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Gay travel: Cruise trends

The old 'party boat' vacation is giving way to more exotic itineraries and cruises with programs tailored for the kids.

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When the Norwegian Jewel, chartered by Rosie O'Donnell's R Family Vacations, departed Miami in February, it sent a clear message that the all-gay cruise market had evolved beyond the one-size-fits-all "party boat." On board were same-sex couples, singles and hundreds of babies and children.

From family-style trips to black gay group charters to small ship and adventure sailings, gay niche-market cruises are making waves.

RSVP Vacations jump-started the all-gay and lesbian cruise industry in 1986 with charters of 200-passenger ships in the Caribbean, and eventually graduated to larger ships and more diverse itineraries. Atlantis Events started in 1991 with land-based all-gay resort vacations, then successfully expanded into the cruise market in 1995 with a Club Med European itinerary; Tahiti, the Caribbean and other destinations followed.

Gay cruise passengers embraced this new vacation experience, finding the cruises a safe place where they could be free and open with their partners.

Alec Mapa, an actor from Los Angeles, says gay cruises are "like an escape from reality -- and the parties are fantastic!"

As gays became more visible in the 1990s, Atlantis and RSVP could charter and fill top-tier ships from Princess, Celebrity, Holland America, and others. They tailored the cruises with heady all-night dance parties; gay-friendly ports like Key West, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and St. Maarten; and an endless menu of gay on-board entertainment (drag queen bingo, anyone?).

The companies quickly expanded into more glamorous itineraries in the Mediterranean, Alaska, the Mexican Riviera and South America.

ALL-WOMEN CRUISES

Olivia, based in San Francisco, offered its first all-women cruise in 1990 and is still the sole cruise company catering entirely to lesbians. O'Donnell's three-year-old R Family Vacations is geared toward gays and lesbians with children.

"We've grown in step with the cruise industry in general," says Rich Campbell, CEO of Atlantis. "We create a friendly environment with top-flight entertainment for everyone."

In October, Atlantis acquired its major competitor, RSVP, but will operate both companies "separately and distinctly" without altering either company's lineup of previously scheduled trips.

During the 1990s, the charter companies found that ships with rooms for 2,000-plus passenger could easily accommodate the diverse ages, ethnicities and relationship statuses of the gay community. But by the early 2000s, some gay and lesbian travelers began searching for more intimate cruises and off-the-beaten path destinations.

Beginning in 2004, all-gay cruises marketed by Travelpride and RomanceVoyages chartered smaller ships holding fewer than 300 passengers for European river cruises.

"Our passengers want a more upscale and personalized experience. They are more interested in the destinations than the parties," says Steve Champion, president of Travelpride. The company's passengers are "85 to 95 percent partnered or with a friend." Their current itineraries feature small-ship-only ports in the Caribbean, Mediterranean, Panama and Costa Rica. The vibe on board Travelpride is relaxed, with some gay-themed entertainment that usually ends by midnight.

In the early 2000s, RSVP and Olivia also planned a few small-ship trips to exotic destinations such as the Galapagos Islands, while still maintaining their large cruises.

In contrast, Atlantis remained focused on its successful formula of large ship cruises to the most popular Mediterranean and Caribbean destinations.

"Atlantis could not add value to a small ship experience in terms of entertainment and programming," says Campbell. "Our passengers want to be on the biggest and best ships in the world." The company is chartering Royal Caribbean's new Liberty of the Seas in January 2008 for the largest all-gay cruise in history.

AFFINITY GROUPS

Another growing travel niche is to join a gay affinity group, organized by travel agencies such as Ocean Voyager Cruise Consultants and Pied Piper Travel.

These groups range from 50 to 300 passengers and sail aboard regularly scheduled cruises. They don't offer the complete gay experience, but passengers do enjoy the camaraderie of gay group travel.

For example, the "Ebony and Ivory Gay Black Cruise Group" will be aboard Royal Caribbean's Legends of the Seas sailing on March 2 -- likely the first affinity group geared toward gay, black passengers. The week before, another affinity group for older gay men will sail on Legends. Both groups are organized by Fort Lauderdale's MIM Travel.

What are the next trends in gay cruising?

"We're seeing lots of straight families and more gay couples who are thinking of having kids [coming on our trips]," says Gregg Kaminsky, founding partner of R Family Vacations.

Cultural and educational tours are also gaining ground, such as Romance Voyages' February 2008 Egypt/Nile Cruisetour. New destinations like the Baltics and Asia are generating interest among more upscale gays.

"Luxury adventure cruises like Costa Rica are hot," says Champion. "What's better than hiking or zip trekking in the jungle all day, then returning to a gourmet five-star meal every night?"