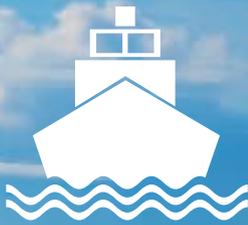


CRUISE CONTROL

**Innovative F&B, better connectivity and heightened security
elevate the ever-changing cruise meetings landscape.**

BY MARIA LENHART



No one planning a cruise meeting or incentive program 10 or even five years ago could have imagined the options now available.

A sea change has taken place by way of the types of ships, itineraries, venue choices and experiences both on board and off-board. Few in the industry know more about the evolution of cruise meetings than Jo Kling, who co-founded the cruise meetings firm Landry & Kling, Events at Sea more than 30 years ago.

Among the biggest changes she's seen is the way that cruise lines have come to value a business segment that was once tangential.

"When we started, many cruise lines did not have a meetings and incentives department, but now even the smallest cruise line will have one," she says. "The ships have become much more like hotels in regards to meetings. People on staff have often come up through hotels and they are accustomed to handling the particular needs that meetings have."

Cruise lines are increasingly equipped to go beyond handling the basics, working with planners to create unique and customized experiences that rival anything offered by a land destination.

"For groups, we're always looking to one-up and provide something exclusive," says Lori Cassidy (MPI South Florida Chapter), associate vice president, international meetings and incentives for Royal Caribbean International. "There's a dedicated team to focus on group activities both on the ship and on the shore excursions. Groups want experiences that are extraordinary, things they can't do on their own."

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MARKET TRENDS

What are groups looking for in cruise programs these days? It varies according to industry, Kling notes. For high-end incentives, cruises that emphasize customized and off-the-beaten-track experiences are especially big.

"Insurance and financial incentive groups like luxury and they also like to charter," she says. "They might even do a charter to Antarctica or other off-the-beaten-track places. River cruises are also huge. Anything experiential."



SAFETY AT SEA

With travel safety of utmost concern these days, the cruise industry has worked hard to position itself as a cruise alternative to land-based travel.

"We truly believe and the data supports that cruising is one of the safest travel options in the world," says Lisa Vogt (MPI At Large), associate vice president, corporate incentive and charter sales for Celebrity Cruises. "We have security teams on board the ship. All of the luggage and everything else is scanned before it's on board. There aren't any guns on board."

The flexibility that cruise lines have in moving their ships away from trouble spots is an advantage over fixed locations, she adds.

"For example, we could see that Turkey was volatile, so we removed our itineraries from Istanbul," Vogt says. "We made this change before the terrorist incidents at the Istanbul airport."

Another point of emphasis is that cruise lines are vigilant about monitoring everyone who gets on and off the ship.

"Everyone is accounted for on board," says Lori Cassidy (MPI South Florida Chapter), associate vice president, international meetings and incentives for Royal Caribbean International. "You cannot just walk on board a ship. And we monitor the watch lists."

When clients do have security concerns, particularly if they are working with a high-profile group, Stephen Milo (MPI South Florida Chapter), managing partner of CruiseEventGPS, says he recommends keeping the group size small and taking other steps to keep visibility to a minimum.

"Say, if you have a large incentive group of a thousand or more, we might recommend doing 10 separate sailings for groups of 50," he says. "It not only reduces visibility, but you can really customize things for each group. With all the safety issues, there's a need for something like this."

Far from discouraging interest, Milo believes that concerns over terrorism are actually making cruise meetings a more attractive option.

"Now there is a lot of concern with the safety of being somewhere that is a soft target," he says. "A cruise ship is not a soft target."

While the Zika virus is a growing concern for travelers, particularly in popular tropical cruising regions such as the Caribbean, it is not something that appears to be affecting cruise bookings.

"So far we have had only one group switch from the Caribbean to Alaska because of Zika concerns," says Karen Devine (MPI Chicago Area Chapter), president of 3D Cruise Partners. "At the same time, interest in the Caribbean for 2017 is up."

Similarly, Milo has not seen Zika negatively affecting cruise business to the Caribbean, aside from one pregnant attendee declining to go on a shore excursion. When clients express concerns over Zika, he responds by helping with precautions and pointing out the fact that mosquitos are not found at sea.

Karen Devine (MPI Chicago Area Chapter), president of 3D Cruise Partners, also says the incentive market is flocking toward river and expedition cruises, a trend that is bolstered by an explosion in the number and type of these cruises now available.

"The product in river cruising has really caught up with demand—there's literally a choice for everybody, especially in Europe," she says. "It's now much like the resort market, whether you prefer a Four Seasons, Hyatt or Marriott, there's a right fit for you."

At the same time, Devine sees groups going for more adventurous options, including expedition cruises to the Arctic or the Galapagos.

"There's a lot more out there for the younger, more adventurous crowd," she says.

The growing interest in adventure cruising is not lost on the major ocean cruise lines, according to Lisa Vogt (MPI At Large), associate vice president, corporate incentive and charter sales for Celebrity Cruises. The cruise line, which already operates a 100-passenger ship on seven-night itineraries in the Galapagos, is adding two 48-passenger yachts in the region, which Vogt says will be a great charter option for high-end incentives.

"People are looking for authentic destinations and great land excursions where you can really delve into the destination," she says. "There's also a growing interest in charters, which allow planners to really tailor a program."

At the same time that incentive travel is growing more adventurous, the duration of itineraries is also starting to lengthen, according to Cassidy.

"Most of our incentive business is seven nights, not the three to five nights you would expect," she says. "Groups can take that amount of time and they are going for it."

Like Vogt, Cassidy sees a growing interest in charters, an increasingly accessible option as cruise lines expand their ship inventory. Not only are charters popular for small incentives, but large corporate and affinity groups are also going for them. Recent charter groups on Royal Caribbean have included everything from a four-night cruise for a Chick-fil-A group to one for a global law firm that brought in people from 50 countries.

"We are doing from 25 to 35 full-ship charters a year—it's great when people are looking for a single housing destination for 500 to 1,500 people," she said.

VENUES AND CONNECTIVITY

For meetings held on board ships, perhaps the biggest evolution in recent years is the quality of meeting and event space. Increasingly, cruise ships, most notably Royal Caribbean, have dedicated conference space that is comparable to hotels with collapsible air walls and state-of-the-art audiovisual. Celebrity plans to have dedicated conference space on its new Edge-class ships, the first of which is launching in 2018.





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Even when ships don't have dedicated meeting space, the ways to adapt other venues such as showrooms and theaters are impressive, according to Kling.

“The ships have created lovely environments for meetings and networking, beautiful rooms that require no added décor,” she says.

Many cruise lines have also made great improvements in their approach to Wi-Fi connectivity and other onboard technology, says Stephen Milo (MPI South Florida Chapter), managing partner of CruiseEventGPS.

“Many of the lines have come a long way, recognizing how important it is for people to connect through their multiple devices,” he says. “In the past shipboard connectivity was very slow, but now it's

fast and people can do streaming. And many of the shipboard venues offer amazing built-in technology—things like high-def projection screens and robotic arms that are all programmable—that you would have to pay big bucks for to use on land.”

ONBOARD EXPERIENCES

When it comes to onboard experiences for groups, perhaps nothing has been changing faster than culinary choices. Instead of the traditional central dining room, ships often have a wide array of specialty restaurants as well as demonstration kitchens for culinary team building that fits well into customized programs.

“On a recent four-night cruise we were able to offer very different dining options, doing a rotation each night so everyone got a

new experience,” Milo says. “You can also break the group up for a dine-around, starting out with a reception and then ending with a big after party for everyone. Today's clients really like this.”

The sophistication of onboard dining has grown as well, often mirroring trends that are seen on land, including the farm-to-table movement. On Celebrity ships, for example, a popular culinary activity is a chef-led shore excursion where participants shop for ingredients at a local farmer's market to use in a meal that the chef prepares for them on board.

“The ship now can satisfy the most serious foodie, providing as cutting edge an experience as you can find onshore,” Kling says. “For example, on Holland America's new *Koningsdam* they are raising their own herbs under grow lights on the ship. They harvest them to use in dishes and specialty cocktails. People still think that cruise ships are all about mass quantities of food, but now it's about small portions of quality food that delights.”

Other shipboard experiences have evolved as well, including entertainment and team building.

“In particular, entertainment has really improved—ships are now offering full-scale Broadway productions, not the cruise-ship version,” Devine says. “You can do group seating or take over the entire show.”

EMERGING DESTINATIONS

What's next on the horizon for cruise meetings and incentives? While the Caribbean and Alaska remain popular cruise staples, some in the industry are seeing increased interest in emerging destinations such as China and Cuba, where many cruise lines are adding or looking to add capacity.

“There are so many new cruise options in China and elsewhere in Asia, including with Royal Caribbean and Princess, that it will be interesting to see what happens there,” Milo says. “And a building boom in tourism is under way in Cuba, which will really take off once the trade embargo is lifted. When things open up in Cuba, cruising there will be huge within the next five years.” ■