



## Early Wave Season Booking Report

Agents polled by Cruise Week consider that Wave Season, while not the massive booking period of years ago, is still a barometer for how the first half of the year will pan out. At this point, few are saying business is spectacular, and few are saying business is bad.

"Overall, we are seeing good activity," summed up one large national seller. "We are running low double-digit increases from same time last year."

Similarly, Florida-based Ed Rudner, of Online Vacation Center, notes: "I can't really say that the past few weeks are stronger than anticipated, because I have just stopped trying to anticipate. That said, we are seeing modest improvement over last year in volume. However, we have seen no extension of the booking curve."

Also not changing substantially, Rudner says, is the consumer shopping patterns. "The only constant that we have observed is that our customers are maniacal about finding deals," he notes.

### Let the Good Times Roll

Many agents report a continuation of good business that started in the latter half of the year. "I like to think our Wave Season actually started the end of October, when we booked about two dozen couples on a series of Alaska cruises and cruisetours [not a group--all individuals]," reports David Coracy, B and A Travel Service, Marion, Ill. "Since then, cruise bookings have stayed pretty steady. We have seen an uptick since January 1."

Glen DeMark, GalaxSea Cruises, Conyers, Ga., is among those agents who says business is going better than anticipated: "Surprisingly, we have been pretty busy since mid-December."

Factors he cites for the improvement range from big picture issues ("The economy is showing signs of getting better, and people are tired of giving up things that they want") to personal factors ("We moved our office to a nicer location in October").

In terms of the booking curve, DeMark notes good Alaska business for the summer and seven- to 10-day Caribbean now booking further out than normal.

For those agents who are not bullish about Wave Season yet, Suzy Smith, Lake City Tours & Travel, Seattle, pretty well sums up the view: "I think the 'Wave Season' is a thing of the past. We have more inquiries but fewer hard bookings. People are still leery and indecisive. Hopefully, it will pick up in the coming weeks."

Potentially impacting business short-term is unusually cold weather extending to unfamiliar territories in the country. Generally, a cold snap this time of year is seen as being good for business--people want out of Boston or Philly. But in 2010, the cold snap has extended to Florida, with residents in central Florida/Tampa seeing temperatures in the 20s, not just for one night, but lasting for

more than a week.

Will the cold help business with Floridians wanting to cruise further south? "Who knows?" responds Karen Skolnick, CruiseOne, The Villages, Fla. "It was 22 degrees here today. This hasn't happened before [for such a duration], so it's hard to predict the impact."

What Skolnick does know is that her January 2010 bookings are "pretty good," running ahead of January 2009: "The phones have been ringing. That's all you can ask for."

## **Epic, Relative To Oasis**

During Carnival Corp.'s most recent earnings call, Micky Arison was asked about the impact of *Oasis* on the company, and he replied there was none. But what about the impact of *Oasis* on *Norwegian Epic*? Agents report there's more correlation there, not only because both are new, but because both are positioned as being so different from what else is out there in the Caribbean.

Initially, some predicted there would be a negative impact for *Epic*, i.e., it would be overshadowed.

But Andy Stuart, exec vp of NCL, reports the success of *Oasis* is having a positive impact on *Epic*. "*Oasis* has clearly had an excellent introduction with very positive feedback about most aspects of the ship," he says. "I think the timing of *Epic* relative to *Oasis* is positive, as there is tremendous buzz around new ships at the moment, buzz which had quieted down a little in recent years, as so many new ships were introduced. *Oasis* and *Epic* have reignited that buzz."

One important aspect, as Stuart and others point out, is that issues associated with boarding and disembarking a ship the size of *Oasis* seem to have vanished since the ship arrived. "Questions around size have been well answered by *Oasis*," he says.

That's partly thanks to the new terminal for *Oasis*. NCL won't have a new terminal, but they assure embark/disembark is being done very differently for *Epic*. "For some time, we have been developing our online check-in capabilities to minimize the need to line up at the pier," says Stuart.

At the moment, customers need to provide their credit card details on arrival at the pier. That will soon change. "We have invested in technology that will allow us to pre-authorize the credit card during the online check-in process," says Stuart. "This eliminates what is probably the most time-consuming remaining step that takes place at the pier today."

Further refinements in the process are being made specifically for *Norwegian Epic*; most notably, NCL is working with the Port of Miami to convert two existing piers to support check-in for *Epic*. Which terminal passengers are directed to is based on their cabin location, whether fore or aft. "Essentially, we're using two facilities



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that are currently being used simultaneously for two ships and 5,000 passengers into one facility for *Norwegian Epic*," says Stuart.

### Pricing Issues

Agents report that *Epic* appears to be attracting a premium over other NCL ships.

"*Epic* is definitely getting a premium price as compared to our Caribbean fleet, and we anticipate pricing increasing from here," says Stuart. "We have priced *Epic* to sell strongly out of the gate, with pricing steadily increasing, no price decreases, and, to date, we have moved pricing up broadly on multiple dates, and we continue to see very strong demand."

Stuart finished: "We are pleased to see the pricing that *Oasis* and *Epic* are commanding—we are starting to see the true value of cruising being accurately reflected, which helps the entire industry get the value it deserves."

## Seabourn Enriches Older Ships

Three of the four Seabourn ships called at Port Everglades this past week, providing *Cruise Week* correspondent Art Sbarsky with the opportunity to explore the recently refurbished Seabourn Spirit.

Not only is Seabourn introducing new ships for the first time in more than 15 years—the *Odyssey* launched late last year and the *Soujour*n is coming in June 2010—but the three original small Seabourn ships are undergoing multimillion dollar makeovers of both public rooms and accommodations. *Seabourn Pride* is now in drydock undergoing refurbishment, and *Seabourn Legend* will have the changes made in fall of this year.

My visit to the already completed *Seabourn Spirit* found an overall freshening of the vessel, with more contemporary color palettes and areas that resemble the recently introduced *Seabourn Odyssey*.

At this end of the business, changes are usually not adding the bells and whistles that are headlines for mass and premium market ship renovations. Instead, the keyword is quality.

An example can be found with seeming basics such as the new carpeting. New carpet on a Seabourn ship has got to be more than a sturdy rug that can handle the pounding of thousands of feet per week. The new carpeting is a semi-geometric pattern in beige, burgundy, and dark blue, and this color pattern extends to much of the public area carpeting throughout the ship, though the patterns change from area to area.

Changes are visible as soon as one enters the ship. In the reception area, the pastel-colored murals that have been on the ship since the beginning have been

replaced with artwork, rich wood paneling and two-toned tile flooring. The main changes in The Restaurant are the addition of sheer curtains in violet and gold along with muted purple drapes along the walls; the chairs are dark woods and the floors are finished in golden stone.

*Seabourn Spirit* may now be slightly over 20 years old, and it may lack an extensive number of balconies, but with impeccable maintenance over the years and the changes recently made, the ship remains the epitome of timeless class.

## Celebrity's Strategy

While new ship orders have fallen off, renovations continue full throttle ahead, partly because the newest ships have such big advancements in terms of facilities.

The latest example comes from Celebrity: There was an eight-year gap between the first Millennium-class ship and the first Solstice-class, so it logically follows that the line is committing nearly \$200 million to upgrade Millennium-class ships (and make software advancements), starting with *Constellation*, which will undergo changes while in April drydock.

In New York this past week, the line announced they will make changes one ship per year. A major portion of the changes will be in the dining area, which is appropriate, since Celebrity has built much of its success on cuisine, and *Solstice* certainly reflects that.

Among the changes will be the addition of Tuscan Grille (the great alternative dining room on *Solstice*), replacing the flower shop; Bistro on Five; Martini Bar; Cafe al Bacio and Gelateria, replacing Cova Cafe. Among the other extensive changes being made to the ships will be refurbished suites and staterooms and public areas.

Celebrity also announced their new marketing campaign. Following an extensive international research study among past and prospective guests as well as agents, Celebrity is jettisoning its "Starring You" campaign in favor of a multi-faceted brand platform entitled "Designed for You." The theme line will appear in all materials, including trade and consumer print advertising, and a new video, which cleverly can be accessed by an assortment of web banners.

President Dan Hanrahan notes "Designed For You" is more than a good tagline. "We've done a lot of good things, but it was coming off as, 'Here's something else Celebrity has done,' as opposed to adding up to the sum of what Celebrity does," he says.

So what you'll see in all forms of marketing is a lot more wide shots, playing to Celebrity's strength. "You'll see people in the ads, but also be able to see how beautifully designed the ships are," says Hanrahan.—Art Sbarsky