

**TRAVELZOO<sup>®</sup>**

# Small Ships, Big Opportunities

**PREVIEW REPORT**

Unlocking Demand for Small Ship Cruising  
in an Experience-Led Travel Era

[READ THE FULL REPORT](#) 

*In partnership with Oxford Economics*

 **TOURISM  
ECONOMICS**  
AN OXFORD ECONOMICS COMPANY

# Unlocking Insights into Small Ship Cruising

Small ship cruising is entering a defining moment. Travelers are seeking deeper, more meaningful ways to explore the world. Hallmarks of the small ship experience align strongly with this shift through personalized and expert service, exclusive access to destinations, and a sense of intimacy that large ships cannot replicate.

While awareness of small ship cruising is high, participation rates lag behind interest. This gap signals untapped opportunities for the sector to convert curiosity into committed travelers through clearer value communication and more confident product differentiation.

Against this backdrop, Travelzoo and Tourism Economics have partnered to examine the scale of demand, motivations driving traveler choice, and barriers that may be holding potential cruisers back. Our analysis draws on novel global consumer research, conducted through an international survey of four major cruising markets – Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Our analysis reveals a market with strong foundations and rich headroom for expansion among a growing audience that is both willing to invest and eager to engage with experiences that feel authentic and personalized.

This summary highlights how small ship cruise providers can enhance their appeal, refine their offering, and expand their reach. The [full research report](#) explores these opportunities in greater depth, helping to inform strategic decisions and support the sector in realizing the full potential of small ship cruising.

## Report Analysis

This report leverages unique insights from an online survey conducted in Q1 2026 among consumers from Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States who expressed an interest in small ship cruising.

Key findings from this research are discussed for the following segments throughout the report:



### ALL INTERESTED

Target consumers interested in small ship cruises; refers to everyone who participated in the survey.



### PREVIOUS SMALL SHIP CRUISERS

Refers to everyone who participated in the survey and has previously undertaken a small ship cruise.



### PROSPECTIVE SMALL SHIP CRUISERS

Refers to everyone who participated in the survey and has not previously undertaken a small ship cruise but is very interested in doing so.



INTERESTED  
IN SMALL  
SHIP  
CRUISING

**55yrs**

Average age

**77%**

Have cruised before

**43%**

Likely to take small ship cruise in the next year

PREVIOUS  
SMALL SHIP  
CRUISERS

**52yrs**

Average age

**20%**

More spent on travel per year

**62%**

Likely to take small ship cruise in the next year

## Profiling the Audience for Small Ship Cruising

Small ship cruising, defined as vessels carrying fewer than 1,000 passengers across expedition, river, and luxury segments, has broad appeal across markets, with particularly strong engagement among German audiences. Previous small ship cruisers skew slightly younger (average age 52) than prospective small ship cruisers (average age 58), suggesting barriers to conversion among older travelers. Older couples are the dominant travel party, with families representing a secondary growth opportunity.

Although interest in small ship cruising is strong across consumers with a wide range of budgets, previous small ship cruisers spend over 20% more on leisure travel annually, suggesting highspending travelers are more likely to convert interest into bookings. Over 40% of those interested in small ship cruising say they are likely to take a small ship cruise in the next year, rising to around half in Germany and the UK. Although awareness in small ship cruising is high, participation remains limited, signaling strong potential to convert interest into bookings.

## Expanding the Small Ship Offering

Travelers increasingly seek meaningful and immersive experiences that small ships are uniquely positioned to provide. Three themes underpin the strongest opportunities:

1. **High Value Product**
2. **High Value Places**
3. **High Value People**



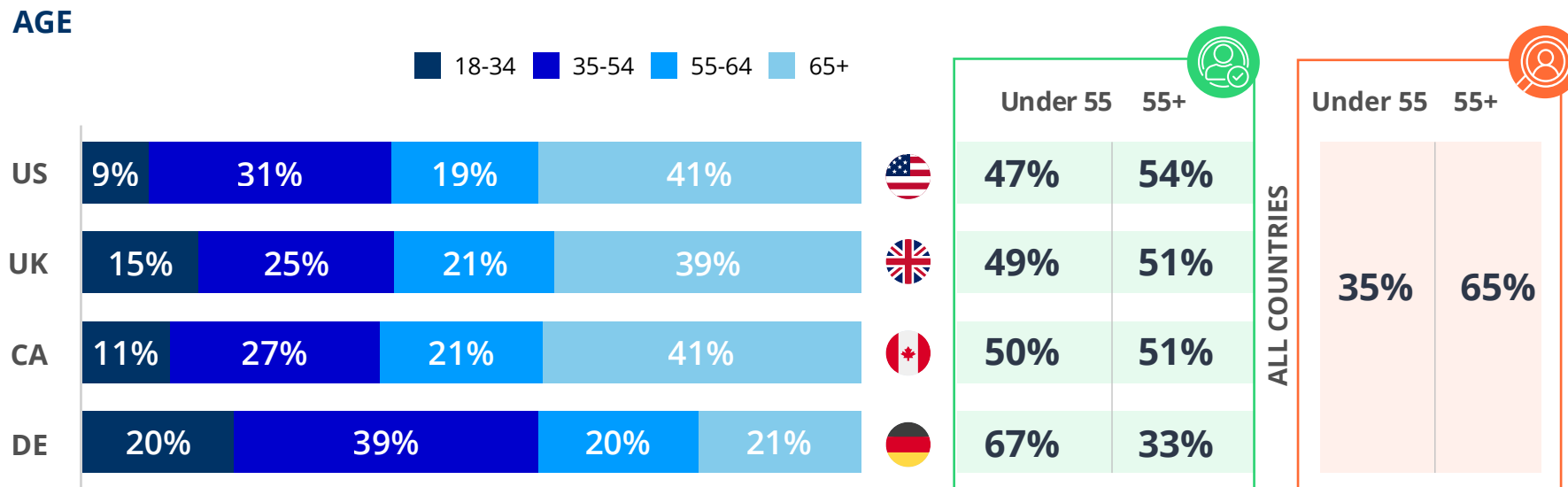
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# Profiling the Audience for Small Ship Cruising

# Life Stage Profile

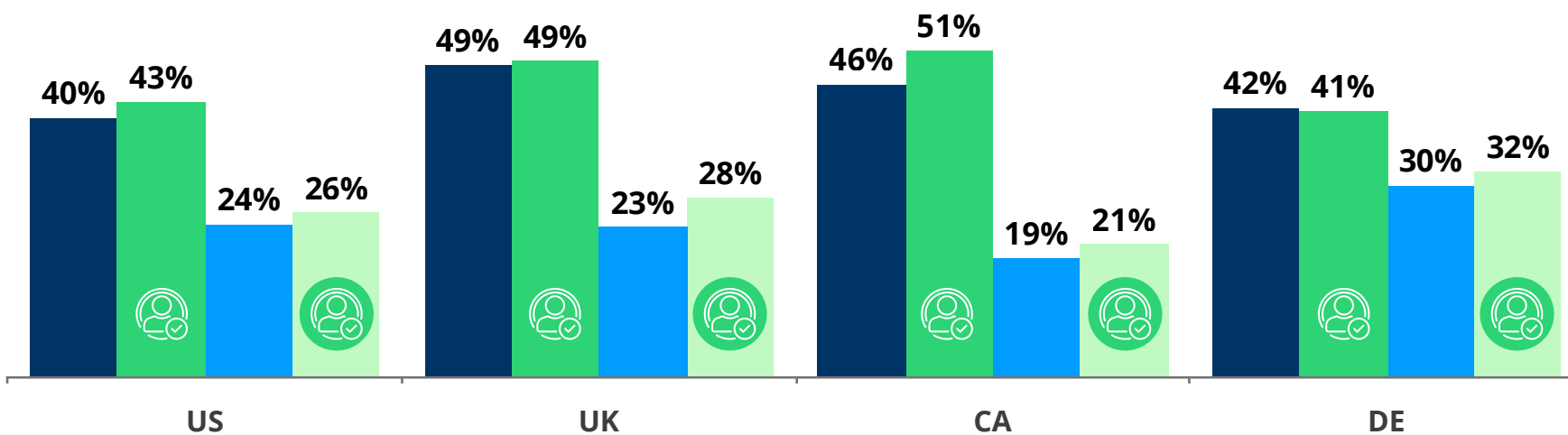
Interest in small ship cruising tends to be highest among older travelers, particularly those aged 55+, although Germany shows stronger interest among middle-aged consumers. However, previous small ship cruisers (average age 52) skew slightly younger than prospective small ship cruisers (average age 58), suggesting barriers to conversion among older travelers. Couples, especially older couples, are the most prominent segment among both previous and prospective small ship cruisers, while family travelers also represent a notable share.

Previous small ship cruisers Prospective small ship cruisers



## TYPICAL TRAVEL COMPANIONS (OVERNIGHT TRIPS)

Partner/spouse only (All) Partner/spouse only (Previous small ship cruisers)  
 With children (All) With children (Previous small ship cruisers)



# 50%

Interested in small ship cruising are under 55



# 2 in 5

Interested in small ship cruising typically travel as a couple

# Awareness and Interest in Small Ship Cruises

Awareness of expedition, luxury and river cruising is high among travelers interested in small ship cruising, with river cruises being the most widely recognized. Germans show particularly strong engagement, with many already having taken a river cruise. However, gaps in awareness remain, presenting opportunities for education and introductory offers to encourage first-time small ship cruise bookings.



**RIVER CRUISING #1**

Highest awareness among target consumers

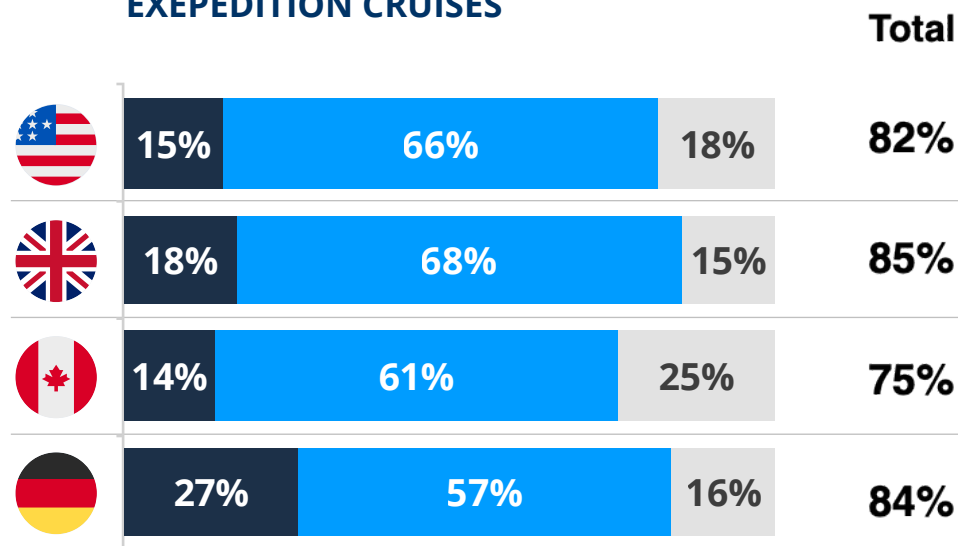


**50%**

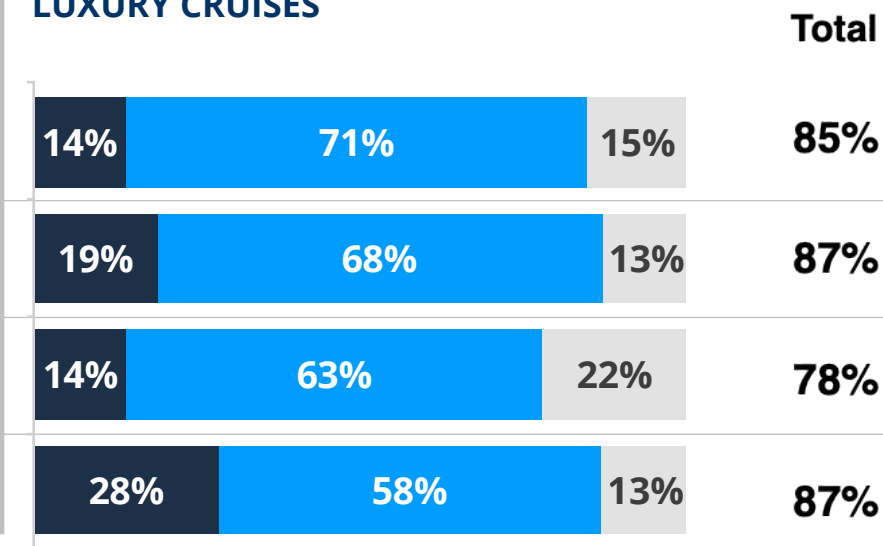
Germans interested in small ship cruising have taken a river cruise

■ Aware, undertaken ■ Aware, not undertaken ■ Not aware

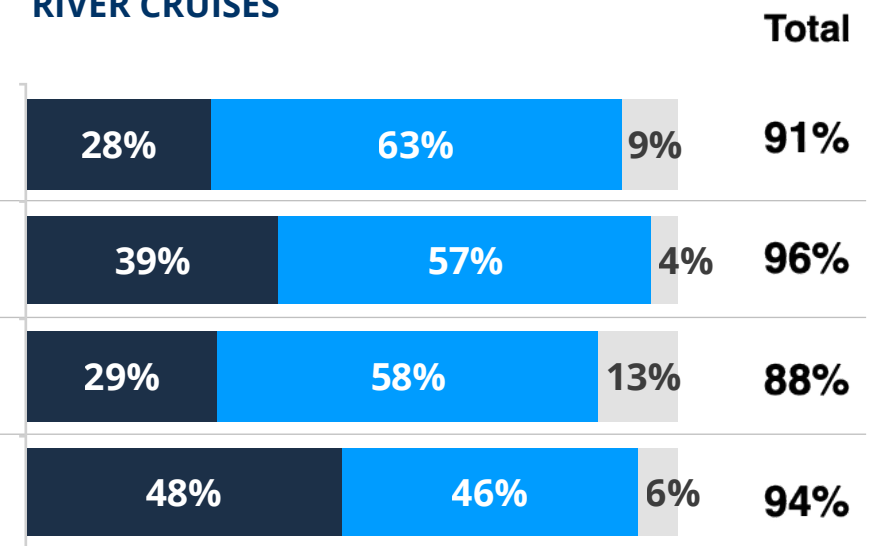
## AWARENESS OF SMALL SHIP EXPEdition CRUISES



## AWARENESS OF SMALL SHIP LUXURY CRUISES



## AWARENESS OF SMALL SHIP RIVER CRUISES



# Expanding the Small Ship Offering

Small ship cruising offers distinctive, experience-driven advantages that align with modern travelers' rising expectations, with three key themes highlighting the strongest opportunities:



01



**High Value Product:**  
Differentiating through immersive and original journeys

Travelers are seeking experiences that feel purposeful, culturally rich and worth the investment.

02



**High Value Places:**  
Unlocking exclusive destinations and experiences

Accessing unique places and hard to replicate excursions is a crucial point of differentiation.

03



**High Value People:**  
Elevating guest experiences with specialist teams

Expert guidance, meaningful connections and high touch service increasingly shape how guests experience and feel about the journey.

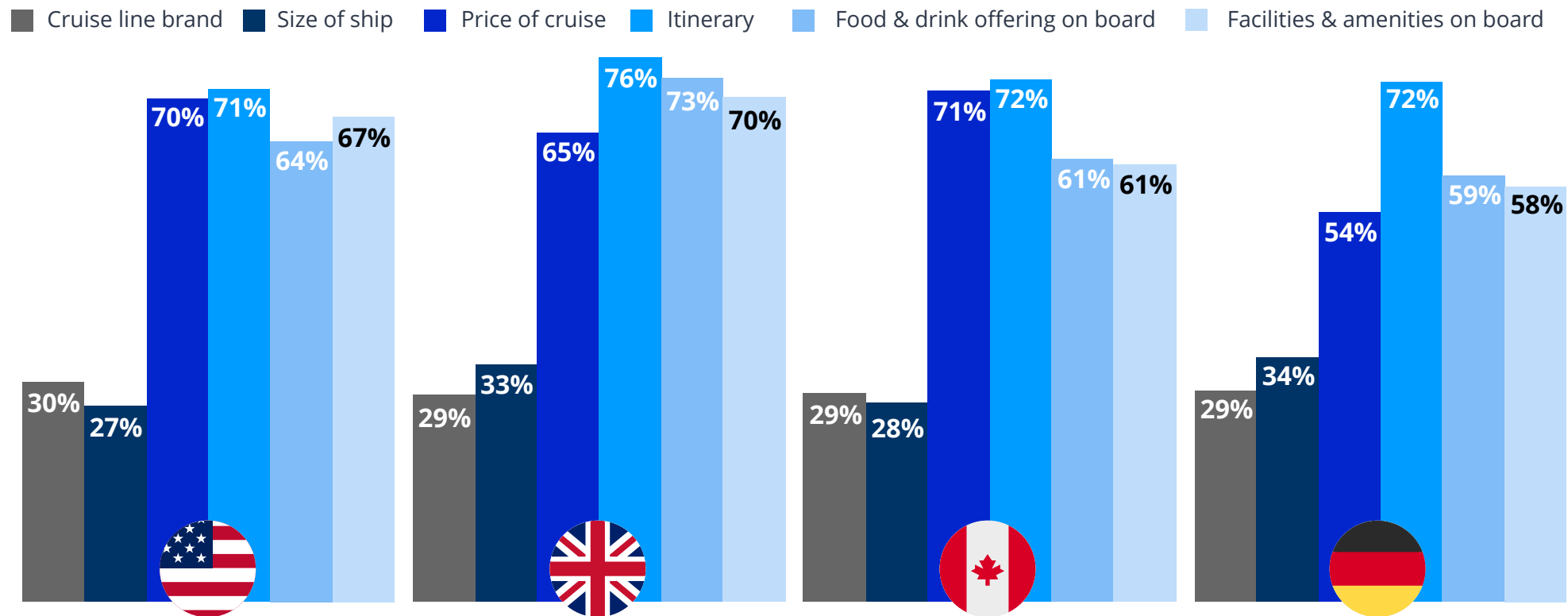
Together, these themes highlight how small ship operators can position their offering and marketing to strengthen appeal and unlock future growth.

# 1. High Value Product: Differentiating through immersive and original journeys

## Product Before Price

Travelers are willing to pay more when the cruise delivers clear value. Itineraries, service, onboard amenities, and dining often outweigh price, especially among European travelers. Brand or ship size loyalty is low, highlighting the importance of communicating high-quality, immersive experiences.

### IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS WHEN BOOKING A CRUISE (VERY IMPORTANT)



IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS WHEN BOOKING A CRUISE (VERY IMPORTANT, TOP 3, PREVIOUS SMALL SHIP CRUISERS)		US	UK	CA	DE
1st		Itinerary 74%	Itinerary 74%	Itinerary 69%	Itinerary 69%
2nd		Facilities 67%	F&B 72%	F&B 62%	F&B 59%
3rd		F&B 65%	Facilities 68%	Price 60%	Facilities 55%



**70%+**  
Itinerary is most important booking factor

**7 in 10**  
North Americans say price is very important when booking

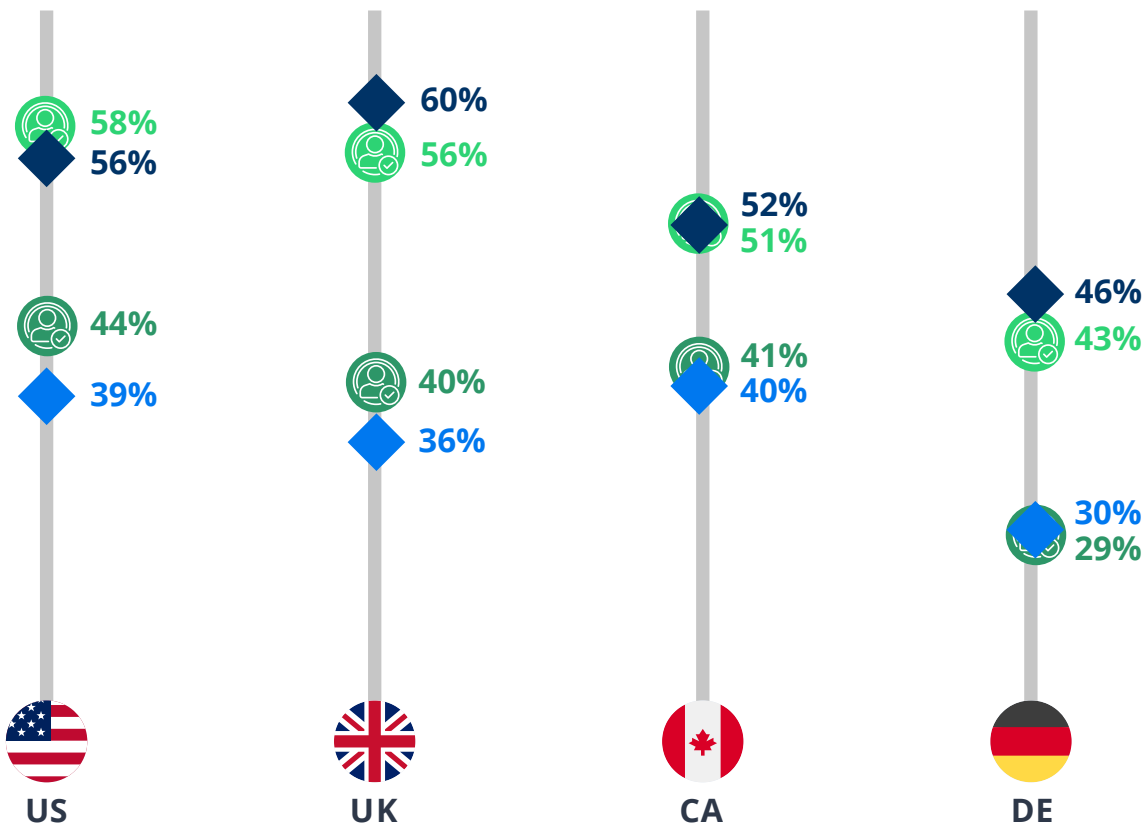
## 2. High Value Places: Unlocking exclusive destinations and experiences

### Growth Opportunity: Unspoiled Destinations

While popular destinations are most appealing, consumers recognize that small ships are ideal for accessing unspoiled locations. This presents an opportunity to tailor itineraries to these expectations and highlight the high value experiences that differentiate exploratory small ship cruising.

#### DESTINATIONS SUITED TO SMALL SHIP CRUISES

- ◆ Seeing unspoiled destinations/landscapes (All)
- ◆ Seeing popular destinations (All)
- Seeing unspoiled destinations/landscapes (Previous small ship cruisers)
- Seeing popular destinations (Previous small ship cruisers)



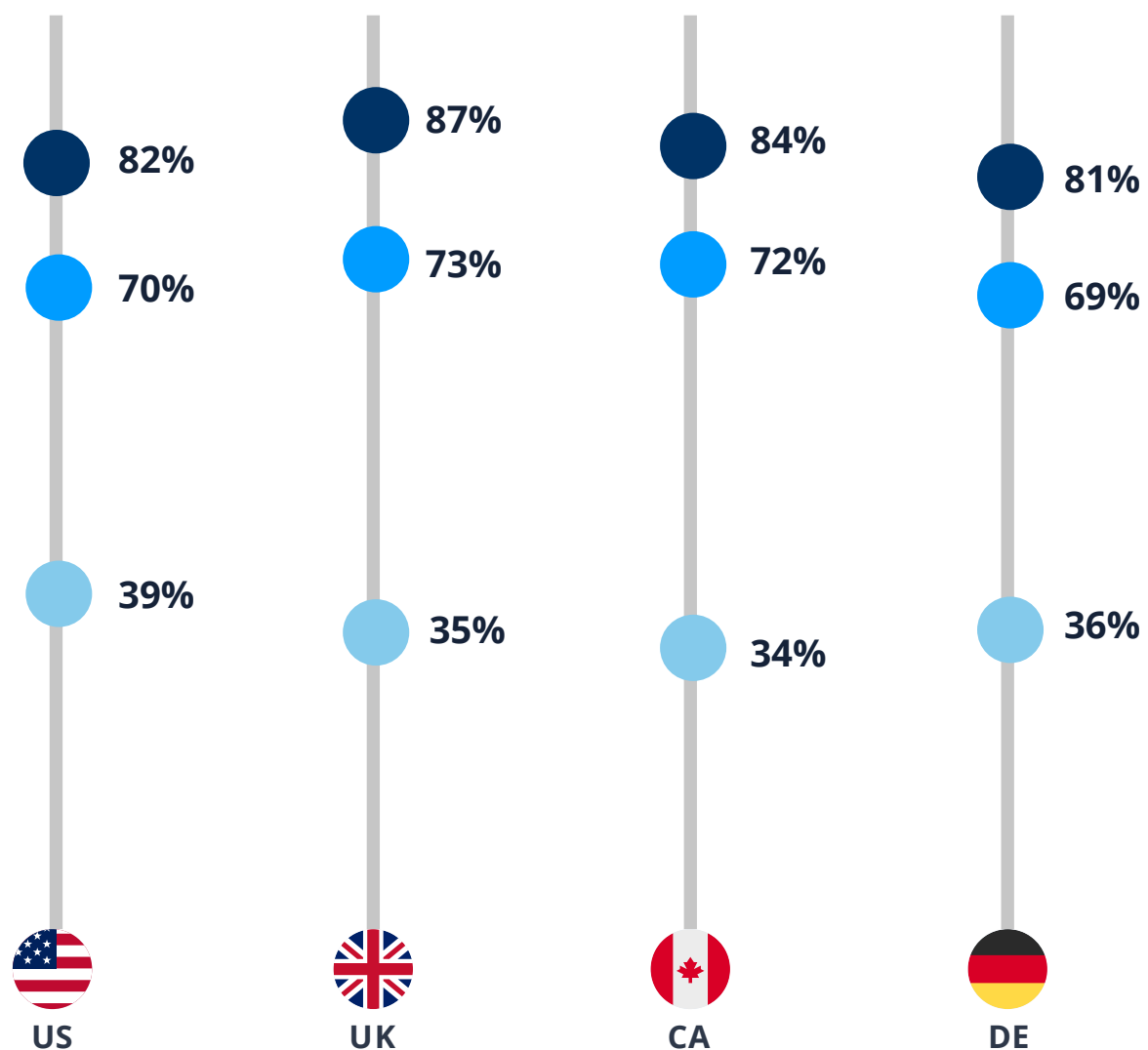
**53%**  
 Small ships are better suited to unspoiled destinations than popular destinations (36%)

### 3. High Value People: Elevating guest experiences with specialist teams

#### Expert-Led Learning and Enrichment

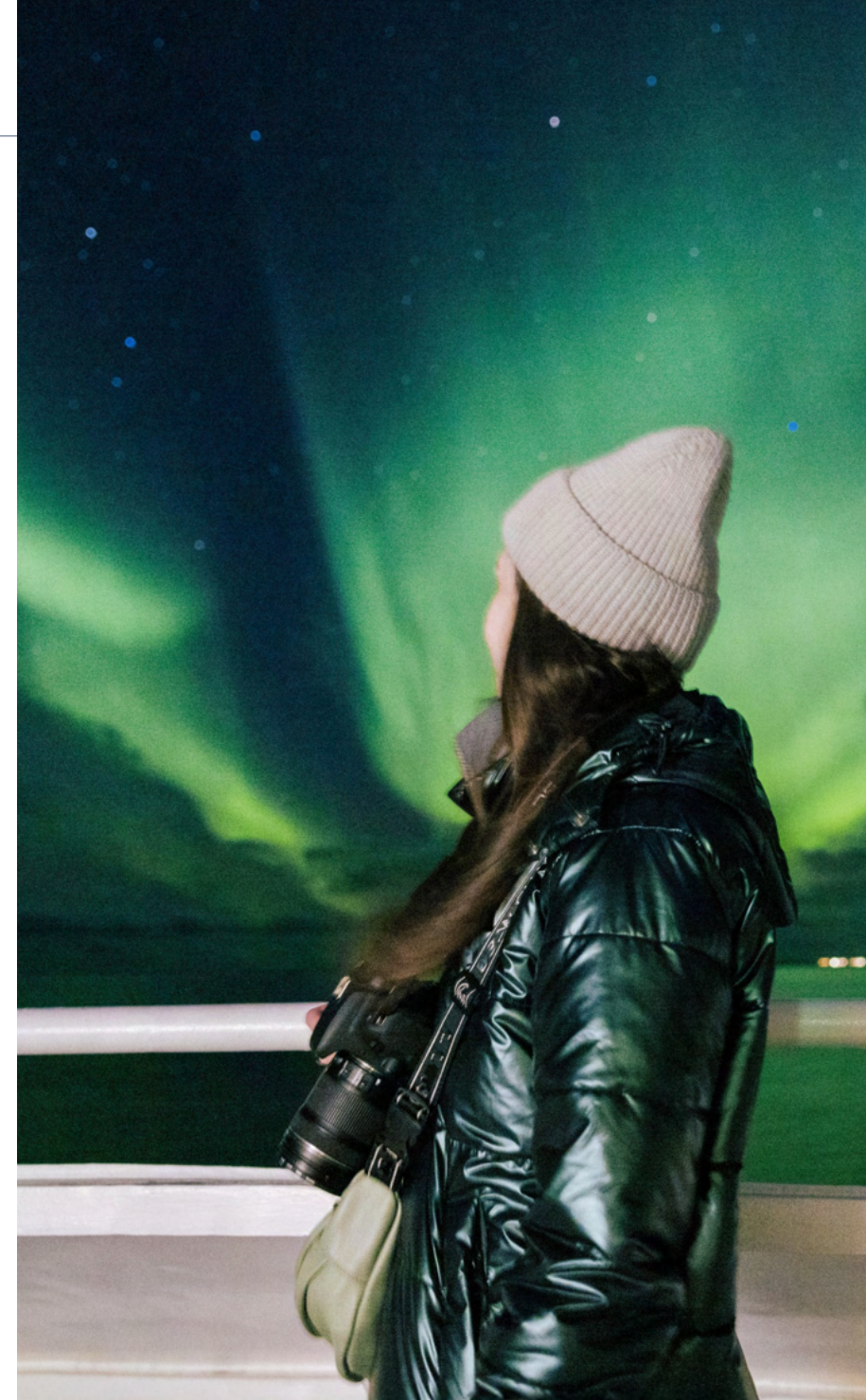
Learning and discovery are powerful motivators for travelers, many of whom prioritize understanding the culture, nature, and history of the destinations they visit over simple relaxation. Expert-led enrichment programs – both onboard and ashore – have therefore become a defining strength of small ship cruising. Experiences such as carefully curated cultural excursions, wildlife exploration, and unique onboard experiences, such as bridge tours and dining with the captain, add credibility, deepen engagement, and enrich the overall travel experience.

#### ACTIVITIES PRIORITIZED WHEN TRAVELING (NET AGREEMENT)\*



- Learning about places I see and visit is important
  - Immersive experiences bringing me closer to culture, history and nature are important
  - Relaxing is more important than undertaking activities when traveling
- \*Net agreement is the difference between those agreeing and disagreeing, calculated as proportion who agree minus proportion who disagree.

ACTIVITIES PRIORITIZED WHEN TRAVELING (NET AGREEMENT, PREVIOUS SMALL SHIP CRUISERS)*	US	UK	CA	DE
Learning about places I see and visit is important	86%	89%	84%	80%
Immersive experiences bringing me closer to culture, history and nature are important	80%	77%	76%	71%
Relaxing is more important than undertaking activities when traveling	36%	39%	38%	39%



**70%+**  
Value immersive and educational experiences



## Key Findings

**Profiling the Audience for Small Ship Cruising:** Small ship cruisers tend to be younger and have higher travel budgets than mainstream cruisers, though interest spans all demographics. Couples represent the core audience, with opportunities in family travel as well.

**Awareness Across Small Ship Cruise Segments:** Awareness of expedition, luxury and river cruising is high among travelers interested in small ship cruising, with river cruises the most widely recognized segment. Engagement is particularly strong in Germany, where nearly half of the interested travelers have already undertaken a river cruise.

**High Value Product:** Travelers' willingness to pay more for small ship cruises is primarily driven by perceived value, with itineraries and onboard experiences often outweighing price.

**High Value Places:** While popular destinations remain appealing, consumers recognize small ships as better suited to accessing unspoiled locations. Over half believe small ships are ideal for visiting unspoiled destinations, highlighting the power of exclusive access and hard to replicate experiences as key differentiators.





**High Value People:** Learning and discovery are powerful motivators. Expert-led enrichment, both onboard and ashore, enhances engagement, credibility and emotional connection, shaping more meaningful and memorable journeys.



# Technical Appendix

Tourism Economics conducted an online survey among consumers expressing an interest in small ship cruising.

The survey was conducted among members of the general public from the following countries who expressed an interest in small ship cruises:

Country	Sample Size (n)
 United States (US)	1,513
 United Kingdom (UK)	1,508
 Canada (CA)	1,501
 Germany (DE)	1,500
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6,022</b>

The research was conducted in February 2026. Data was tabulated and analyzed by Tourism Economics.



An aerial photograph of a man and a woman dancing on the wooden deck of a ship. The woman is wearing a white dress with a colorful pattern, and the man is wearing a light blue shirt and white pants. They are holding hands and looking at each other. The ship's railing is visible on the left side. The background is a vast expanse of deep blue ocean with white foam from the ship's wake.

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To access the full report please  
[click here](#)

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