

Cruising for conferences

Over the past six years, the segment catering for business meetings, incentives, congresses and exhibitions (MICE) within the worldwide cruising business has grown over 300 percent - 50 percent annually.



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Royal Caribbean International (RC) became the first cruise company worldwide to create a designated MICE department and the events focused specifically on ways to assist the MICE sector in taking advantage of the benefits of cruising. According to George Argyropoulos, CEO of Cruises International, representative of RC in Southern Africa, "cruising as an incentive or conference destination can be 30 percent cheaper than similar land-based options."

"Many companies and congress organisers are unaware of the potential savings offered on cruise ships, which are ideal venues for congresses and similar gatherings," he said. These savings are substantial taking into account that accommodation, meals, entertainment, shipboard activities including the fitness centre, some drinks, complimentary room service and the use of the conference venue including audio-visual and other equipment are all included in the package.

"People working in MICE tourism need to think outside the ballroom," explained Dalene Oroni, manager groups and incentives department at Cruises International. "Cruise ships are perfect venues for meetings and congresses. Delegates only need to unpack once while enjoying a variety of destinations. For organisers, the advantage is that cruise liners offer state-of-the-art facilities and a complete package including logistics, hospitality and technical aspects," she said.

While cruising as a vacation option is the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry worldwide merely underlines the vast potential. This is also true for South Africa, where there is a large demand for quality vacation options at a reasonable price as well as a significant MICE market already in place.

Consider the following facts when looking at a cruise ship for a MICE event:

- The onboard experience: Indulgent stateroom amenities, spectacular entertainment, a variety of dining options - including gourmet cuisine, fitness centres and casinos.

- Dedicated, state-of-the-art facilities: Conference and meeting spaces have the latest audio and visual equipment. The MICE packages include full technical support, ranging from conference room set-up to Wi-Fi and cellphone connectivity plus a full range of business services.
- Packages can be tailor-made to suit the group. Customised menus, onboard branding, team-building events, shore excursions and private functions such as cocktail parties can be arranged. Special entertainers and guest speakers can be brought in as part of their full-service offerings. Royal Caribbean also provides advice on shore excursions appropriate to the delegates.

What sets it apart

Cruises offer an incredible range of destinations. “Of course, this is the big thing that separates a conference or meeting at sea to a land-based one,” noted Ms Oroni.

South African companies can easily have their meetings while visiting European destinations such as Lisbon, Rome, Barcelona, Dubrovnik and Venice, while Dubai has opened up a whole region including the Greek Islands, Monte Carlo, Santorini and even Alaska. “That’s the reason an increasing number of companies are considering cruising. Due to demand, Royal Caribbean International has created a designated MICE department and has dedicated onboard group coordinators to handle individual group bookings,” noted Oroni.

“Many people may never take a cruise in their lives, and these incentives are, therefore, very powerful. The chance to take an excursion at an amazing destination can make significant and lasting impressions,” said Oroni.

It is possible that a group of individuals on an incentive cruise may feel lost in a large group of passengers. In such situations, the ship will specifically cater for the group in terms of entertainment, dining and cohesiveness, ensuring that the group has its own identity on board and does not disappear into the crowd.

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