

FIRST LOOK RESEARCH

# Anchors Aweigh:

The Future of Cruise Meetings and Incentives



# SUMMARY

What do groups prioritize when it comes to cruise meetings and incentives, and what would appeal most to planners in the future? We set out to navigate the evolving nature of meeting on the water in “Anchors Aweigh: The Future of Cruise Meetings and Incentives,” produced by Northstar Meetings Group and sponsored by Virgin Voyages. The online survey of professional meeting and event planners was fielded from May 6 to June 12, 2025. Results are based on 120 qualified responses, with research and analysis conducted without sponsor involvement.

Perhaps most striking is the untapped market growth potential in the segment: While just under half of respondents have booked a meeting or incentive on a cruise previously, an overwhelming majority – 85 percent – identified as likely to do so in the future. Planners are constantly under pressure to find unique venues and create memorable attendee experiences, and they demonstrate here that meeting on the water represents just such an opportunity.

What emerges in terms of planner concerns and preferences is a desire for flexibility and connectivity from a cruise meeting experience – and all with a close eye on the budget. The latter point is consistent with the findings from the most recent Northstar Meetings Group/Cvent Meetings Industry PULSE Survey, which revealed that the top three planner concerns are all about money: higher costs of goods and services, budget constraints, and a potential economic downturn.

In light of these concerns, the all-inclusive pricing model associated with cruise meetings could hold considerable appeal.

## AMONG OTHER FINDINGS

» **CONNECTIVITY IS PARAMOUNT.** Wi-Fi/connectivity is the number-one factor when it comes to booking a cruise for a meeting. In other words – and understandably – not being able to demonstrate solid Wi-Fi capabilities is likely a deal-breaker. Planners will embrace the open water as long as it isn’t off the grid.

» **SUN & SURF REIGN SUPREME.** Cruise operators have been building an impressive variety of destinations and themes, but planners are largely interested in tropical and beach destinations for their future floating events, over ports of call in cities or themes involving adventure or historical elements. The idyllic backdrop of tropical beaches provides the clear promise of leisure activities, which planners might perceive as most universally appealing to stakeholders and potential participants.

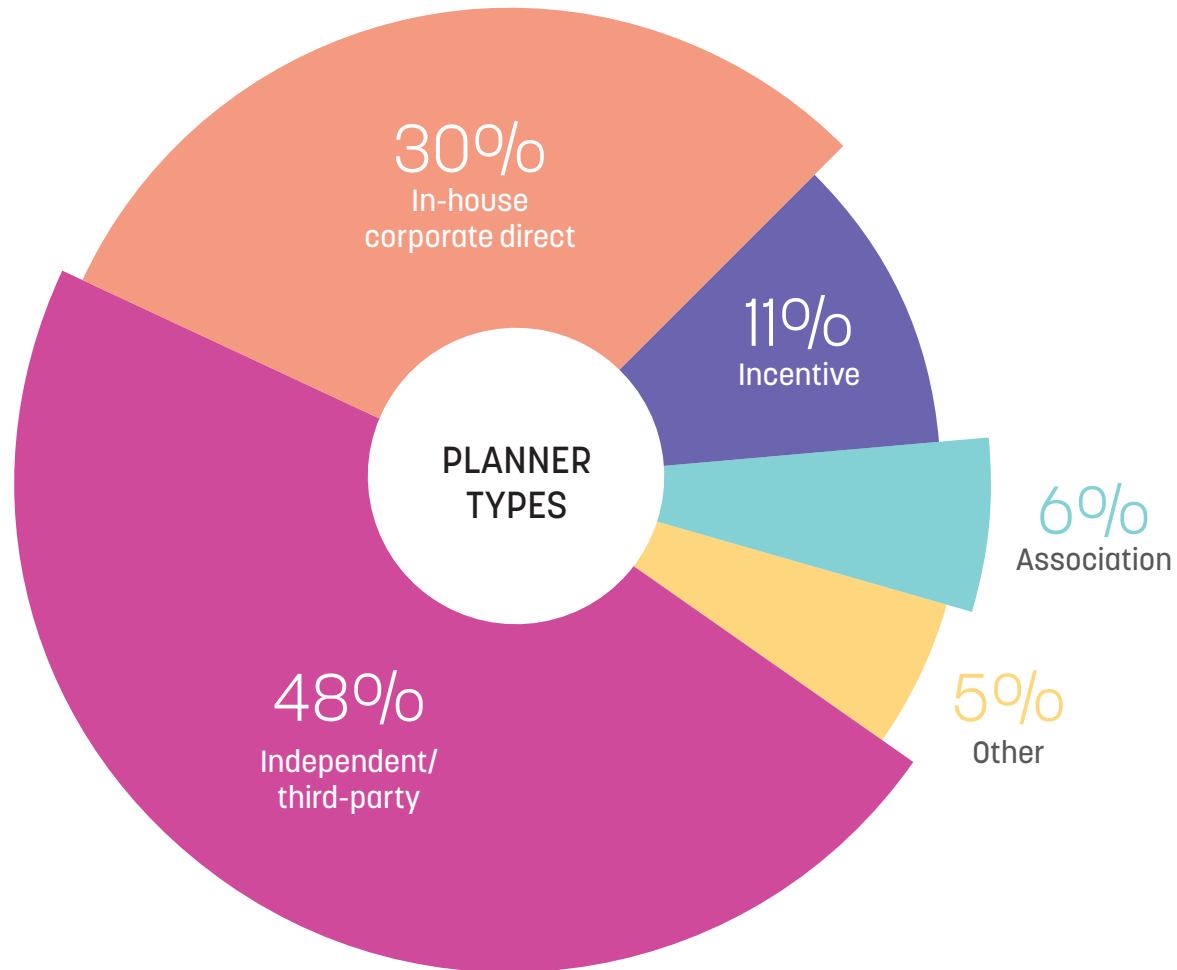
» **FLEXIBLE OVER FANCY.** What appeals to planners most for future cruise meetings? Flexibility and the opportunity to provide a casual, focused setting: Think casual dining and dress, shorter itineraries, no kids, and high staff-to-passenger ratio.

» **SUSTAINABILITY IS BARELY ON THE RADAR.** Although sustainability concerns are often publicly addressed with respect to cruises – with some operators trumpeting their environmentally friendly practices and various ports of call putting restrictions on the types and quantity of ships that can visit, for instance – sustainable practices are dead last among planner priorities. Less than one-third say such practices are important.

# PLANNER PERSPECTIVE

## What type of planner are you?

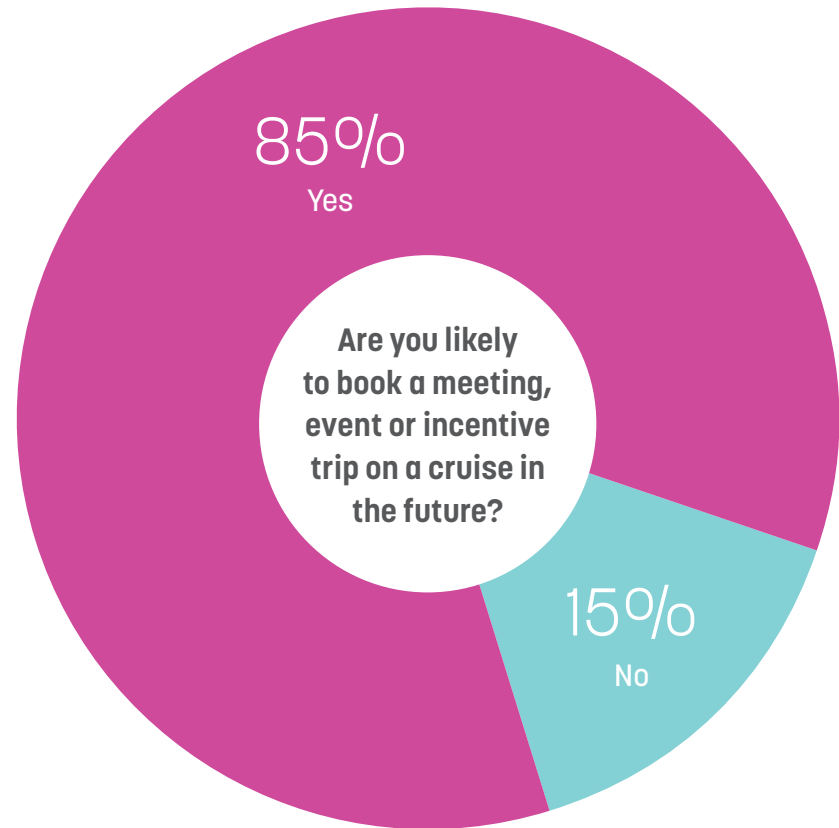
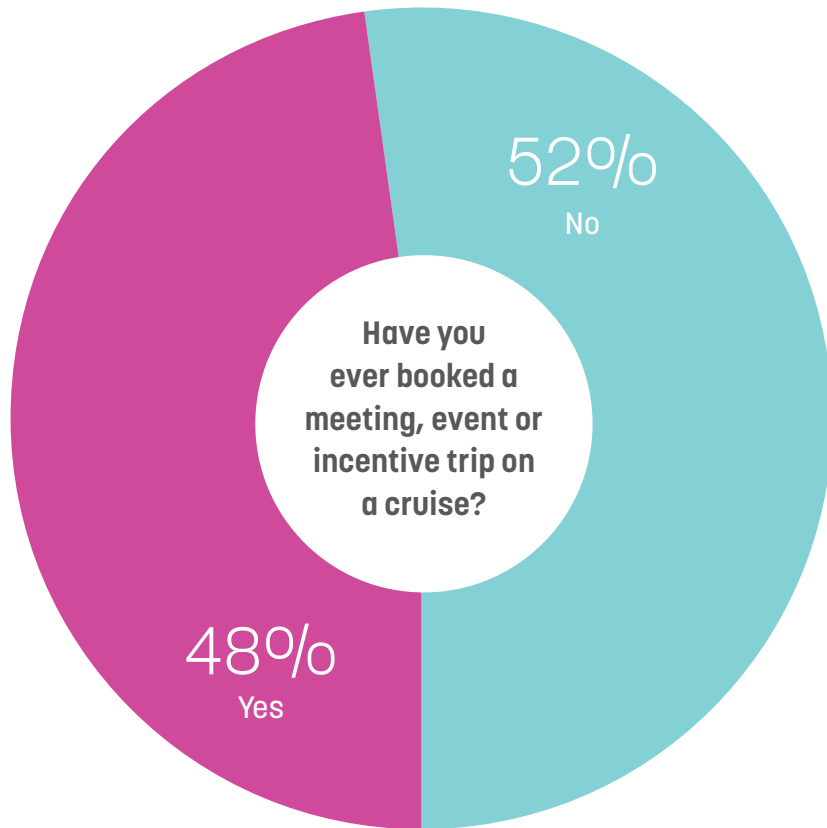
Nearly half of the qualified respondents identify as independent or third-party planners, while three out of 10 are corporate planners.



# UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITIES

## Eager to Set Sail

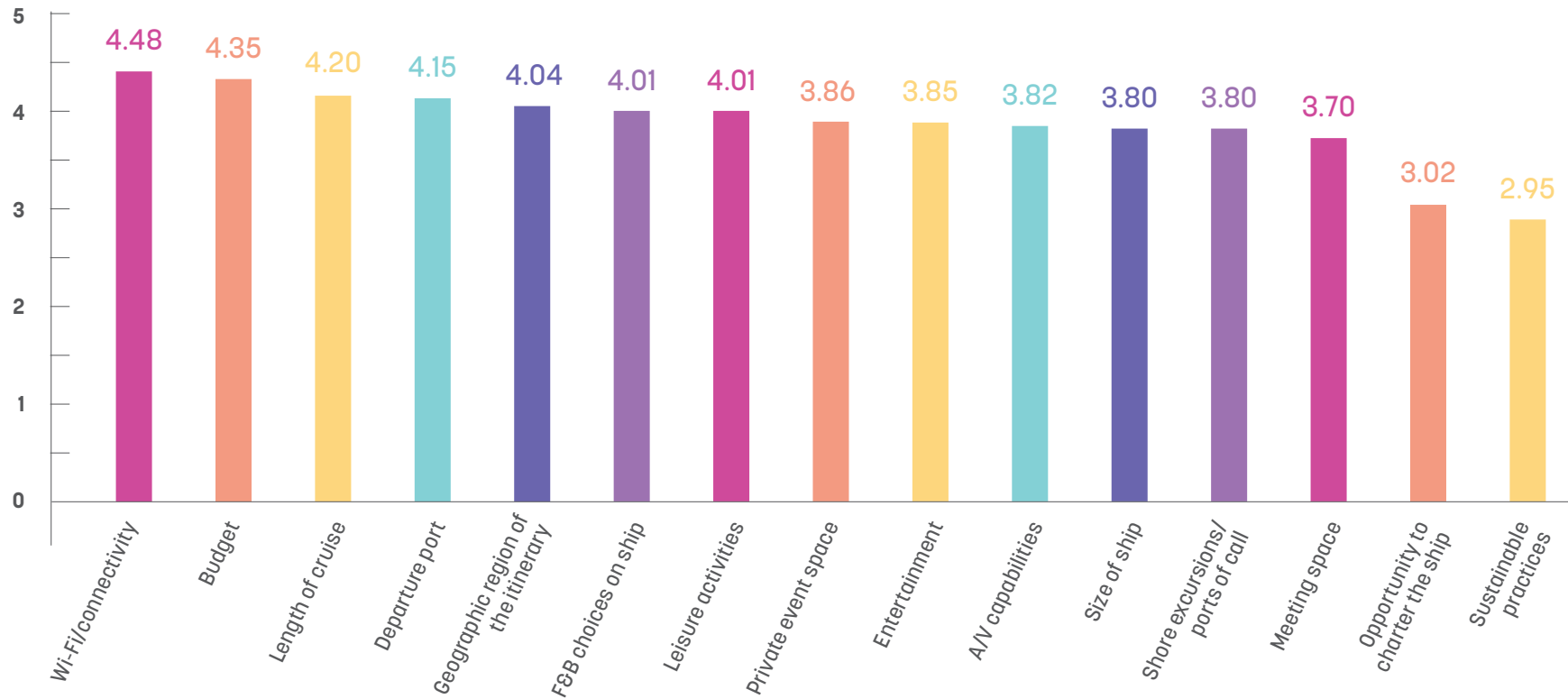
In the never-ending quest for unique venues and experiences, planners are overwhelmingly receptive to cruise meetings, although more than half have never booked one before.



# KEY FACTORS IN BOOKING DECISIONS

## Which factors are most important in your decision to book a cruise meeting?

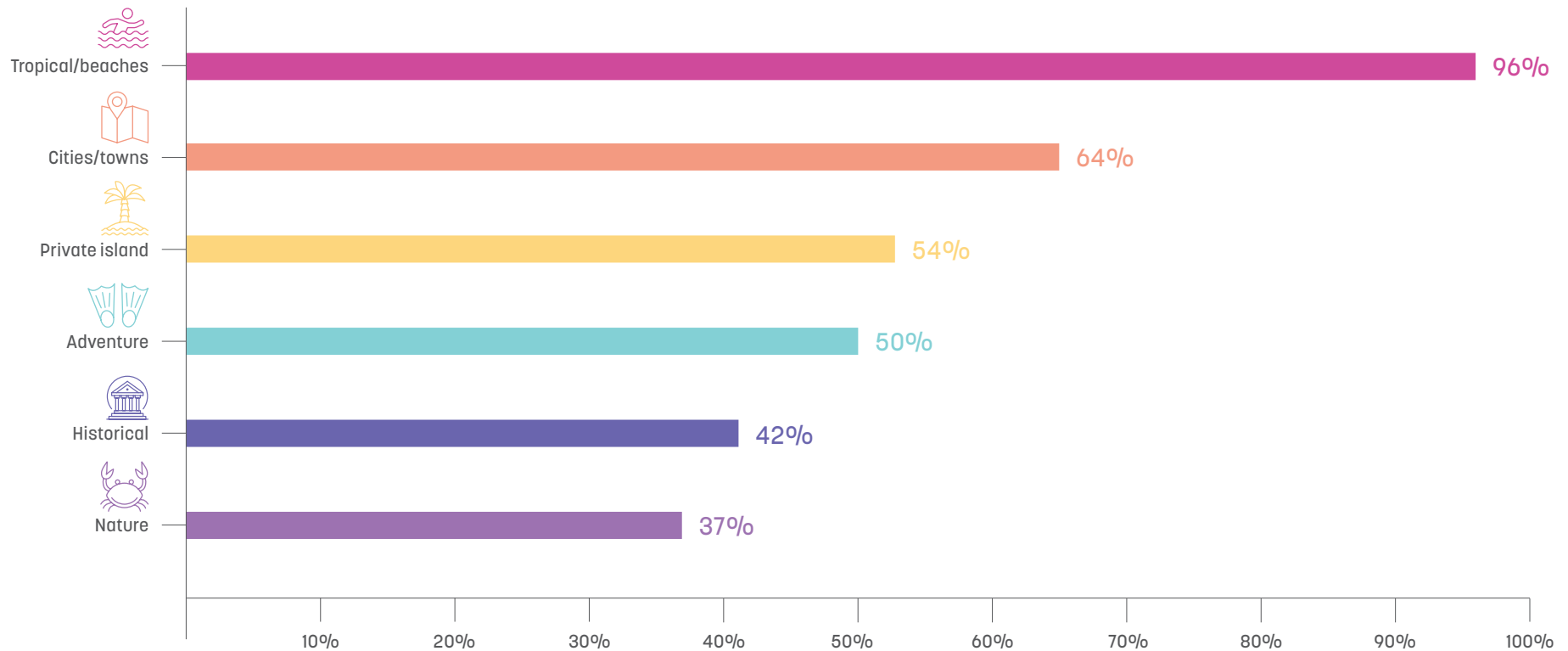
(Ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being most important)



Practical concerns are the primary drivers for planners, and even with technological advances, connectivity/Wi-Fi is the most influential, followed by budget and length of cruise. Meanwhile, sustainability issues are of little importance to planners' booking decisions.

# PREFERRED CRUISE TYPES

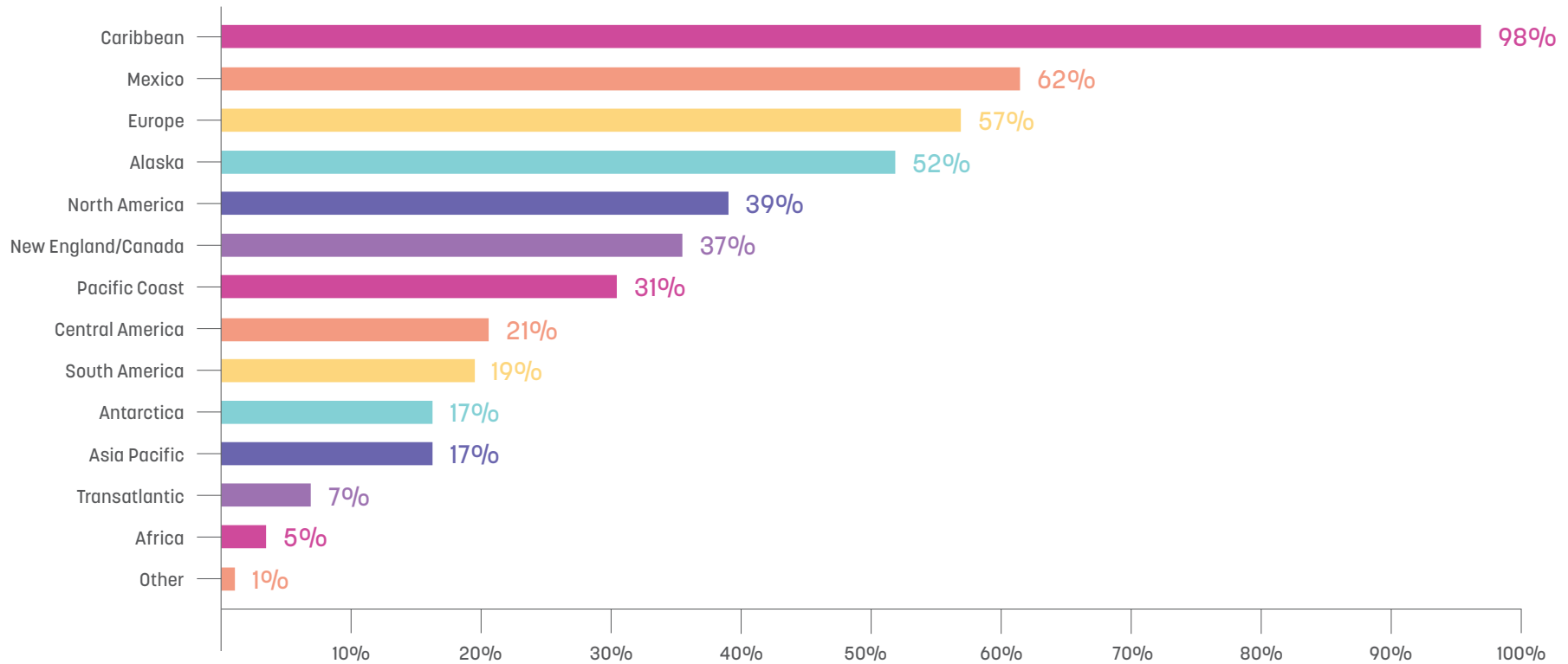
Which types of destinations or ports of call are you most likely to book in the next five years?



While there are a growing number of cruise themes and a variety of ports of call in the marketplace, planners overwhelmingly envision tropical and beach destinations as most likely for their meetings. The opportunity to explore cities and towns at ports of call is a distant second choice.

# WHERE TO?

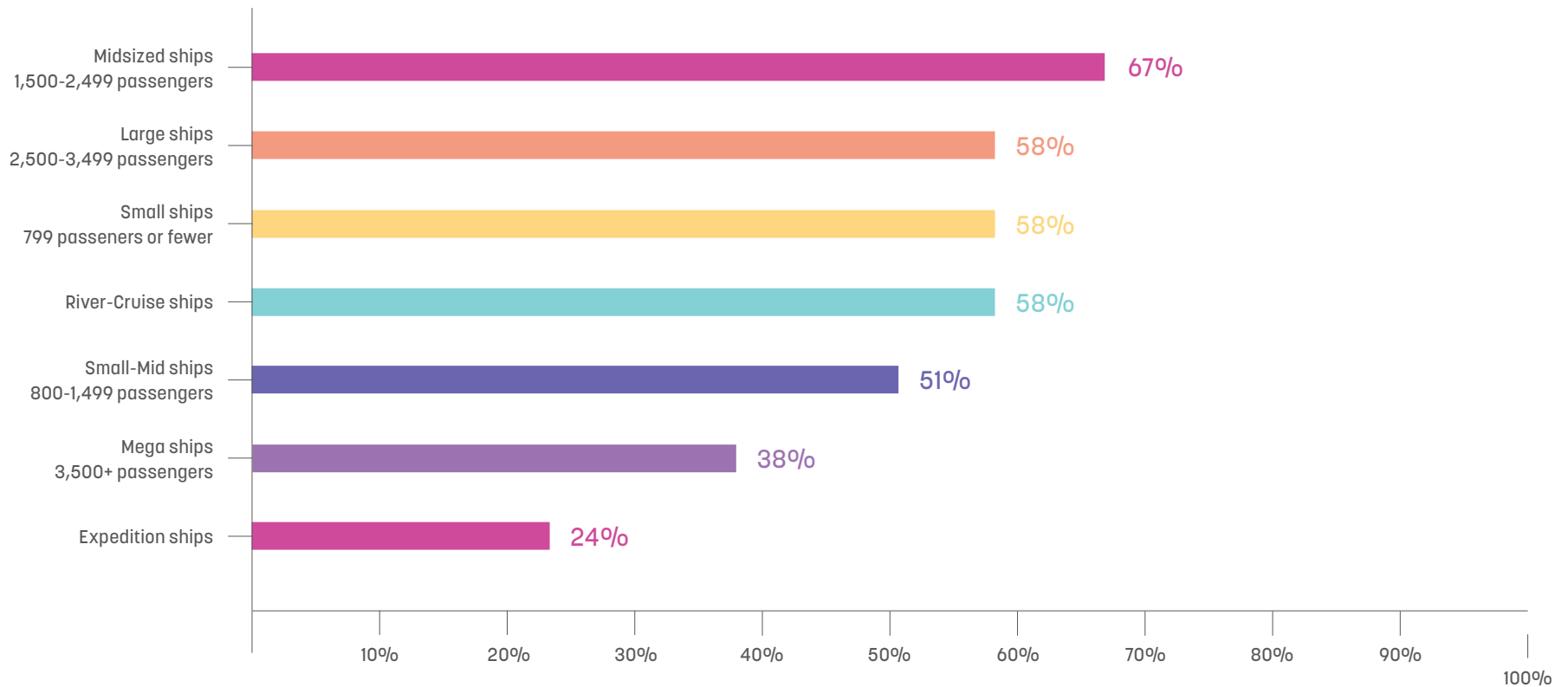
Which geographic regions will you be most likely to book for cruise meetings in the next five years?



In line with planner preferences for tropical and beach destinations, the Caribbean is the clear region of choice, followed by Mexico. Europe and Alaska also are options for more than half of respondents.

# SHIP-TYPE FLEXIBILITY

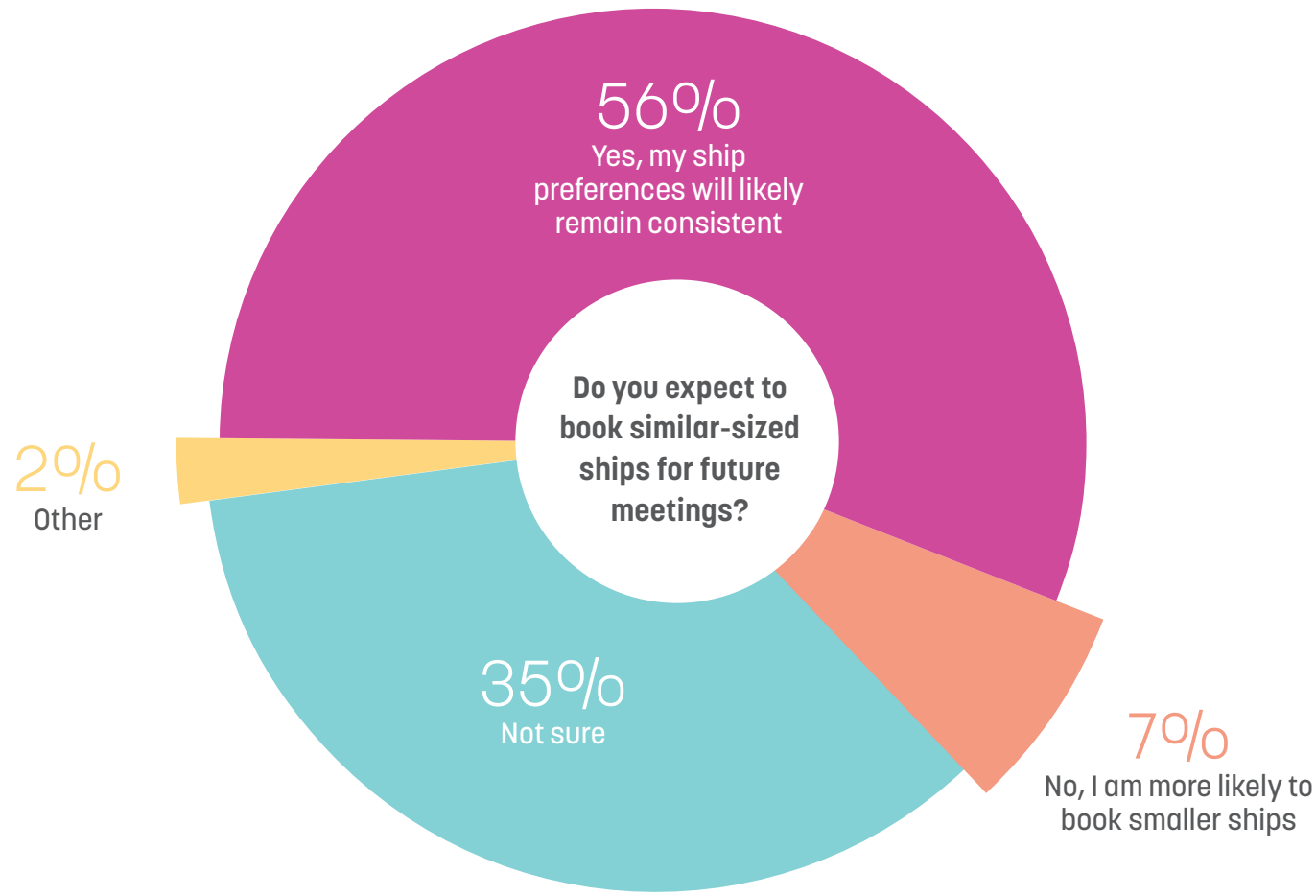
## Which types of ships are you most likely to book for your meetings?



Planners are fairly flexible when it comes to the type or size of the vessel, showing a slight preference for midsized ships. But large ships, small ships – and, interestingly, river-cruise ships – are tied for a second choice, with far fewer planners expressing interest in mega ships.

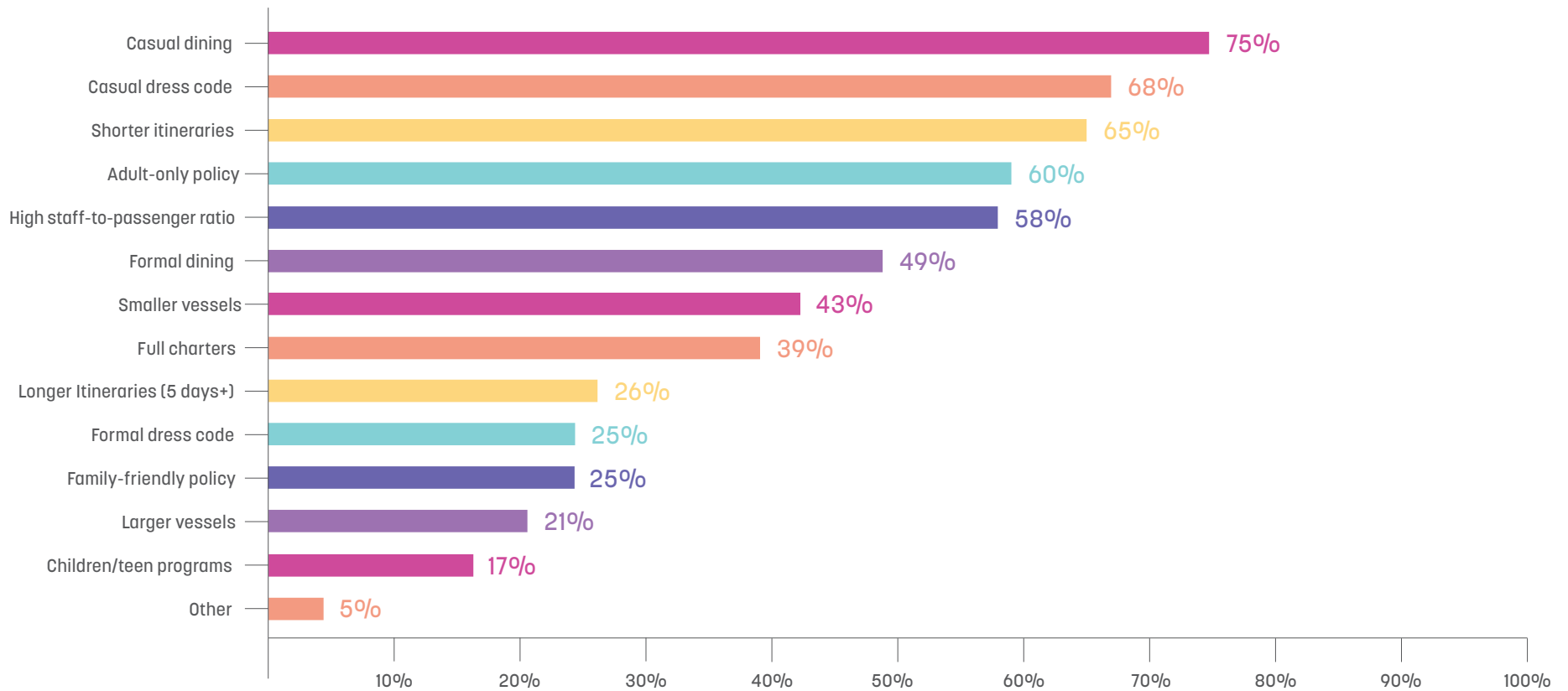
## NO CHANGE EVIDENT ON THE HORIZON

Planners largely expect to stay the course when it comes to ship size for future cruise bookings — though it's worth noting that not a single respondent expects to book a larger ship than they have in the past.



# WISH LIST

## Which of the following elements would appeal to you for future cruise meetings?



Planners aren't asking for a lot from future cruises – merely a way to gather casually, in a relaxed atmosphere, among adults and with high service levels.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

» **FLOATING EVENT VENUES HOLD APPEAL.** Planners are overwhelmingly receptive to booking cruises for their meetings or incentives, with 85 percent likely to do so in the future — substantially more than the 48 percent of planners who have booked one in the past.

» **POOR TECH COULD BE A DEAL-BREAKER.** Wi-Fi is the number-one factor in booking a cruise meeting. Planners need to know they can stay connected — and that they won't be fielding Wi-Fi complaints from attendees throughout the meeting.

» **BUDGET IS A CONCERN.** Planners are under pressure to do more with less, and while the all-inclusive pricing is compelling they still are keeping a close eye on the bottom line.

» **JUST ADD SUN AND SAND.** Planners are most likely to book tropical and beach destinations in the future, over ports of call in cities or towns or themed cruises more immersed in adventure, history or nature. The Caribbean and Mexico are top of mind geographically.

» **MIDSIZED SHIPS ARE "JUST RIGHT."** Call it the Goldilocks effect: Planners prefer midsized ships, though both large and small ships follow close behind. Interestingly, so do river-cruise ships, with this fast-growing segment significantly outpacing a desire for mega ships.

» **GET DOWN TO (LAID-BACK) BUSINESS.** Planners are looking for casual dining and dress-code options, along with the flexibility provided by shorter cruise itineraries. And they prefer that attendees leave the kids at home.