

The Niche Cruise Marketing Alliance (NCMA)

A Unique Collection Within the Cruise Industry

By Cindy Bertram

Not every cruise guest wants a large ship experience. Today, an increasing number of alternatives exist for the seasoned traveler who wants a cruise experience but seeks to avoid the conventional cruise vacation, Niche cruise lines are filling that void.

Although a relatively small part of the cruise industry in terms of total capacity, niche cruise lines each focus on an extremely well defined market segment. Passengers sailing on a niche line tend to prefer more unique destinations, are more seasoned travelers, and are content with less structure and activities onboard. The ships operated by niche lines are smaller, offer a more intimate cruise experience, with more personalized service, and concentrate on hands-on port of call experiences.

Niche cruise lines can't and won't use price to entice the cruiser to book; instead, it is the value and consistency of the entire cruise experience that they use to differentiate themselves. Larry Dessler, Executive Director of the Niche Cruise Marketing Alliance, mentions that travelers who sail on niche cruise lines are ones who want more than simply a "...superficial glance at something – these are the passengers who want the 'Bigger Bits' and experiences when they travel." Also, the niche cruise line industry has seen explosive growth because new small ships are constantly on the draw-



Peter Deilmann's Casanova in Venice

ing boards. Niche cruise lines realize that re-circulating old tonnage doesn't attract new passengers. The key is attracting the experienced traveler or cruiser who wants more, whether it is a heightened travel experience, or a more unique one.

For a group cruise experience that offers something beyond the norm, considering a niche cruise line product for your next trip is an enticing alternative, because so many choices currently exist. Cruise line members that comprise the Niche Cruise Marketing Alliance are one alternative.

The Niche Cruise Marketing Alliance (NCMA)

The Niche Cruise Marketing Alliance (NCMA) was originally established in 1999 by a group of cruise lines who wanted to showcase their products and differentiate themselves from the mass market and high-end luxury cruise lines. Today this association of niche cruise lines includes 10 members. A criterion for membership in NCMA requires that the cruise line either owns or controls the vessels they sail and operate; this excludes the

tour operator who charters a vessel. New to NCMA are American Cruise Lines, Glacier Bay Cruises, and Imperial Majesty Cruise Line; other cruise line members include American West Steamboat Company, Cruise West, Galapagos Explorer II Canodros, Norwegian Coastal Voyages/Bergen Line Services, Peter Deilmann Cruises, RiverBarge Excursion Lines, Inc., and Star Clippers. Here is an overview of those members.

American Cruise Lines

American Cruise Lines, which refers to itself as "The World's Leader of Small Ship Cruises" offers voyages that travel along the inland waterways through the U.S., combined with an historical slant. The line first began in 1974 and now has three ships in its fleet, offering cruises from Maine to Florida, with 9 unique itineraries. Cruise lengths range from 7 to 14 days; the ships are intimate and accommodate from 49 to 98 passengers. With a shallow draft design, these small ships can easily navigate lakes, bays, inside passages, and canals. The fleet includes the American Spirit (51 state-

rooms), and her two sister ships, the American Glory, built in 2002; and the American Eagle, built in 2000. They offer an all-American crew, along with an informal atmosphere for dining where meals are cooked to order. Another feature is the specially invited "Enlighteners" – naturalists, historians, and experts who join guests onboard to offer informal lectures and lead expeditions. 800-814-6880, www.americancruiselines.com.

American West Steamboat Company

Launched in 1995, American West Steamboat Company's Queen of the West is an authentic sternwheeler ship that offers a unique cruise experience on the Columbia, Snake, and Willamette Rivers in Oregon and Washington. American West Steamboat Company's newest addition, the Empress of the North, which sails on new itineraries to Alaska this year, is the only overnight sternwheeler cruising in the Alaskan market. Reproductions of ships designed back in the late 1880's, these vessels combine historic charm with

modern refinement. Open seating is offered for meals, and guests who sail on America West Steamboat Company appreciate the informal and casual ambiance of a smaller ship, with special ports of call. 800-434-1232, www.americanweststeamboat.com.

Cruise West

Founded over 50 years ago and still family owned, Cruise West offers a wide variety of small ships cruising to a number of destinations throughout the world. They pride themselves on offering passengers a chance to experience destinations that are more unique in a more customized experience. Their philosophy still remains – providing up-close travel that focuses on the destination, with personalized touches. Itineraries cover Alaska, Costa Rica, Panama Canal, Baja Mexico's Sea of Cortes, California wine country, and the Columbia & Snake Rivers, as well as British Columbia. Eight ships are in their "Destination First" fleet, each with a unique and distinct personality. Cruise West also offers "Exploration Leaders" aboard their ships. 800-888-9378, www.cruisewest.com.

Galapagos Explorer II Canadros

Galapagos Explorer II Canadros is unique because it is a private organization dedicated to promoting Ecuador as a privileged destination for tourism. Its ship, the Galapagos Explorer II (formerly the Renaissance III) offers an ecological theme, and is even equipped with a special sewage treatment system that minimizes environmental disturbance. During a 7 night cruise, the Galapagos Explorer II visits up to 10 islands, and is known for offering exceptional service and world-class amenities. 888-368-9929, www.canadros.com.

Glacier Bay Cruises

Glacier Bay Cruises has been operating since 1967 and has 3 "adventure class" small cruise ships which they refer to as "Sport Utility Vessels." Their fleet includes the Wilderness Explorer (31 passengers), the Wilderness Adventurer (69 passengers) and the Wilderness Discoverer (87 passengers.) Each ship is equipped with sea kayaks along with a custom floating kayak-launching platform, and is

BARGING THROUGH AMERICA





The 196-guest *R/B River Explorer* offers your clients the only barging experience in America! These four to ten day river vacations let your clients relax in a casual, family atmosphere with home-style cooking and regional entertainment while experiencing the heritage and culture of nearby towns. Your clients can experience travel on the Mississippi, Cumberland, Ohio, Missouri and other American rivers and inland waterways on a RiverBarge Excursion.



Explore quaint river towns and bustling river ports. Watch the stars on the Sky Deck. Your clients will enjoy our all-inclusive pricing and casual dress. We even throw in shore activities and gratuities.

Great Vacation for Groups!

Group Benefits Include:

- 1 free berth for every 15 full fare guests.
- Group discount on most excursions.
- Only 5 double occupancy staterooms needed to qualify!

For a Free Video or Brochure, Call:
1-888-GO BARGE (1-888-462-2743)
For Group Information call 1-888-898-0492
or e-mail groupres@riverbarge.com
www.riverbarge.com

RIVERBARGE EXCURSION LINES, INC.

able to get close to nature with minimum disturbance.

A unique feature is their three levels of adventure cruising. The "low impact adventure" offers opportunities for viewing wildlife as well as visiting small ports. The high level, "Focus on Activities Adventure" experience includes numerous activities, such as forest hikes, sea kayaking, and island explorations. Finally, the medium adventure level, called "The Perfect Combination," combines fea-



tures from both adventure categories. Glacier Bay Cruises provides all the training and gear guests need, and this is included in the price of the cruise. Their itineraries focus on Alaska, and their lodge, the Glacier Bay Lodge, is located within Glacier Bay National Park. 800-451-5952, www.glacierbaycruiseline.com.

Imperial Majesty Cruise Line

Imperial Majesty Cruise has one ship in its fleet, the Regal Empress, which accommodates 1180 guests. The Regal Empress sails from Ft. Lauderdale and offers 2 night cruises to Nassau/Paradise Island in the Bahamas. Included is a full day in Nassau. Live entertainment aboard the ship is featured, and Regal Empress offers several lounges, a disco and casino, children's programs, along with a complimentary champagne reception and midnight buffet. For guests who want a Bahamas escape, the Regal Empress offers the perfect alternative. www.imperialmajesty.com.

Norwegian Coastal Voyage Inc./ Bergen Line Services

Norwegian Coastal Voyage Inc./Bergen Line services has 12 ships in their fleet, offering passengers the opportunity to experience over 1,000 miles of fjord scenery along the Scandinavian coast. They operate year round on 6 to 12 day voyages; on the 12-day "Norwegian Coastal Voyage" experience, for instance, 34 ports are included. NCV Escorted Vacations are available that can be combined with the cruises.

The fleet includes 4 different designs and categories – the "Millennium" ships as the newest. With a capacity of 600 guests, the "Millennium" ships include the MS Finnmarken and the MS Trollfjord, both introduced in 2002. The third "Millennium" ship, the MS Midnatsol, was introduced in 2003 and is a sister ship to the MS Trollfjord. Rounding out the fleet are six ships in the "Contemporary" class which were built between 1993 to 1997 and accommodate 490 passengers, two "Mid Generation" ships built in the early 1980's, and one "Traditional" ship. 800-323-7436, www.coastalvoyage.com.

Peter Deilmann Cruises

No novice to cruising, Peter Deilmann Cruises has been offering deluxe cruise vacations for over 25 years. And they not only have ten different deluxe vessels that cruise the rivers of Europe, but also have two ocean going vessels, the MS Deutschland and the SY Lili Marleen in their fleet. The MS Deutschland, constructed in 1998, offers a true ocean liner experience,

while the SY Lili Marleen offers a superb sailing yacht experience. Their cruises are designed with the first time cruiser in mind, as well as the frequent traveler. Sometimes dubbed "floating hotels," their river vessels visit a multitude of different destinations, from quaint villages and beautiful cities, to castles, natural wonders, and vineyards. Their newest vessel is the MS Heidelberg. 800-348-8287, www.deilmann-cruises.com.

RiverBarge Excursion Lines

RiverBarge Excursion Lines, Inc. operates the R/B River Explorer, which offers a hotel barge experience that travels through America's rivers and inland waterways. Lengths of its cruises range from 4 to 10 days and travel to seven different geographic regions on various itineraries. RiverBarge Excursion Line is known as "Barging Through America," and they specialize in adventure and taking passengers to places that are "off the beaten path." All-inclusive pricing is included, as is an all-American crew, a no tipping policy, and regional cuisine and music. 888-282-1945, www.riverbarge.com.

Star Clippers

Unique in that they offer sailing ships, Star Clippers offer more yacht-like experiences with the 3 tall ships that comprise their fleet – the Star Clipper and the Star Flyer, which are sister ships and accommodate 170 guests; along with the Royal Clipper, which is slightly larger and can accommodate 227 guests. The Royal Clipper is the largest full-rigged sailing ship in the world, and entered service in 2000. Offering an informal, yet elegant approach to sailing with the ultimate sea going experience, Star Clippers take guests to a variety of destinations ranging from the Mediterranean to the Far East, as well as the Caribbean. Guests will experience a casual elegance with modern amenities and comforts, combined with the traditions of the past. International cuisine, pampered comfort, and lack of rigid schedules are also part of the ambiance. 800-442-0551, www.starclippers.com.

Additional information about members of the Niche Cruise Line Alliance members can be found by going to www.NicheCruise.com. ■