

# Presidents' sway

Get insider access to cruise line bosses on these special sailings, writes **Jane Archer**

**I**t sounds crazy: putting yourself in the line of fire of your fiercest critics, aka cruise lines' loyalty club members. But that's what the brave presidents of some of the world's leading cruise lines do to dig deeper into what their customers think and want – and, yes, to do their bit to increase sales.

The sailings, known as presidents' cruises, have been around for a long time but they are back in vogue as competition heats up and companies look for new ways to gain an edge over their competitors. If it takes the top brass to meet and greet top-tier guests to make sure they feel valued, so be it.

## SOCIETY SAILINGS

"It's been very respectful," said Silversea president Bert Hernandez after a Q&A on his first Venetian Society Reunion Voyage (Silversea's name for a president's cruise) after just six months in the top job.

"It's an honour to meet our Venetian Society guests and important for me to listen and learn."

The presidents of Windstar Cruises, Celebrity Cruises and Atlas Ocean Voyages have also recently hosted special sailings, while Hernandez has more Silversea Venetian Society (VS) cruises lined up on October 17 and June 19, 2026. The latter is a 12-day sailing round-trip from Nice that starts at £9,500 per person (with flights, transfers and excursions).

In June, luxury line Crystal marked its 35th anniversary with a Chairman's Cruise accompanied by Geoffrey Kent, founder and chairman emeritus of Abercrombie & Kent, part of parent company A&K Travel Group.

Meanwhile, Royal Caribbean International chief Michael Bayley will be centre stage on his annual President's Cruise on September 22 – a Bahamas and Perfect Day sailing on *Utopia of the Seas*. ➤

PICTURE: Quark Expeditions/David Merton



# DESTINATIONS

## CRUISE | PRESIDENTS' CRUISES



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Silversea president Bert Hernandez; Windstar Cruises president Christopher Prelog; Polar Latitudes founder and president John McKeon; Silversea's *Silver Nova* in Hong Kong

PICTURES: simaocosta; Jenna Lyn Photography; Adam Rehborg



### HOT TICKETS

These cruises are a great sales tool for agents as sailing with a cruise line's president is a hot ticket. Windstar's next President's Cruise, from San Juan in March 2026, is already sold out, while suite categories on Silversea's VS cruise in October are waitlisted.

Claire, a Silversea VS member from the US, is typical of many regular guests. She travelled solo on the 2024 VS cruise in Asia and booked the 2025 trip as soon as the date was announced in the Q&A session with Hernandez. "You feel part of a special club," she said.

You don't have to be a member to go on Silversea's VS cruises but about half of the passengers – around 340 people – on *Silver Nova* in Asia were. Most were from the US but Hernandez said plenty of Brits are loyal VS members, opening the door to some straightforward sells for UK agents.

During his president's cruise, Windstar boss Christopher Prelog took part in a Q&A, had time ashore with passengers and met the

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many loyal Yacht Club members on the cruise as well as those new to the brand.

Windstar head of sales Augustus Lonsdale says: "These cruises are a great chance to sail with the president but it's also fun to be around long-time Windstar cruisers as they are great travellers with lots of tales to tell. You also get to learn about the company from those running it – an insider view."

In case cruising with the boss wasn't enough of a draw, Windstar added a touch of mystery to the cruise. The start and end ports of its two trips, both in the Mediterranean, were known, but the ports in between were only revealed day by day.

### ADDED BENEFITS

As well as enabling passengers to get the ear of the boss, these cruises

often include a few special treats. Silversea's Asia sailing featured a harbour-side wine-and-dine festival in Hong Kong, and on Celebrity Cruises' President's Cruise to Norway in May, top passengers enjoyed an exclusive trip to Flor og Fjære gardens in Stavanger, with lunch, wine and cider included.

Celebrity president Laura Hodges Bethge said feedback from the cruise – an annual event for the line – is invaluable. "Guests are our 'north star'. The feedback plays an important role in shaping future product innovation.

"I love spending as much time with Captain's Club members as possible. I am at every event, hosting as many shore excursions as possible – sometimes [several in] a day. My role is to be present and listen."

Hodges Bethge added that "many" passengers booked the 2026 President's Cruise after it was announced on day two of the sailing. It will be on *Celebrity Xcel*, a new Edge Class ship launching in November this year, on an eight-night sailing from Athens to Barcelona departing September 13, 2026, from £1,707.

### EXPEDITION EXTRAS

Adventure lines are also getting in on the president's cruise act. Quark Expeditions boss Sam Seward will be doing the meet-and-greet honours and joining excursions on an Antarctic voyage on *World Explorer* departing on January 5.

Or for a president's cruise with a difference, how about sailing with John McKeon, boss of Antarctic specialist Polar Latitudes? But beware – clients will have to look hard to see him as when he joins a cruise (provisionally a March 15, 2026, sailing), he'll be out driving Zodiacs or whale-watching with passengers. An adventure with the president? Beat that for a sales line. **TW**