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## From Baltimore, Ply the High Seas Year-Round

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Baltimore is about to sail past a travel milestone: Beginning in November, it will become a year-round cruise port, with winter cruises departing from its 3 1/2 -year-old passenger terminal for the first time.

The city has proved so popular an embarkation point that Carnival and Celebrity cruise lines have decided to continue their Bahamas and Caribbean sailings beyond October, when their schedules have traditionally ended. And not to be left at the dock, Royal Caribbean will also launch all-season sailing from Charm City next July.

"Baltimore will be our farthest north year-round home port," said Vance Gulliksen, spokesman for Carnival Cruises, the world's largest cruise operator. "Even if the weather is bad, our ships will quickly be getting into warmer weather."

The cachet of winter cruises from the [port of Baltimore](#) -- at a time when New York is seeing a decline in them -- caps a year in which Baltimore's passenger volume tripled, going from 47,000 in 2008 to an expected 165,000 by the end of this year.

"This is a Maryland success story," said John Meister, marketing manager for the Maryland Port Administration. "We've been running at above capacity at times because of the convenience of driving to this port."

Baltimore was the departure point for 81 cruises this year. It has 92 scheduled for next year, and 2011 will see about 120 sailings, according to Meister.

Most Baltimore cruises are seven-day trips to the Bahamas and the Caribbean, although some ships travel to New England and Canada. And American Cruise Line's smaller ships leave from the Inner Harbor for trips in the mid-Atlantic Inland Passage and the Chesapeake Bay.

As cruise lines continue to move ships to customers, the Baltimore story is being repeated across the country. There are now more than 20 passenger cruise ports in the United States, a big shift from the early 1990s, when New York, Miami and Seattle were the main places to embark.

"After 9/11 . . . the hassle of airports really boosted interest in nearby ports," said Maureen Davis, a Fallston, Md., travel agent specializing in cruises. "The economy also is bringing us travelers who want a set rate, and the rates are a tremendous value right now." She noted fares as low as \$449 per person for a five-day Baltimore cruise to Bermuda.

Five cruise lines operate out of Baltimore. Its passenger terminal, visible from Interstate 95, is a converted paper warehouse festooned with flags and containing

40 check-in stations and a seating area for more than 750 passengers. Adjoining the terminal are surface pay lots with space for 1,500 automobiles. Stevedores grab luggage from passengers' cars as they drive to the front door.

The state paid \$13 million for the renovation and for dredging a channel to accept 70,000-ton, 900-foot-long ships that boast up to 11 decks of cabins, swimming pools and aqua parks, casinos, wedding chapels, gyms, spas and multiple restaurants.

Meister said the biggest challenge for ships is getting under the Chesapeake Bay and Francis Scott Key bridges, which offer the largest ones only 10 to 12 feet of clearance.

Sailing throughout the winter is prompting port authorities to construct a covered walkway and perhaps set up outside heaters for the few moments travelers spend walking to the terminal.

"We're committed to making this a great passenger experience," said Richard Scher, spokesman for the Maryland Port Administration.

Even the state's planners have been surprised by who is driving to Baltimore. Passengers from Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey make up a third of the volume, with travelers from Maryland, Virginia, the District and even Ohio and the Carolinas making up the rest. The growth of Southwest and AirTran, the discount airlines flying into nearby Baltimore-Washington International Marshall Airport, has brought cruise passengers from Canada and beyond.

State officials are happy to see cruise revenue continue this winter.

"Expanding the Port of Baltimore's cruise program to include cruising year-round has provided a tremendous economic impact to the State of Maryland, especially in such trying economic times," wrote Maryland Transportation Secretary Beverley Swaim-Staley in an e-mail response to a question. She noted that cruise-related jobs have increased and passengers are spending in Baltimore restaurants, stores and hotels.

Karl Teel of Forest Hill, Md., said that driving to the port allowed him to bring his parents, ages 86 and 89, from Towson to join three cabins of children and grandchildren for a trip. "They're too old to handle airports," he said. "This gives them a chance to go to some pretty exotic ports, even when the weather's bad here."