

Bright lights, big city: the *Crystal Symphony* in Hong Kong.

Exotic itineraries to Asia and the Far East have surged in popularity in the last decade, but how long can interest in the region be maintained? **Simon Douwes** of Holland America Line and Captain **Birger Vorland** of Crystal Cruises tell us about the region's long-term appeal.

Eastern enchantment

Simon Douwes, director, deployment and itinerary planning, Holland America Line

Itineraries to the Far East have certainly increased in popularity in the last five or six years. We've increased our programme there and also in Australia and New Zealand. These are popular destinations and I

think they will increase in popularity as people expand their horizons and want to see more of the world.

We expanded our Asian itineraries in 2009, including our first round trip from Hong Kong and four maiden ports:

Puerto Princesa, Philippines; Otaru, Japan; Sanya, Hainan, China; and Keelung, Taipei, Taiwan.

In the autumn, the *MS Volendam* will make nine unique voyages through exotic locations in China, South East

Asia, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Russia, and also to major ports in Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. We will also offer turnover operations in Singapore, Hong Kong and Kobe, in Japan.

'People really want to see new parts of the world, and a cruise ship is the most perfect way to do it.'

In 2010 the company's focus for new itineraries in the region will be more on Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific, including a series of 14-day Sydney round trips and a 34-day Australia circumnavigation voyage with the *MS Volendam*.

We've also introduced a variety of new ports into these programmes. We introduce somewhere between 15 and 20 ports on a worldwide basis each year, and there will be a few new ones next year in the Far East, I'm sure.

I don't think the economic downturn will affect the popularity of itineraries in the Far East, but it will affect the way people travel there. To make cruises more affordable, people are cutting out the need for flights and choosing round trips instead. We have quite a few longer cruises to Asia and the South Pacific that are round trips from the US. But I think this is only a temporary trend.

My feeling is that Asia and the Far East will grow in popularity and volume over, say, the Caribbean, because it has a much longer way to go.

People really want to see new parts of the world, and a cruise ship is the perfect way to do it. Australia and New Zealand will similarly grow in popularity.

These countries are very popular holiday destinations for Americans; they've heard how beautiful they are or have seen them on TV and want to experience them. I also think we will see a lot of interest in Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia. These countries all have their own beauty.

Our fleet is expanding, so we have to find new deployments in order to fill our ships at the maximum possible yield;

we cannot have them all sailing the Caribbean and the Riviera.

So we need to expand and find new destinations to operate at the most profitable level, and Asia and Australia allow us to do that.

Captain Birger J Vorland, vice-president, nautical operations, Crystal Cruises

As Crystal Cruises is a luxury line, exotic itineraries such as those to the Far East have been a fixture on our schedule for years. These are the types of destinations that luxury travellers want to experience.

Crystal has been cruising Asia since the mid-1990s. Its popularity has increased over the years, especially with the increase in the number of Asian guests, but interest in these itineraries is cyclical, like anything else.

We increased our presence in Asia in 2008 with the *Crystal Symphony* and *Crystal Serenity*, which both cruised there in the spring, offering six itineraries and 120 shore excursion choices.

In 2009 we offered our Far East Focus itinerary, which travelled from Hong Kong to Kobe and Hiroshima in Japan, and to Shanghai, Dalian and Beijing in China; and our Far East Enchantment cruise, which sailed from Beijing to Dalian, Shanghai, Osaka in Japan, and Hong Kong.

Itineraries to East Asia were more popular in 2008 compared with 2009, which was a bit unexpected given the Beijing Olympics. There was a boom expected in travel to China following the Olympics with lots of new buildings and increased capacity in the region. Many other Asian destinations expected to benefit from this; but for a variety of reasons, including a shift in the economy, this boom did not happen.

And it's not just Crystal Cruises that has experienced a slowdown in Asia; it is being felt throughout the travel industry.

For this reason, and the fact that we try to keep itineraries fresh and different for our guests, we're not sailing the region in 2010; we will focus instead on the South Pacific. We continue to seek new exotic destinations for our guests to experience in 2010, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. These regions and countries offer an extremely rich history and culture and the people are very hospitable. These areas are

Simon Douwes

As director of deployment and itinerary planning for Holland America Line, a subsidiary of the Carnival Corporation, Simon Douwes is responsible for researching, developing and implementing the deployments and itineraries for all vessels in the HAL fleet. Simon served as captain on most of HAL's ships between 1993 and 2002.



opening up to North Americans for travel, and they generate strong interest.

For Crystal, the interest in Asia will increase again after we've spent some time out of the region. These cycles tend to generate fresh interest once there's been an absence.

That said, our 2010 Temples and Trade Routes itinerary travels to Singapore from Sydney via Bali and Semarang in Indonesia; while our Indian Ocean Insight itinerary departs from Singapore and visits Phuket in Thailand, Yangon in Myanmar, Cochin and Mumbai in India, through to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.

'Crystal has been cruising Asia since the mid-1990s.'

Like the rest of our cruises, our guests on Asian itineraries are primarily North American, since that's where we're based and concentrate most of our marketing efforts. However, numbers of guests from Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and other Asian areas have been steadily increasing. The Asian cruise market is very popular with our Asian guests.

Because air travel has become so unattractive, these guests appreciate the ability to embark from their home port.

Though we only have 2010 schedules and destinations set for now, and we're not in the Far East then, we realise that Asia cruises offer many options with a rich history and culture, so we'll always consider the region. **wc**

Birger Vorland

Captain Birger Vorland has been vice-president of nautical operations for Crystal Cruises since 2003. He has served on the *Vistafjord*, *Royal Viking Sun*, *Seabourn Goddess I* and *Seabourn Sun*.

