

Bon Voyage
Where the journey is the destination

by Josh Krist
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In the swankest suite available, the CEO of a major insurance company dazzles select members of his staff nightly. A personal butler flits in and out of the crowd floating a tray of hors d'oeuvres and making sure everything is just so. Boasting a private Jacuzzi, library and workout room, the view from the veranda is unparalleled-miles of scenic Mexican Riviera coastline-and the service can only be described as top-drawer.

This isn't the presidential suite at an exclusive beachside resort, but rather the 1,345-square-foot Crystal Penthouse on the Crystal Serenity cruise ship. So if you don't like the scenery, stick around-it changes by the minute.

Upscale groups suffering from the "been there, done that" drudgery of immobile meetings may find that getting there is most of the fun when incentive and other programs are put in motion.

The Call of the Sea

Although setting sail rather than staying put may seem like a luxury that can be ill-afforded in the current economy, planners who have managed cruise meetings and incentives say that the biggest draw isn't only the luxury five-star lines such as Crystal, Silversea and others offer, but agreeable prices and all-inclusiveness.

"The value is by far better on a ship than it is on land," says Shari Wallack, president of Buy The Sea, based in Plantation, Fla. "Just about everything you need is included in the price and provided right onboard, from accommodations to meals to entertainment to meeting facilities, and you know the costs upfront. There is no guesswork and no going over budget."

As far as the cost, Michael von Wittenau, director of charter and incentive sales for Crystal Cruises, notes that meetings and charter rates can sometimes be as low as 60 percent of the line's rack rate. A stateroom with a private veranda might cost around \$1,000 per person, double, per night, at rack rate, so inviting a meeting or incentive attendee aboard would set the company back approximately \$600 per person.

But the best part of the deal is that the planner is freed from having to worry excessively about meals, entertainment, meeting space, or audiovisual services-resort-level luxury and convenience at procurement-pleasing prices.

"It depends on all the details of the trade, of course, but on Crystal the rates can be as low as \$250 per day, per person," says von Wittenau, who adds that the line has further targeted the meetings and incentive market by rolling out a Meeting and Incentive Package.

The high degree of inclusiveness and attention to detail offered on a cruise is almost hard to fathom, and may take some getting used to for those who have not been truly pampered before—a welcome challenge in these days of hidden charges and nickel-and-diming.

Options Afloat

To comprehend all of the options luxury shipboard meetings afford, it helps to understand the vessel. The Crystal Serenity, for example, has 11 decks, with the top decks offering two swimming pools, tennis courts, a sunbathing area, and two semi-open-air restaurants with stunning views.

There is one main dining room that can seat 566 and two specialty restaurants, the Italian Prego and Japanese/Asian Silk Road (famed Japanese chef Nobu oversees the restaurant and sushi bar). A cigar bar, disco and large lounge serve as evening watering holes, with any of the venues convertible into eventspaces for groups—obvious picks for cocktail mixers or a private end-of-cruise party.

"With the number of public spaces we have, with our size, we have the ability to close off public spaces for private events," von Wittenau says. For larger events, there is the 572-person Galaxy Lounge, where guests can see a different Broadway-style show every night—perfect for presentations and award ceremonies. There is also a 202-person movie theater that can be used for lectures.

Whether a ship is used for an incentive trip—the most common use for groups—or for meetings, a planner will find that the amount of cruise line choices is dizzying. This is one of the reasons that out of all the segments of the travel industry, intermediaries are still going strong in the cruise world.

"A lot of planners just have not cruised, so they don't really understand the experience," says Gina Meyerson, vice president of sales for Contacts Unlimited—Meetings Resource, a Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.-based meeting and incentive travel company. "So people like me, who have been on a number of cruises and cruise lines, can give that first-person perspective and help them find the best fit. I always ask a lot of questions, and we have a form that we ask people to fill out about the group's age, interests and

expectations-matching the group to the cruise line is key, because each line has its niche."

As Wallack puts it: "Most travel buyers and meeting planners know the difference in quality between a Four Seasons, a Hilton and a Holiday Inn, but how many can tell you the difference between Silversea, Windstar and Celebrity?"

There are three primary ways a planner can utilize a ship; traditional meetings, which Meyerson says are easier to plan than ever; incentives on a scheduled itinerary; and charters, where a planner takes over the whole ship for anywhere from four or five days to a week or two and uses it for meetings, corporate wooing or a traditional incentive program.

According to Elena Rodriguez, director of corporate and incentive sales with Cunard Line, about 80 percent of Cunard's planner customers use ships for incentives, compared to 20 percent who stage actual meetings onboard. For their part, cruise lines are increasingly trying to spread the word about the benefits of sea-going meetings.

"I think there's this perception that there are too many distractions [onboard a ship], but I would counter by saying that a ship offers the opportunity for everybody to be together and be fairly captive—they're not going to go down the street shopping, because there's no 'down the street' to go to," she says.

Other hurdles include planner conceptions that this leisure- and incentives-driven market segment gives short-shift to providing space for breakout sessions and other meetings must-haves.

"Some of the new cruise ships have a huge amount of meeting space," says Contacts Unlimited's Meyerson. "I like planning meetings on ships, it's a much nicer atmosphere than some sterile meeting room somewhere.

"Planners do have to think outside the box a little; your goal can be accomplished, but you may have to tweak your thinking," she adds. "There are a huge amount of resources available on a ship, you just have to really get to know what's there."

Apart from chartering an entire ship—an attractive and cost-effective option if the meeting or incentive is large enough—the planner needs to go along with whatever the scheduled itinerary is.

Shore excursions, however, are another matter. Planners can either sign up attendees for the excursions the cruise line is offering or they can work with local DMCs at ports of call to customize group outings.

Shipboard planners note that when planning their own shore excursions, it's imperative to make sure that attendees are back on the ship in plenty of time.

"If you are on a ship-run excursion, no matter what happens, the ship will wait for you. However, keep in mind that the ship's excursions are designed for the masses," Wallack says. "If you use a DMC, you have the chance to completely customize the experience, which is so much nicer and exclusive for an incentive group. Just make sure you use a reputable one."

Don't Miss the Boat: You Own it

If chartering a luxury cruise liner seems like an ostentatious proposition, planners need only take a look at a published cruise schedule to notice a lot of black holes when the ship does not appear to be sailing.

Although some of that downtime may be dedicated to maintenance (during shore excursions the ship is often docked, so there's a good 10- to 12-hour window for maintenance and repairs), those gaps in the schedule could be dedicated to charters.

"We like it when corporations charter a full ship, because, first of all, it's a simple transaction for us because we don't have any mixture of retail guests on the same sailing as corporate clients," says Andrew Poulton, director of strategic marketing for Radisson Seven Seas. "But we also like it because we can be much more flexible for the client. They can customize their itineraries, their onboard program, their meal times, and seating arrangements. The ship is theirs; they can do with it what they want-up to a point, obviously."

Meyerson has booked and managed a shipboard incentive charter, and found that the ability to customize the experience for her group was highly motivational for her clients.

"Everything was personalized-the menus, the daily schedule of activities-everything," she says. "People felt like they owned the ship, and they really did. There was even the company flag below the ship's flag. I can't tell you how proud everyone was to be a part of the company during this trip-they were just beside themselves."

To further personalize the experience-Meyerson suggests that planners present each attendee with a shipboard credit of \$100 to \$150.

"That way, instead of getting everyone a spa treatment or getting a liquor package, some people can do the spa and others can use it toward a shore

excursion that might not be included in the trip," she says. "Others, who want to drink, can use it toward a bar tab. If you give people options and let them make the cruise what they want it to be, they'll be a lot happier."

Planes, Trains and Chartered Yachts

Although they are definitely the most accessible, cruises certainly are not the only luxury voyage option available for meetings.

Chartering a private jet can start as low as \$1,875 per hour for round-trips on a light jet that can seat a maximum of six people. If first-class airfare is part of the executive retreat or incentive winner must-haves, it may be not be too large of a jump to charter a jet.

Greg Goodwin, vice president of Norwell, Mass.-based Private Business Jets, says that a planner could call his company and book a jet without the memberships or deposits required by some charter jet companies.

"We're a really high-end taxi," he jokes, explaining that his pricing is for the Lower 48 states and his company can fly in and out of many more regional airports closer to a customer's final destination than can commercial airlines. "Private travel gives hours and hours back of time back to our customers every time they fly."

Luxury train trips are another option. Cruise ships on rails, train journeys boast the luxury of premier vessels but can offer more varied stops-at lakes, in mountains, by the sea-than is possible on any ship.

Canada's Rocky Mountaineer Rail Tours offers a meetings and incentives package for groups of 20 to 500 for journeys that cut through the pristine scenery of the Canadian Rockies.

American Orient Express offers a number of luxurious itineraries that criss-cross North America, including 11-day treks across the continent meant to re-create in style the "Go West" experience of early settlers; trips up the Pacific Coast; or fall foliage journeys through New England and Quebec.

Yacht charters, especially for evening functions, are within reach at seaside destinations, and may even be affordable for a truly *crème de la crème*, multiday incentive trip.

According to Meyerson, who was involved in a yacht charter incentive trip that sailed out of Tortola with a company's top six sales people aboard, the luxury afforded is striking: a menu customized to attendee desires, a bar stocked with top-shelf liquors of choice, and absolutely nothing to worry

about.

"I just told them to bring some T-shirts, different shorts for inside and outside the boat, personal items-that was about it," she says.

Ship to Shore

On the last day of the Crystal Serenity voyage, a few people from the meetings industry got together for a brunch on the outside patio of its Lido restaurant. A few days earlier, from this very spot, one of them had photographed a pod of dolphins following the ship.

There was laughter as some recounted stories of late-night karaoke in the disco. Mouths started watering as talk turned to the subject of dinner the night before at Silk Road-a fantastic chef's special from Nobu and sake that some had only found before in Japan. Some raved about the pillows in the rooms, and how they had gotten more sleep in four days than they usually get in a week.

Everyone realized it would be a good while before they tasted such luxury again. A few of the people were first-time cruisers and had approached the journey with some skepticism, but on this sunny day, as their visit to the good life was setting, there was only one regret-that it ever had to end.

But, alas, all journeys must eventually come to a close.