

With its near-perfect weather, idyllic beaches and relaxing lifestyle the main attractions, the Caribbean has long been the most popular destination on the cruising roster. According to the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA), the region is the choice of 47% of cruise passengers surveyed, followed by Alaska at 28%,

while Europe and the Mediterranean have a combined share of 23%. However, as the economic downturn tightens consumer spending, and as other destinations catch the interest of passengers seeking something unusual in their itineraries, operators in the Caribbean cannot take this strong position for granted.

'The Caribbean is probably the destination that springs to mind of first-

time cruisers when they are thinking about booking a cruise, but the market is changing,' says Matthew Sams, vice-president of Caribbean relations at Holland America Line. 'Traditionally, cruising meant summer in Alaska and winter in the Caribbean, but the market has gone global. New destinations have grown in popularity with more ships based in Europe, Brazil, Australia and China.'

Adapt to change

How can cruise lines improve passenger experience in an oversubscribed destination such as the Caribbean? Shirley Accini talks to **Matthew Sams** and **Simon Douwes** of Holland America Line, **Andrew Poulton**, Regent Seven Seas Cruises, and **Cicely Walcott**, Barbados Tourism Authority.



Passengers: the next generation

As the industry changes, so has the typical cruise passenger. Traditionally, this person would be retired, reasonably wealthy and looking mainly for a restful vacation in exotic climates. 'Many of our retiree passengers are repeat cruisers, and they no longer want to just sit back in the sun for the whole trip,' explains Sams. 'They have become much more active and we've had to adapt to make sure we keep them interested. I often see people upwards of 70 on jet skis or parasailing. We are constantly looking at trends and we have had to adapt our itineraries and activities to suit our guests' needs and interests.'

Cruise lines looking to attract a new generation of cruisers, such as families and young couples, have used a number of strategies to broaden their appeal. One example has been the introduction of megaships, which can carry thousands of passengers at a time. Economies of scale allow these vessels to offer competitive prices, provide more activities and adapt itineraries to attract people who previously would have never thought of taking a cruise holiday.

According to Simon Douwes, director of deployment and itinerary planning, Holland America Line, the itinerary is a major factor that passengers look for in a cruise.

'Cruise lines have to be innovative in planning itineraries these days,' he says. 'New passengers want to visit places they've heard about, while repeat passengers want to go back to places to try out things they didn't have time to do previously.'

Adventure holidays, such as cruising the Antarctic and the Galapagos Islands, have grown in popularity. 'We have to make sure that we have something for

everyone on our ships, and as the market expands, that becomes more challenging, but it's a challenge we're more than happy embracing,' says Sams.

While the Caribbean remains the destination of choice for now, can the area continue to offer new and repeat cruisers a unique cruising experience and remain at the top of popularity polls? Andrew Poulton, director of corporate communications at Regent Seven Seas, points to the Caribbean's diverse range of cultures and topography as major factors in offering something for everyone.

we must work to make them fit together.

Otherwise, the passenger experience could be severely hampered. We advise the ports and authorities what we need and they let us know what works for them.'

Cicely Walcott, senior vice-president of the Barbados Tourism Authority, agrees that it is a matter of give and take on both sides. 'We nurture this relationship,' she says. 'Everyone in Barbados knows the importance of tourism and what it means to its economy.'

The passenger experience starts as soon as the ship approaches the port. Local

'Traditionally, cruising meant summer in Alaska and winter in the Caribbean, but the market has gone global.' **Matthew Sams**

'It has a wonderfully diverse mix of destinations within easy reach of each other,' he says. 'Two places can be in close proximity to each other, but so different culturally. For example, St Barts is very French with expensive, exclusive shops, while nearby St Maarten is extremely laid back.'

Joint effort

Although few places can rival the Caribbean for its sun, sea and sand, the growing desire for new places to visit means that interest in the region will be harder to maintain, and ports and cruise lines recognise they have to cooperate to ensure future prosperity.

'The Caribbean is an area of many differences and it is important we keep the experiences of each island unique,' says Sams. 'This is tough to do, but it's a good educational process for us as well as for the islands.'

For the cruise lines, their relationship with the ports and local authorities is crucial for efficient disembarkation, provision of activities and facilities and guarantees of safety and security while passengers are on the islands. For the islands, the ships bring in high-spending tourists who will go home to tell friends and relatives about their visit and who will want to return to the islands in the future.

'It is vital that we work together,' says Douwes. 'Both sides have needs and

authorities have made huge investments preparing ports for the large number of people that one ship can bring. Projects include expanding terminals and providing facilities and infrastructure. The major port expansion project of Bridgetown Port in Barbados is expected to be completed by 2015 and has so far included two new cruise piers, which means the port can now accommodate up to five ships at a time. Roads and signage on the island have also been improved. The island's top attraction, Harrison Caves, reopened recently after a year-long refurbishment having expanded the caves and provided facilities.

The island also has 20 duty-free shops selling goods for up to 50% less than prices in Europe and North America. There is a shuttle service from the port to Bridgetown and 200 taxis operate from the port.

Elsewhere in the Caribbean, Trinidad announced plans to expand its cruise berths as well as to improve roads and introduce a water taxi service, while sister island Tobago is looking at the feasibility of a new pier at Charlotteville. St Maarten has introduced a water taxi service, expanded roads and is keeping traffic away from the main shopping areas. 'St Maarten has created an infrastructure that is encouraging private enterprises on the island and which will increase customer spending,' says Sams.

By providing facilities, shops and tourist attractions, the islands also work in the

Criteria for making vacation decisions:

Destination	8.1%
Price	6.8%
Best opportunity to relax	6.4%
Fit vacation schedule	5.8%
Offer of a unique experience	6.1%
Convenience	6%
Particular hotel/resort property/cruise ship	5.9%
Good programmes for children and family	4%

Source: Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association



'New passengers want to visit places they've heard about, while repeat passengers want to go back to the places to try out things they didn't have time to do previously.' **Simon Douwes**

Top ten most appealing destinations to cruise:

Caribbean/Eastern Mexico	47%
Alaska	28%
Bahamas	22%
Bermuda	16%
Hawaii	16%
Mediterranean	13%
Europe	10%
Mexico (west coast)	9%
Transcanal	9%
Canada/New England	6%
South America	4%

Data used is based on a ten-point scale, where ten is 'most influence' and 1 'did not influence at all'.

Source: Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association

hope that many return to the islands after their cruise 'taster', staying in the hotels and using the bars and restaurants. 'The rate of return for the investment that ports make in their facilities and services is huge,' says Sams.

Walcott agrees that the cruise industry has a big influence on the Caribbean's long-term economic future. 'The ships have a significant spin-off effect for the local economy,' she says. 'Local businesses benefit greatly: from the port operators and taxi drivers to shops and enterprises such as tours, so it is in our interest to make sure we offer what cruise passengers want.'

Local governments have also worked with cruise operators to improve immigration clearance services and reduce the taxes and fees that lines have to pay to dock, while encouraging local businesses to take care of the environment. The islands need to provide facilities and attractions of the standard required to ensure that they stay on the lines' itineraries.

'Barbados is further south than many of the islands and cruise lines may be looking at ways to reduce costs such as fuel, particularly given the high costs of oil over the last few years,' says Walcott. 'We have to show the lines that it is worth their while for them to travel to us.'

Cruise lines are also making significant investments at destinations. Some share the expense of improving facilities and providing attractions, such as the Grand Turk Cruise Center, which is built and owned by Carnival. The pier features a swimming pool, restaurant, bar and a FlowRider surf simulator. Many lines have their own exclusive islands, such as Holland America Line's Half Moon Cay in the Bahamas where activities include nature trails, feeding stingrays and horseback riding in the sea.

Cruise control

It seems the Caribbean's year-round sun, beautiful beaches and relaxed lifestyle will always be popular with the cruise industry, but that popularity comes with provisos.

'The cruise industry is changing constantly, but the Caribbean will always be the destination of choice,' says Sams. 'Customers are looking for more so we have to keep one step ahead, anticipating needs and looking out for the next big thing. We have to keep a good relationship with the islands and advise them what our guests want. Ports have to maintain high standards of safety and security, ensuring that passengers experience the best the region can offer. The answer is looking ahead, diversifying the product and working with the ports to make the passenger experience special.'

While the outlook for the Caribbean may seem promising, it cannot be taken for granted. Cruise lines will sail to

destinations where passengers want to go, as safely and as cost effectively as possible. For this to happen, lines and destinations must keep the passenger experience at the forefront in everything they do.

The challenges and opportunities for both entities are to work together to encourage passengers, old and new, to cruise time and again. **wc**

Matthew Sams

Matthew Sams joined Holland America Line in 1985. In June 1997 he was promoted to vice-president, and has been responsible for the government relations for the Caribbean, Central America, South America, Mexico and Florida.



Simon Douwes

Simon Douwes has been director of deployment and itinerary planning for Holland America Line since 2002. He has served as captain on most of Holland America Line's ships between 1993 and 2002.



Andrew Poulton

Andrew Poulton joined Radisson Seven Seas in 1996. Following the company's re-branding to Regent in 2006, his responsibilities expanded to include the Regent Hotels & Resorts brand in the Americas. Since 2008, Poulton's responsibilities have been focused on corporate communications.



Cicely Walcott

Cicely Walcott is senior vice-president of the Barbados Tourism Authority.

