

Easy does it

It has been just two years since the launch of easyCruise, and the company is already making a splash in the cruise industry. easyCruise chairman **Stelios Haji-Ioannou** tells Christopher Kanak about his determination to revolutionise the industry.



'Just as easyJet changed the way we fly, easyCruise is set to change the cruise industry,' says Stelios Haji-Ioannou, Greek-Cypriot-born British entrepreneur and easyGroup founder. The son of a shipping magnate, Stelios has the sea in his blood. He started his professional career in 1988 working for his father's shipping company, the Troodos Shipping Co Ltd.

easyCruise is simple and bold in concept and design, having recently been given a new look, with sleek exteriors, and updated interiors and onboard facilities. easyCruise customers are primarily 20-40-year-olds seeking a more shore-based cruising experience than is available on traditional cruiseliners.

Since easyCruise was launched in 2005, the company has had a successful couple of years, buoyed perhaps by the booming maritime industry and the desire for more innovative holidays. easyCruise uses a similar model to that of easyJet. It seems Stelios's mission is to do for cruising what easyJet did for flying.

World Cruise Industry Review set sail with Stelios to look back on the past two years and ahead to what new surprises easyCruise has on the horizon.

CK Why did you decide to set up easyCruise?

Stelios When I looked at the cruise industry, I found that traditional cruising really only caters for a certain market, and I felt that there was a gap in the market to appeal to consumers looking for a different holiday experience. With our flexible and affordable cruise offering, I believe we can open up cruise holidays to a massive new market and help customers think of cruising with us as a credible alternative to a beach holiday or a city break.

It has always been the easyGroup approach to challenge traditional ways of doing business and to provide opportunities for consumers to enjoy new experiences.

CK What were the challenges of setting up a cruise company?

Stelios easyCruise is one of a kind. It offers a mixture of short breaks through to two-week holiday itineraries, coupled with great value pricing, which is attracting people who have never previously considered cruising.

We have an audience that is much younger than traditional cruise passengers, and this in itself

is challenging. To speak to this new audience, our marketing, advertising and PR activity is targeted at different sectors in the media and different media altogether from traditional 'cruise sectors'.

We have also been fighting people's stereotypical views of cruises: that they are expensive, restrictive, elitist and the choice of the elderly.

Unlike traditional cruises, easyCruise sails each morning and arrives in a new port by lunchtime, allowing passengers time to enjoy the beaches, sightseeing and shops by day, and the bars, restaurants and clubs by night.

CK What do easyCruise passengers want?

Stelios We have found that consumers are much more savvy as to where they want to travel, how long they want to travel for and what they want to pay for it. The key to our success is our ability to be flexible. The easyCruise concept offers a standard rate for accommodation only, and then the passenger pays for additional services. That way they don't pay for things that they don't want or need. Also, our itineraries have changed every year, offering our customers much more choice.

CK Do you intend to shake up the cruise industry?

Stelios The cruise industry has risked stagnating. Despite new innovations, in many countries, cruises are still seen as expensive and the choice of the over 60s. At easyCruise we have produced a cruise option that goes against the norm. I think that we have already done a lot to shake up the industry. We are unique, appealing to a totally different audience.

Our target market is younger than that of a traditional cruise, and our offering appeals to pleasure seekers through to savvy travellers. It appeals to the adventurous, to couples and to groups who want exotic and exciting destinations.

CK How do you decide your itineraries?

Stelios Customer requirements for destinations are changing. They want to visit new, different and exciting places, so we are continuously looking for new destinations, and we change our itineraries regularly. For example, easyCruiseOne this summer

is visiting Greece for the first time, taking in Athens, as well as some of the most popular and least travelled islands in the Aegean.

easyCruiseOne provides us with the opportunity to try out new destinations that will appeal to our passengers. In 2008, to continue our policy of taking people off the beaten track, we are going to call at Saranta in Albania so people can visit Butrint – one of the finest Classical sites in Europe.

Our itineraries are different, exciting and affordable, and we know that we have cruise options that will appeal – whether customers are looking for a weekend break or a longer holiday.

CK How involved are you in the running of the ships?

Stelios My position at easyCruise is chairman. I am involved looking at new itineraries, new ports and so on, especially with our new Greek itinerary, which has been something I've wanted to see set up since we launched easyCruise. But the team are great and experts in their fields, so I let them do what they do best.

CK Where do you want easyCruise to be in two years? How do you intend to expand?

Stelios The easyCruise proposition is already proving popular, and the feedback from our passengers shows this. This year we aim to continue our awareness campaign and encourage people who would traditionally not think of trying a cruise to reconsider and try easyCruise.

In the longer term we will be increasing the number of vessels in the fleet. I believe that this model of cruising is part of the future for the industry. As people become more adventurous, seek alternative holidays and want to visit more destinations, companies like easyCruise will come into their own. wc

In summer 2008 easyCruiseOne will operate a range of itineraries, including a ten-night cruise leaving Athens and taking in the Ionian islands, including Corfu and Kefallonia, and a Cyclades weekend cruise, which will include Mykonos and Sifnos. wc

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