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Oddball theme cruises '08

Chess, chocolate ... and Elvis? Not your typical floating buffet!



Hogs On The High Seas

By **Sandra Larriva**
Forbes TRAVELER

updated 1:24 p.m. ET, Tues., Jan. 29, 2008

As if some cruises didn't already run the risk of being populated by throngs of eccentric partygoers dressed in garish, '70s-throwback fashions, at least one liner is filled with nothing else. On the dance floor, it's swivel-hip dads wearing rhinestone jumpsuits and their giggling dates prancing about in painfully pointy blue suede shoes. And everywhere, the sideburns are so long and bushy that the term "mutton chops" won't do them justice.

Welcome to the world of theme cruises. In this case, it's the Elvis Cruise, where each night lonesome-hearted hound dogs sing along with "Elvis Tribute Artists" to little ditties about hotels for the broken-hearted and the kind of rockin' that apparently happens in jailhouses. Don't abandon ship just yet—music is just one theme used by cruise lines to keep their privileged spot as the fastest-growing sector of the travel industry.

"Cruise lines have tailored the on-board experience to satisfy the needs of special-interest groups," said Terry L. Dale, president and CEO of the Cruise Lines International Association, "whether it's jazz, theater, baseball, health and fitness, or wine and food." Some luxury passengers prefer to entertain themselves while at sea, but many others are jumping on board the growing theme trend. Lyn Farmer, director of entertainment and creator of the Spotlight Series at Regent Seven Seas Cruises, says that the

This year, Harley-Davidson enthusiasts have two chances to tear up the lido deck with their chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected suicide machines. First up is the Mexican Riviera cruise in April; then, it's the 6th annual Western Caribbean cruise in November. Expect the usual shore excursions, but also tattoo and beard contests, biker bingo and a belly flop competition.

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special-interest programs give passengers the opportunity to “look at the destination from a different perspective.”

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So, while some theme cruises focus on entertainment, others work hard at getting you out of the pool and into the classroom. But this is no traditional schoolhouse education. Ships are adding and revamping programs that revolve around the voyagers’ personal interests. Think: wine, caviar or car racing. For pure decadence, chocolate-lovers can indulge for a week or two aboard one of two Regent Seven Seas vessels, which set sail from Ft. Lauderdale to the Eastern Caribbean and from Rio de Janeiro to Ft. Lauderdale. On board the Seven Seas Voyager and the Seven Seas Navigator, lucky passengers can sample fine Valrhona concoctions on a ship packed with cocoa bean experts and pastry chefs.

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Fans of Norwegian food, scenery and music can combine their passions on Hurtigruten’s “Gastronomy in a Musical Framework” cruise, which promises to explore Norwegian culture while passing through the North Cape, the Lofoten Islands and, of course, fjords. But if eating, looking and listening aren’t enough entertainment, they also offer the Norwegian National Costume Cruise. On this seven-day excursion, cruisers meet experts on Norwegian folklore and soak up historical lectures under the long summer sun. Local folk crafts and costumes will be on display at the various ports of call.

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Conference organizers have also discovered the joys of entertaining on the deep blue sea. Geek Cruises, for example, has been holding organized computer classes on cruise ships since 1999. But it’s not just tech—they also run

Shakespeare-themed cruises. Neil Bauman, the company’s founder and CEO of International Technology Conferences, Inc., believes that the floating school system makes learning more enjoyable. “Graduates will return not only refreshed,” he says, “but armed with powerful industry contacts and full of ideas.”

Even nudists can have their day in the sun. Bare Necessities has chartered ships for clothing-optional outings since 1991, and the naked truth is—they’re incredibly popular. In 2006, more than 2,100

in-the-buff cruisers boarded the Costa Mediterranea.

The downside for lovers of theme cruises? They don't run regularly, making them difficult to fit into a set schedule. And, many don't repeat annually. Seatrek, a Star Trek-themed cruise, and SlayerCruise for Buffy the Vampire fans, for example, set sail for the last time in 2007



Randal L. Schwartz

because the organizer wanted to focus on other things. (But Cruise Trek, the "unique convention and vacation all in one" is still going strong in its sixteenth year.)

In 1998, Neil Bauman was reading a computer programming book on a cruise and thought, why not combine the two? One year later, he founded Geek Cruises. Themes have included The Photoshop Fling, Mac Mania and Shakespeare at Sea. One of his most popular cruises, though, is the annual Chess Moves, which promises tournaments and classes that include "The Art of the Exchange Sacrifice" and "Understanding Pawn Endings."

Still, there are plenty of options. So kick back with an "All Shook Up" Martini and a sampling of fine chocolates, and check out the hottest theme cruises on the water.

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