

## **DESTINATIONS**

**CRUISE | FLORIDA** 

## AMERICAN CRUISE LINES' COASTAL CATS SHIPS

In November, the first of
American Cruise Lines' Coastal
Cats ships will set sail on the
Historic Isles and Golden Isles
Cruise. The line specialises in
small-ship US river and coastal
cruises and is sold through
Fred Holidays.

The 106-passenger

American Eagle is the first
of 12 hybrid catamarans with
environmentally friendly
technology, including electric
power capabilities. Designed as
'go anywhere' vessels, American
Cruise Lines says the Coastal
Cats can sail on lakes, rivers,
bays and coasts to combine the
advantages of an ocean cruise
with the stability of river cruising.

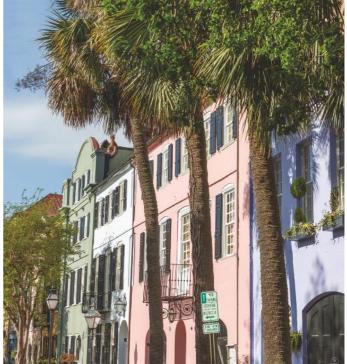
American Eagle and all its successors will feature 56 outside cabins – most of which will have balconies – in six categories. Solo clients will feel right at home, as these include single cabins with verandas. For travellers with a big budget, the largest cabins are the two Grand Suites, which feature a separate bedroom, living area and alfresco dining space on the balcony.

The vessel's facilities include two lounges, main dining room, cafe, fitness centre, games room, sun deck and watersports platform equipped with kayaks.



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Colourful Charleston; Savannah, Georgia's oldest city; cannons in Charleston's Fort Sumter







attractions – perfect for any nature and culture lovers looking for a relaxing cruise with a difference.

After boarding, I grab one of the omnipresent snacks and a drink before joining fellow passengers in the cosy lounge for a talk by retired airline pilot Robbie Robinson. He's guest speaker on my week-long Historic Isles and Golden Isles Cruise and enriches the sailing through Florida, Georgia and North Carolina with his in-depth knowledge of the area. That afternoon, we learn about the history of 'the ditch', which was constructed to transport goods when there weren't many roads. The next day, it's a talk on Civil War history. Another educates us on 'Carolina gold' – the 18th-century rice crops that made Charleston one of the world's richest cities.

Later we stop at Jekyll Island, among the largest of the Golden Isles dotted along the Atlantic coast between Savannah in Georgia and Jacksonville, Florida. A retro sign welcomes us to a pristine estate that was once a 19th-century holiday playground for some of the US's richest dynasties, such as the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers – now a luxury resort.

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We gawp at huge mansions they humbly called 'cottages', which were built without kitchens as the wealthy occupants always dined in the clubhouse.

### **CHOICE OF EXCURSIONS**

The American Independence offers a great choice of daily excursions. After our Jekyll Island trip, some passengers head off on a retired shrimping vessel for a first-hand experience of the industry that was once one of the most important in Georgia.

Plus, there's an overnight in atmospheric Savannah, with its moss-draped oaks and cobblestone waterfront streets, providing plenty of time to take a tour or two or

38 5 OCTOBER 2023 travelweekly.co.uk

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ABOVE: American Star in Savannah, Georgia PICTURE: American Cruise Lines

head off to explore independently.
Film fans can seek out locations
featured in Forrest Gump, Magic
Mike XXL and the Baywatch
remake. You can see Chippewa
Square where Forrest sat and told
his life story, but the famous bench is
now in Savannah History Museum.

The cruise also visits smaller ports of call that you'd be hard-pressed to reach, even on the most ambitious of road trips. These include Hilton Head Island, which was cut off from the mainland until the 1950s - allowing wildlife to flourish among the low population of islanders. Particularly memorable is the small-boat trip on one of the lakes in Sea Pines Forest Preserve. I get incredible close-up views of alligators sleeping on the banks, turtles and a magnificent great blue heron with shimmering plumage. On the way back, we scale the island's iconic striped lighthouse, now an

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unusual circular museum packed with exhibits all the way to the top.

### FRIENDLY LOCALS

Another unusual excursion takes me to charming Beaufort, frequently ranked as one of the US's best coastal small towns, where old homes are built with concrete made from sand and seashells. Locals picking up on our British accents are eager to stop and chat.

The all-American experience continues back on board, where satisfying southern food features widely. Think of any pie – and it's likely to make an appearance during the cruise. Turtle pie is a new one for me, but after seeing my alarmed face, the waitress explains it's a combo of chocolate, caramel and pecan nuts. It's delicious. Hungry for more? There are plenty of sweet temptations during the twice-daily fresh-baked cookie time.

Our final stop is Charleston, where I have a few hours before flying home. I stroll around the distinctive streets, where historic houses boast elaborate balconies and gas lamps glow in the doorways. While attempting to walk off the pie fest, I have time to reflect on a cruise that provides a unique taste – in every sense – of this lesser-known corner of the South.



### Andy Hawke product and sales manager, Fred Holidays

"Florida is well known as a self-drive destination, but more and more customers are discovering how easy it is to take a coastal cruise as an alternative. Coastal cruising gives customers a different aspect of the region, with great scenery among the bays, rivers and canals. If they want to stay a little longer, it's easy for agents to extend the holiday, with perhaps a visit to one of Florida's theme parks or a trip further up the historical East Coast with a stay in Washington DC or Philadelphia. With American Cruise Lines. clients enjoy fantastic dining and service and a relaxing cruise experience.



#### **BOOK IT**

The seven-night Historic South and Golden Isles Cruise from Amelia Island to Charleston, departing on March 24, 2024, on board American Eagle leads in at £6,995. The price includes flights, a one-night pre-cruise hotel stay, onboard meals and cocktail parties. fredholidays.co.uk