



Too much of a good thing?

The popularity of the Mediterranean is one of the industry's successes in these hard times, but with it comes a strain on local infrastructure. Katie Kilgallen talks to Windstar's **Bill Ellerington**, Crystal Cruises' **John Stoll**, and MSC Cruises' **Pierfrancesco Vago** about how cruise lines are working to ease the pressure.

The Mediterranean has experienced a staggering amount of industry growth in recent years. For instance, the number of cruise passengers visiting Valencia has risen from 10,228 in 2002 to 93,338 in 2007. In Venice this figure almost trebled over the same period, leaping from 63,225 to 181,709.

But the Mediterranean's success has seen onshore operations and facilities struggle to keep up with demand. Increasing numbers of ships make itineraries far more complicated to plan, while cruise operators are faced with the problem of having to manoeuvre around the area's different regulations and cultures.

Bill Ellerington, Windstar business development director for The Cruise Portfolio, believes the popularity of the region and subsequent increase in passenger numbers is a fundamental issue to be addressed.

'Pressure on the ports is increasing and some are worse than others,' he says. 'Ports such as Rome and Venice get crowded, which puts pressure on their operational procedures and facilities, such as tour operators.'

Large visitor numbers can also negatively affect local communities. Thousands of passengers can double the population of a typical small Greek port, while larger, more established destinations struggle to schedule all the vessels that want to call there.

For John Stoll, Crystal Cruises' director of land programmes, it is all about working efficiently. 'Our greatest challenge is how we work with ports that have additional ships in port when we are there,' he says. He notes the importance of talking to port authorities in advance about issues such as national holidays and dates when additional ships will be in port. 'Then we can devise a programme that works around the obstacles,' he says.

According to Stoll, some of the destinations Crystal works with are becoming increasingly sophisticated in what they bring to the table. 'We have capable operations [partners] that we work with,' he says. 'Port

The Mediterranean is seeing larger cruise ships make visits.



agents, ground officials, the businesses in ports; they are important to us. The process is more sophisticated than it has ever been and destinations understand this and are preparing better.'

MSC Crociere CEO Pierfrancesco Vago agrees that better organisation is crucial if companies are to prevent a decline in the overall quality of the product they offer. 'I always say that, for MSC, the main challenge is to never create queues,' he says. 'We try to make sure that the logistics and organisational side on land links into the flow on board and never creates a backlog or queue of any sort.'

Vago points out that the sheer number of different countries, cultures, procedures and practices across the Mediterranean add further complications for those operating in the region. 'It depends on the country,' he says. 'Every central and local government has its own rules and laws.'

He cites Greece as a good example. 'It has an economy which relies heavily on tourism and is a big shipping country, too. Yet there are no laws that regulate windows. You can't book, it's first come first served.'

For Windstar, its problems are minimal compared to the more mainstream cruise liners. Windstar runs just three ships, two accommodating 148 passengers and the other just over 300. 'It's not as bad for us because of the way we programme the cruises and because of the size of the ships,' Ellerington explains. 'The scale is completely different from the likes of Royal Caribbean, P&O and Princess. We can easily find destinations where there isn't that pressure.'

However, good communication and

working well in advance are still vital. 'We work very hard with our port agents to ensure we don't coincide with the larger vessels. And it works,' Ellerington says.

Cooperation counts

Ellerington says he has noticed concerted efforts to standardise policies and procedures, particularly within the EU. For example, a number of databases are shared across the region and many countries now operate under the same environmental laws. 'The differences seem to be minimal as time goes on, and that's one benefit of the popularity of Mediterranean cruises,' he says.

He also points out that there is a significant amount of constructive cooperation and discussion among cruise companies. 'Every cruise liner wants to give their customers the best experience,' he says. 'It's not about competing for space but trying to ensure everybody has a good time depending on what their product is.'

John Stoll agrees: 'There's a lot more cooperation than you'd realise. There are professional currencies that go back and forth as well. We all realise what we're up against and we do have to rely on the courtesy of other cruise lines.'

However, as Pierfrancesco Vago notes, good communication and thorough planning and preparation on their own will not be enough to accommodate the dramatic growth the Mediterranean has seen in recent years.

'There is a lot of structural investment that needs to be done for ports to accommodate larger vessels, and that requires new

maritime stations and quays,' he says. He warns that the industry needs to be proactive in order to ensure success in the Mediterranean is sustainable. 'The industry cannot sit back and watch. We must actively present ourselves and also invest a lot.'

Vago believes some Mediterranean destinations are only now recognising the value cruise tourism can bring to an area. 'After years of promoting the benefits of cruise liners, all of a sudden destinations are beginning to understand: visitors come, spend money and then leave, all without putting too much pressure on structures,' he says. 'Destinations are welcoming of cruise liners, especially in difficult times.'

The popularity and scale of the industry has also caused many to sit up and take notice. 'Cruise liners are investing [about] €800 million in ships,' Vago says. 'When an industry invests so heavily, I think a lot of people pay attention to it if they want a piece of the pie.'

Many authorities at cruise destinations across the region are actively seeking to cooperate more closely with the industry. 'They are approaching us to say we're interested, let's talk,' says Vago.

But with the current economic outlook so bleak for those on both sides of the Atlantic, there are issues about the area's ability to maintain its current levels of investment.

Ellerington believes the area will still see growth in 2009, but the rate will be slow. 'Carnival has pulled out. It obviously thinks it can get higher yields out of the local domestic region,' he says.

However, he also points out that the current exchange rates could keep passengers from the US making the journey across the Atlantic, despite the economic slowdown. 'And the Mediterranean will always be popular from the UK perspective because of the ease of getting to the area,' he says.

It appears the Mediterranean cruise industry is well-placed to withstand the present financial turbulence and Stoll is keen not to lose sight of the fact that the trends the industry is experiencing should all be viewed in a positive light.

'The message needs to be a positive one, this is a good news story,' he says. 'It's a challenge but I think we are meeting it successfully and we will continue to do so. All things considered, it is a good problem to have.' wc