

Destination expectations

Nigel Ash talks to **Octavio Sanchez**, manager of port operations for Crystal Cruises, who says that thorough homework is the best way to ensure a destination will fulfil passenger expectations.

'Our first and most important piece of homework is the mindset of our world cruiser,' says Octavio Sanchez, Crystal Cruises' manager for port operations, explaining that the cruise line goes to a lot of trouble to poll the views of guests about where else they might like to visit and what they might like to do there. Indeed, over and above the now standard questionnaires, Crystal's president Gregg Michel will fly out and join the cruise to consult passengers directly on where they would like to go next.

Sanchez explains that typically the 1,080 cruisers who will join the Crystal Serenity next year will be retired, highly affluent Americans with high expectations.

He says that once customer ambitions have been nailed down and the itinerary sketched out then the technical homework begins, not least booking the high-demand Hong Kong berth around which the rest of the cruise is built. A further early booking

will be Sydney's Circular Quay because the Crystal Serenity's 51.2m air draught cannot pass under the Harbour Bridge. In China, similar limitations keep the vessel at a cargo wharf and away from the Shanghai Bund. This call is also tidal with a single vessel channel, says Sanchez, so the operational window needs precise calculation. Nor are the calculations exclusively technical.

Crystal added Ho Chi Minh City to its 2002 cruise, which includes several hours of river navigation. But the biggest challenge for Crystal was getting the port tariff right. 'Initially they had a tariff designed for cargo that was far too expensive,' recalls Sanchez. 'Their tonnage tax was also based on gross tonnage.'

Crystal executives visited Vietnam to make personal representations to the authorities and the tariff was revised.

However, because Crystal, with just two vessels, rarely visits any port more than four times a year, Sanchez accepts that it

Domes of Spas-na-krovi cathedral. St Petersburg, Russia.



©2017 2018 Discover Dominica Tourism Authority

*Feed
the call of
Adventure*

The melodious call of rare, exotic birds welcomes you while you stand surrounded by a tropical paradise like no other in the world. Verdant hills, dense with vegetation await exploration as you hike through unexplored terrain. Seize the day by unwinding in crystal clear streams.

Visit Dominica: Where your opportunities for adventure are limited only by your imagination.

Dominica
THE NATURE ISLAND

DISCOVERDOMINICA.COM
UK Toll Free: 0 800 012 1467
US Toll Free: 1 866 522 4057
Germany: 49 711 2634 6624

BE SURE YOUR CRUISE ITINERARY INCLUDES DOMINICA.

cannot enjoy the same multiple-call discounts of larger operators that might make up to 40 calls.

New call Rangiroa in French Polynesia is proof, however, that limitations are not necessarily a bad thing. 'In terms of venues, it may be somewhat limited but the island has a well-developed air tourism industry for people who just want a tropical paradise.' On other cruises, Crystal has quite different onshore experiences. It's Baltic Cruise, for instance, has a three-day call at St Petersburg during which passengers can choose to book a supersonic flight in a Mig 21 jet fighter.

Port management

A one-day call is likely to inject several hundred thousand dollars of passenger and facility spend into a port, says Sanchez. Some ports, such as Petropavlovsk lack the promotional budgets and machinery to push their claims. A few others, particularly in the Mediterranean, go out of their way to prevent cruise ships from disturbing their exclusive isolation. But Sanchez says there is an increasingly assertive campaign by many ports that have invested in new infrastructure to pull in cruise operators. In one respect this suits companies for which the challenge is to find fresh passenger experiences and destinations. But he already sees evidence of the dangers inherent in the process.

'My view is that some ports are becoming victims of their own success. They have too many simultaneous calls and will have to re-evaluate the situation and determine how many ships they can absorb at any one time and still meet the visitors' expectations.

They may have to place a limit on the number of ships.

'Some ports have been greedy and packed in far too many people. However, this is often because they have spent money improving their infrastructure, and understandably they want to recover their investment.'

It is, however, Sanchez's view that the biggest challenge faced by cruise operators, whether in new or existing calls, is the immigration clearance process. He says the key is to understand exactly what is involved. If a vessel is tying up at a dock without a passenger terminal where people can pass through immigration, it is also necessary to set aside appropriate space on the vessel, to ensure the procedures take minimal time. Given the average stay is around nine hours, there is little room for obstruction or delays.

Japan currently poses a particular headache. Having copied the US by introducing the photographing and finger-printing of passengers going ashore, it has since also introduced temperature scanning, to spot fever which might be connected to the returning danger of SARs infection. Anyone with a high temperature is given a more detailed examination. This can stretch out the whole immigration process to around four hours. To compensate, an operator must either schedule an overnight stop or at best a later departure.

The immigration process is the one point at which an operator has absolutely no control. 'You can only do so much,' says Sanchez. 'Once the officials are on board, you simply have to cross your fingers and hope that their equipment and computers are all working properly.' *wc*