alaska to New York through the Northwest Passage. Special offers include some 2-for-1 cruise only fares, and a complimentary evening of dining at a specialty restaurant onboard.

Whether it’s your first cruise or your 10th, the number of choices can be overwhelming. A travel agent has the expertise to help you sift through the options and book a trip that meets your interests and budget.