

CHINESE TRAVELERS ATTRACTED BY SHORT CRUISES



When the Mariner of the Seas made history as the largest ocean liner to arrive in Shanghai with a home port in China it was seen as a symbol of intent. The magnificent 138,000-ton mega-ship has an impressive luxury spec sheet which includes a mini golf course, 10 pools, a rock climbing wall and an ice rink.

The cruise ship owned by Royal Caribbean International is mostly used to make three- and four-night trips to South Korea. They currently charge \$500 per head. **Unfortunately due to the short stature of the cruise, the 3800 passengers it carries won't get enough time to enjoy all the splendor the ship has to offer.**

The switch to such short cruises is one of the many necessary changes international cruise companies have undertaken in order to attract more Chinese clients. This is because most Chinese nationals (who do not work for international companies) only go on vacations during public holidays coupled with traditional festivals like the Chinese New Year. These are normally no longer than a week. That all but rules out the 12-night and longer cruises that are popular among the western community. International cruise lines have found it easier to sell the short cruises to the Chinese as they see this as a market segment that has vast untapped potential.

According to 2010 market analysis by Royal Caribbean, numbers show that if the Chinese were to take to cruise trips the same way as Europeans and the rest of the western tourists, they could provide a staggering 40 million cruise guests yearly, which is more than twice the number expected worldwide.

Some would argue that it is wishful thinking you could look at the Chinese middle-class population and extrapolate that you can go sell them a cruise, because for people who have not had any money before but now have a discretionary income, they are more likely to go and buy a car or a house.

However it can be noted that unlike western tourists who travel as couples, **the Chinese often travel in large groups of extended families and friends, which makes them a more lucrative market to go after.** Another thing to bank on is the Chinese never ending passion for gambling and shopping. On an average day the Chinese are likely to spend more onboard than their counterparts from North America and Europe.

It is this enthusiasm that international cruise lines are trying to cash in on by offering needs that the Chinese can't resist. Cruise lines like Crystal Cruises have started recruiting Chinese-speaking staff and even gone a step further and enlarged its casino floors for two of its ships - the Symphony and the Serenity - to appeal for the Chinese love affair with gambling.

Other cruises have added Karaoke lounges and hired cooks skilled in preparing authentic Chinese dishes. Michael Goh - vice president of Star Cruises - talks of how they added a 7,750 square-foot shopping arcade to the Star Pisces which offers a one-night cruise that has proven popular among the Chinese.

It is still early days in Asia for the cruise ship business as most Asian countries give first priority to

container ships, cruise ships have to play second fiddle. It is safe to say that slowly the priorities are starting to shift if the 1.1 billion Norman Foster-designed cruise terminal in Hong Kong is anything to go by. Better days are approaching fast and victory will go to the one who has the most impressive cruise package on offer.

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