

NOVEMBER 18, 2013

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WHAT IF...?

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Jamaica Weddings Focus

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CRUISES



Top Sail Lounge, MSC Yacht Club, part of the *Divina's* 'ship-within-a-ship' concept.

MSC IN MIAMI

Line's 'Divina' will cruise to the Caribbean year-round from its new home port.

EUROPEAN LINE MSC Cruises (www.msccruisesusa.com) is maneuvering into the "shark tank" of South Florida's heavily trafficked cruise seascape. Its 3,502-passenger *MSC Divina*, a 139,400-ton Fantasia-class launched in 2012 and set to arrive at PortMiami on Tuesday, November 19, will operate alternating seven-night eastern and western Caribbean sailings year-round.

"Once she arrives, she's here to stay," Ken Muskat, senior vice president of sales and marketing, MSC Cruises

USA told 700 agents attending a recent CruiseOne and Cruises Inc. conference on *Norwegian Breakaway*. The ship's year-round North American sailings are a "first" for MSC Cruises, owned by Geneva-based Mediterranean Shipping Company, the world's largest cargo ship operator.

Another "first" for MSC Cruises is the utilization of PortMiami as its new North American home port. Previous seasonal sailings had operated from Port Everglades, FL, about 35 miles north.

Miami's air lift is more robust, and given MSC's international guest mix, that's a plus. Another first? The new voyages bring the upscale MSC Yacht Club, a "ship-within-a-ship" concept to U.S. shores.

That said, strong competitors with such brand names as Royal Caribbean, Norwegian or Carnival are already entrenched in the Caribbean from home ports in South Florida, the Atlantic Coast and Gulf of Mexico. Many of

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CRUISES

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them have recently beefed up their service as they move some ships from Europe.

So how does MSC plan to compete effectively? *MSC Divina's* product will be significantly tweaked, adding a North American flair to the line's Mediterranean style of cruising. "We are going to customize this product for what North Americans are looking for," Muskat emphatically told the CruiseOne and Cruises Inc. agents.

banned smoking on balconies, now the only places where smoking is permitted onboard are the cigar lounge and a couple of areas on the port-side pool deck, said Muskat.

New partnerships are bringing new experiences American travelers should like, such as a partnership with Eataly, which will operate two new specialty restaurants on *MSC Divina*, the first Eataly Steakhouse at sea and an Italian restaurant. All dining room menus have also been upgraded, new healthy

One major change, a clear sign of the difference between Americans and Europeans on a cruise, is in gaming. "We'll have a whole new focus on gaming," Muskat stressed. The ship has hired an executive casino host and put in a slew of new games and player play-tracking.

Also, expect more extensive children and teen activities onboard, given the ship's hardware. Space has also been set aside for a new, permanent cruise consulting area, "so you can encourage guests to book onboard and you get the credit," he told the agent group.

Despite all those upgrades for North Americans, Muskat added: "Let me be clear though; we're not losing the Mediterranean style as that's in our DNA," he said, referring to the touches of Italian culture like fresh pasta, dancing, pizza and so on. Those brand differentiators will continue.

Having a new product is helpful, certainly, but delivering it to the guest's satisfaction is just as important. Muskat said *MSC Divina's* crew boarded the ship in Venice, Italy, on October 19; they've spent a month onboard, training in product delivery.

Why so much fuss for one ship? It's not just one ship in Florida for the winter, said Muskat. It's a year-round ship, thus justifying the line's sizable investment. The goal is growth. MSC Cruises has launched 12 ships since 2003. With more growth expected, it needs more sourcing from new places.

"The whole idea of bringing a ship year-round Miami is that you can experience the ship with your clients and we can get the awareness out there, and then we can start to use that halo effect to send them elsewhere on the other beautiful ships we have," Muskat said.

The MSC Yacht Club should help draw more upscale guests and experienced cruisers. Accessible by key card only, the "ship-within-a-ship" complex houses 69 luxury suites, a private pool, the Top Sail Lounge, a panoramic restaurant, select complimentary wines and spirits, and 24-hour butler service. Club guests also have private access to the Balinese-inspired MSC Aurea Spa.

The *Divina's* Sophia Loren Royal Suite is named after the legendary Italian actress, who christened the ship.



What's new? English will become the ship's predominant language onboard, unlike on the line's globally focused ships. So guests won't hear messages in four or five languages over the PA system. The line will cut back on the number of onboard announcements as well.

Crew members who interact with guests at the purser's desk, and activity areas, and those on the cruise director's staff, will hail from Great Britain, South Africa, Canada and other English speaking countries. The ship will have a separate group of staffers to assist international guests.

The line recently updated its smoking policy. While it had previously

options added and the menu verbiage improved. Other new *MSC Divina* features include a new coffee bar, a new martini bar and new mixology classes.

New activity offerings include Mediterranean jewelry making, demonstrations and wine tastings, and new aqua cycling by Flywheel. "There are 20 spinning bikes in the pool," Muskat quipped, noting the spinning classes will have "a DJ, music, the whole works."

A jumbo outdoor movie screen has also been added above the pool deck of *MSC Divina*. Seven nights of production shows have been cut to four or five, with comedians and other acts also on the schedule. Staterooms have new English TV programming.

"Having the *MSC Divina* sail from South Florida is exciting for the industry," said Drew Daly, vice president of sales performance, CruiseOne and Cruises Inc. "The product is going to introduce new travelers into cruising, provide a unique alternative for agents to offer cruisers, and more group business."

In October, MSC Cruises kicked off a North American travel agent road show with presentations to more than 400 travel agents at New York; King of Prussia, PA; Miami; and Toronto and Montreal, Canada. More road shows are planned in 2014.

Agent Booking Promotion

Last month the line also launched a new "Cruise A Day Give-Away" booking promotion for National Cruise Vacation Week. Through December 31, one agent each day will win a week-long cruise for two onboard *MSC Divina*. Details and voyages that qualify agents for the drawings are announced at the start of each month.

Muskat said his line is a strong trade supporter, citing a trade loyalty program where agents earn reward points for every booking that eventually "turns into cash in your product." He told the agents about the line's new travel agent website and a radio show the line has, which often focuses on the value of agents. He said his line strongly values the trade and needs more agents to sell its product.

Agents also need more choices, he said. "Choices are key," said Muskat. "It's better for you to have more suppliers and more ships to offer your clients," particularly for the experienced cruisers who may already have sailed Europe and the Caribbean on other lines.

—SUSAN J. YOUNG

AT TRAVEL AGENT UNIVERSITY

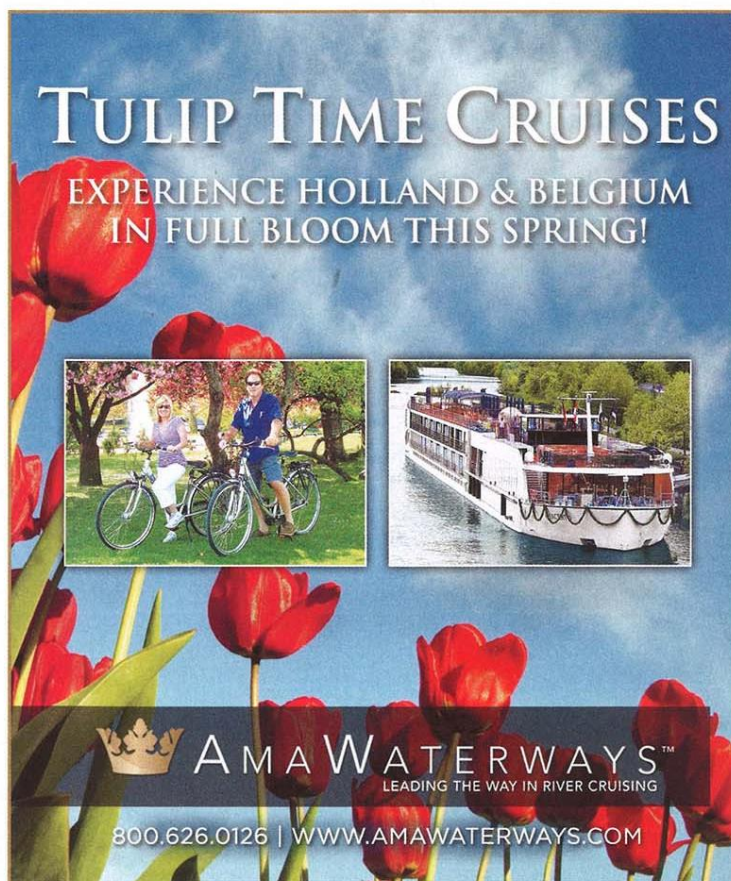
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Miami Cruise News

■ **Norwegian Cruise Line** (www.ncl.com) and the Miami Dolphins said the Miami Dolphins Cheerleaders will christen *Norwegian Getaway*, as the official Godmothers, on February 7, 2014. The christening ceremony will be onboard the ship, the largest ever to home-port year-round in Miami. The line also inked a new partnership with the Miami Dolphins that designates Norwegian as the "Official Cruise Line" of the Miami Dolphins and Sun Life Stadium.

■ For winter 2014-15, **Regent Seven Seas Cruises** (www.rssc.com) 490-guest *Seven Seas Navigator* sails 16 Miami roundtrip sailings to the eastern and western Caribbean. A 24-night eastern Caribbean/Amazon River itinerary begins November 23, 2014 and includes calls on Santarém, Boca da Valeria, Manaus, Parintins and Alter do Chão, Brazil, along the Amazon River.

■ **Crystal Cruises** (www.crystalcruises.com) has four new Wine & Food-themed luxury cruises for 2014, when it will introduce guest chef-prepared Vintage Room dinners on four sailings—in Asia, the South Pacific, Transatlantic, and the U.S./Caribbean. The last is a 14-day *Crystal Serenity* sailing from New York on November 5, with calls at Baltimore, Norfolk, Charleston, Turks & Caicos, Curaçao, Aruba and Miami, where it will home-port for the winter.



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