



Caribbean Dreamin'

Despite some indications to the contrary, demand for Caribbean cruises is still strong, especially when it comes to incentive and other group programmes. *written by* **CHRIS MCBEATH**

In the 1950s, when the number of people crossing the Atlantic by air surpassed those traveling by sea, many felt the days of the grand ocean liners were coming to an end. Yet within a few decades, travel by ship meant cruising in warm waters, climbing rock walls, freestyle dining and casual attire. Today, the cruise world means bigger is better – even when it creates a ‘smaller’ experience. Europe has become the new North America; Asia is in line to be the new Europe. And while the Mediterranean is purported to be the new Caribbean, demand for the latter is far from waning, especially when it comes to meeting and incentive planners whose programmes must appeal to an ever-broadening delegate demographic.

NON-ISSUE

“Some people think of cruising as potentially being boring, due to the confines of the ship and being out at sea, yet nothing could be further from the truth,” observes Jim Walter, president and CEO, Crossing Boundaries LLC, which plans meetings for corporate and incentive groups alike. “It’s a nice uphill sales battle to have, because once a group has cruised, these concerns become non-issues. The various ports of call and onboard activities take care of that.”



Cunard's Queen Elizabeth 2

Although marketing efforts have traditionally focused on the leisure traveler, in recent years, group travel has taken hold, prompting corporate offices to engage entire salesforces dedicated to group and incentive business. Indeed, group bookings represent such a significant portion of Carnival Cruise Lines' business, it has introduced a new travel-agent web portal, bookccl.com, that promotes the convenience of managing group bookings electronically. Agents can now berth group cabins and select/modify cabin assignments and assign/modify guest information, along with cities for FlyAweigh air supplements.

"All-inclusive pricing is a huge benefit in the planning process," continues Walter. "On smaller ships, particularly when you're doing a full-ship charter, you're often working on itineraries two to three years out, and being able to organize financial and other details so far in advance is an enormous help."

Annika Hayes, president, Whole Planet Tours & Conferences, has been in the meetings industry for 30 years, yet only started cruise ships, in earnest, over the last decade. The key reasons? Value, having a captive audience, ease of operations and a meetings-aware salesforce.

COMPETITION

"The intense competition between cruise lines, particularly in the Caribbean, has created a very responsive sales and operations staff, which are far more aware of meeting planners' needs than their hotel colleagues," says Hayes. "They are flexible and collaborative to the point where I am constantly amazed at what we are able to do now that would have been unheard-of just a few years ago. For example, within the all-inclusive concept, we are able to negotiate for private receptions, and have even

Staying Connected

After teaming with Wireless Maritime Services (WMS), which has roaming agreements with more than 300 carriers in 180 countries, many cruise lines make it possible to stay connected with the office and loved ones while on board.

Examples include:

Carnival Cruise Lines includes wireless access onboard its entire fleet in areas adjacent to its 24-hour Internet cafes. The Carnival Valor, Liberty and Freedom offer 100-per-cent bow-to-stern WiFi service, including staterooms.

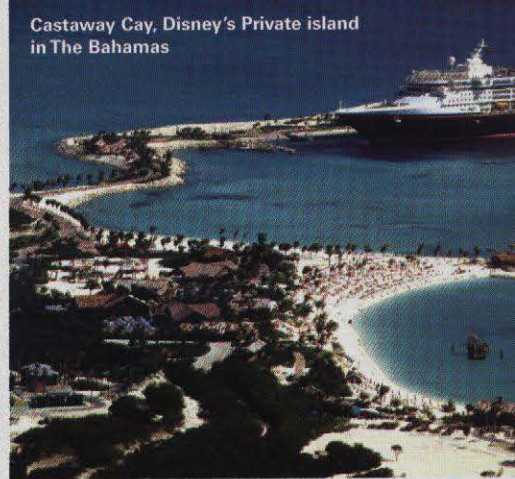
Celebrity Cruises offers Internet access and shipboard e-mail services in each ship's cyber cafe. Celebrity's Millennium-class ships also offer Internet access in staterooms.

Crystal Cruises features WiFi and cell-phone access onboard, using the same Internet connection as the U.S. Navy. Disney Cruise Line and Princess Cruises offers WiFi hotspots in most public areas in addition to Internet cafes.

Holland America Lines offers guests 24 hours of Internet connection in its Explorations Cafe, as well as WiFi zones throughout public areas.

Norwegian Cruise Line's ships have Internet centres and wireless access in most public areas and some staterooms. Guests are given their own cruise-line e-mail addresses with their trip documents.

Castaway Cay, Disney's Private island in The Bahamas



Caledonia

Sailing Green

The cruise industry has taken steps to lessen its environmental footprint. Each week, a typical ship generates, on average, 10,000 gallons of sewage (all of which is treated), one-million gallons of grey water (much of which is treated), more than 130 gallons of hazardous waste (all of which is properly manifested and discharged ashore to licensed hazardous-waste treatment facilities), seven tons of solid waste (which is landed ashore or incinerated on board; very little is ever discharged) and 12,740 gallons of oily bilge (which is separated with the effluent discharged at less than 15 parts per million oil-to-water ratio; the residual oil is either incinerated or discharged to licensed treatment facilities).

Recently, U.S. Senator Richard Durbin introduced the Clean Cruise Ship Act, which would ban discharges within 12 miles of the coast and set discharge limits to 200 miles offshore.

brought our own organic food products onboard, which were stored and prepared on our behalf. The other shift is in how a sponsor can be showcased. Cruise lines are much easier to deal with when it comes to banner placement and other related issues. They just 'get it.'"

Despite the current economic uncertainty, some 38 new ships are in the works to set sail by 2012, an investment of some \$23.5-billion U.S. that will add more than 83,000 extra berths into the marketplace.

83,000 BERTHS

Cruise Lines International Association, too, notes that the industry is positioned for continued growth. Its biannual 2008 Cruise Market Profile Study paints a picture of a healthy, in-demand industry, citing 10.25-million North Americans who took a cruise in 2007 and an estimated 12.8-million who expect to do so in 2008.

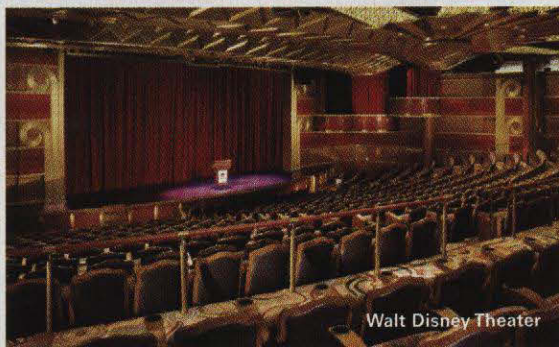
Since a ship keeps groups together, branding and networking opportunities are significant – every meal, reception and activity can underscore a company's core value or meeting theme without distractions. "Corporate leaders love the fact that they capture their key producers and managers for an entire week. They develop closer relationships and there is ample opportunity for business discussions in a relaxed and informal setting," says Ann Gilmartin, president, Wings Unlimited, a meetings and incentive company. Walter agrees. "It is rare these days to have high-end achievers have time to relax and spend with their significant other. A cruise fulfills this need beautifully. A full ship charter also gives the sponsoring organization an unprecedented amount of opportunity to 'bond' with the top achievers, as everyone on board is recognized as being a member of the incentive programme. This does not happen when a group is staying at a hotel with hundreds of other guests all around."



Queen Victoria,
Cunard Royal Spa



Wii Fit on
Princess Cruises



Walt Disney Theater

CARIBBEAN ITINERARIES

Caribbean itineraries are popular, in large part, because of weather, accessibility—embarkation points are close to most gateway cities—and sailing itineraries that can easily slip into the work cycle. Time differences are manageable and fuel surcharges less onerous. “With a cruise, you can visit many countries in just a few days, [which] makes the itinerary more of an adventure,” Gilmartin adds.

Before oil prices skyrocketed, planners were scouting out European itineraries for the ‘been there, done the Caribbean’ crowd, and despite the strength of the Euro, economics are dictating a swing back to the Caribbean. Costa Cruises offers more seven-night itineraries than any other cruise line in Europe, yet is savvy to the American market’s need to stay closer to home. Demand for their seven-night Caribbean product is as strong as ever.

Disney has one such distinct edge. Since Florida is access point to the lion’s share of cruise departures and home base for Walt Disney World Resort, planners can enjoy the best of land-sea worlds. Moreover, Disney Cruise Line is the only one to offer premium ships in the three- and four-night market, in addition to a variety of seven-night itineraries.

Cunard, too, gives a nod to the Caribbean, with sailings aboard Queen Mary 2 out of Fort Lauderdale and New York. This ship boasts over 20,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, as well as the only planetarium and only Canyon Ranch SpaClub at sea, plus a wide variety of speakers from Cunard Insights.

As mega-ships grow to massive proportions, two things are creating a more intimate or experiential cruise.

First is the advent of the resort ship. “There’s been an evolution of comfort in the cruise industry over the past few years,” says Eric St. Pierre,

marketing and cruise products, IFS/Intair & Fun Sun, who cites flexible dining, bigger staterooms, larger gyms, more varied shopping and entertainment as the new standard.

“All these changes make sense and are even necessary,” he explains. “There are so many ports in the Caribbean, that the change in itineraries cannot, alone, be as strong a sales argument as it was a few years back. Hence, the ‘destination ship’ that is coming about in the industry.”

ONBOARD SPAS

Onboard spas are another significant change. Costa Concordia was one of the first ships to feature an onboard spa-resort, with its own accommodation, restaurant, private cabin access, dedicated professionals and included treatments.

The second experiential development is the rising popularity in niche and specialty cruises, where passenger counts range from 50 to 200 and destinations are remote and generally inaccessible to larger vessels.

SeaDream Yachts and The Yachts of Seabourn are extremely active in the Caribbean and offer all-inclusive charters with customized itineraries. Ports of call include places such as Jost van Dyke or Virgin Gorda in the British Virgin Islands or St. Barts in the French West Indies, as well as barbecues at private beaches. A far more informal cruise experience is found aboard the family-owned American Canadian Caribbean Line; it even has a BYOB policy.

In the quest for an authentic experience, optional participation has become hot. If ‘glamping’ is the term for glamorous camping, then perhaps ‘glailing’ should describe its sailing counterpart. Canadian Sailing Expeditions (CSE) offers small-ship cruising adventures in Atlantic Canada, Quebec and the Caribbean that are eco-friendly and culturally rich: CSE’s ship, Caledonia, is a 245-ft. barquentine (a sailing vessel with three or more masts), with room for up to 77 passengers and 20 crew. Its newest cruises are through the relatively untouched French Caribbean and the former British colony of Dominica. Passengers can participate in the sailing of the Caledonia, discover ways to prepare local delicacies or immerse themselves in local experiences, all of which can be built into a meeting agenda or team-building exercise.

Star Clippers, however, epitomizes a new breed of tall ship, with its fleet of three vessels, including the Royal Clipper, the largest full-rigged ship afloat today. Catering to nearly 230 guests, this magnificent ship travels under the power of 42 sails across five masts. Passengers can climb the nets to the crow’s nest and help man the winches and hoist the sails.

— Chris McBeath is a Vancouver-based freelance writer.