

On the horizon

Wondering how to restore confidence in cruise?
Laura French speaks to the specialists for advice on
how to reassure clients, plus their tips for trends in 2021

It's hard to beat waking up to a new view every day, sunlight streaming in as the waves bob gently beneath your balcony, or sipping a pina colada on an open deck as the sky blazes pink and peach above the ocean. Which is probably why cruise lines across the board are reporting strong demand for the latter half of 2021 and 2022.

But with ongoing uncertainty around what to expect next year, not all clients will be as easily sold, so how do you reassure those feeling less confident about setting sail?

We've spoken to some of the key lines and cruise specialists to find out what you can say to clients and how you can keep your finger on the pulse of key cruise trends.



"DEMONSTRATE THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN A BUBBLE ON BOARD A SHIP"

Edwina Lonsdale, managing director of Mundy Cruising, says:

“When it comes to reassuring customers, it's important to be on top of the ways in which the

cruise industry has risen to the Covid challenge. It's an amazing success story, with the cruise industry having proactively stayed one step ahead of the legislation and emerged as a leader in safe and responsible travel, and we need to articulate that.

It's vital you learn as much as possible about the new protocols. You need to be able to compare these experiences to what your client might find if they were to choose an alternative form of travel, and demonstrate the benefits of being in a bubble on board a ship.

It's also worth highlighting the longer-term advantages that are likely to come out of this. We will probably see more extensive shore excursion programmes with a greater range of pricing, and there will be a greater focus on decarbonisation with new fuels, technologies and collaboration between cruise lines, shipyards, ports and destinations.

The ships will be even cleaner than before, and enhanced technology will speed up the practicalities. We are also likely to see more calls away from the crowds, meaning exciting, off-the-beaten-track itineraries.” ➤



“BE HONEST AND ACKNOWLEDGE CLIENTS’ CONCERNS”

Stefan Shillito, managing director of The Sovereign Cruise Club, says:

“I think honesty is important when selling, so it’s vital to acknowledge clients’ concerns and take time to explain to them the incredible work cruise lines have done with regard to virus protocols. Life has changed for us all in many respects and the majority of clients understand this. The cruise lines have worked tirelessly to find the right balance between protecting their guests and still making a cruise holiday an enjoyable experience.

It’s also worth highlighting the flexible booking policies in place if customers can’t travel. Our luxury cruise partners have done an excellent job in improving flexibility around rebooking, which provides further confidence to clients wanting to book now.

In terms of who to target, spread the net wide. While initially it was mainly existing cruisers booking, we have recently seen an uptick in interest from new-to-cruise clients. Also, don’t limit it to certain itineraries; our world cruises have proven popular, with people keen to tick experiences off their bucket list. Travel, once again, is being seen as a privilege and not an inalienable right.

The Mediterranean, Caribbean and Far East are all selling well. We’re seeing an excellent level of interest for 2021 bookings, especially so for the latter half of the year, by which time most of our clients expect mass vaccinations to have taken place.”



“USE THE FACTS AVAILABLE THROUGH CLIA AND HIGHLIGHT THE LINES’ PROTOCOLS”

Shane Riley, associate vice-president of international sales at Virgin Voyages, says:

“Be confident when selling – for the past few months, like all cruise lines, we’ve been creating a new set of health measures so your customers can get back to those quiet, sun-on-their face moments out at sea.

Even if clients don’t ask, they are likely to be thinking about safety. Take the lead, use the facts available through Clia and highlight the cruise lines’ protocols.

There are many useful guides available that clearly explain how each cruise line will take care of their guests. We’ve created tools our First Mates can use to reassure customers, including a 30-second video that explains what they can expect before, during and after the voyage.

It’s also worth doing your research around flexible booking policies. We offer a book with confidence policy, allowing guests to amend their voyage or cancel and receive a 100% future voyage credit up to 48 hours before departure. Our partners at Voyage Store also offer flexibility on packages, allowing free date changes up to six weeks before departure on most packages.”



JOHN FAIR, UK sales director, CroisiEurope

“On the back of a safe return to river cruising from July to October 2020, CroisiEurope is planning a resumption in spring 2021 on all of Europe’s major rivers. We believe our now-proven health and safety protocols, along with valuable lessons learnt this summer, will enable us to provide cruising that is not only safe but still has our core values of service, great food, immersive itineraries and onboard comfort at its centre.”

LUCIA ROWE, managing director, A-Rosa

“We are proud to have successfully operated river cruises for five months of the 2020 season with social distancing, enhanced cleaning, pre-screening and table service among the protocols. When the season starts in 2021, we will have all of these in place. However, with a vaccine becoming more realistic in the first half of next year, we hope we will soon be able to return to many elements of our usual concept.”



“CRUISING WILL BE MORE REGIONALISED UNTIL 2022”

Phil Nuttall, chief executive of The Travel Village Group, says:

“Cruising will resume slowly but surely. All the interest we are seeing for 2021 is for late summer onwards, and there will be more seven-day cruises until summer 2022. I also think cruising will be more regionalised until 2022, with cruise lines positioning their ships for a local market – for example Italians, Spanish and French predominantly in the Med, with Southampton and its five cruise terminals heavily reliant on UK cruisers.

In the longer term, the vaccination programme will be key; once the virus is under control, we will see a much more familiar cruise experience, albeit enhanced by new health and safety protocols.

I think river will continue to be the growing force of the cruise industry for many years to come, and not just because it doesn’t fall under the no-travel position ocean cruise currently finds itself in; it’s a natural progression for many ocean-cruise guests, offering destinations ocean ships can’t reach, a slower pace of life and excellent food and wine.”



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Cycling in Cologne, AmaWaterways; artist’s impression of AmaWaterways’ AmaDahlia; Virgin Voyages, Sea View cabin on Scarlet Lady; brown bear and cubs, Russia, with Aurora Expeditions PICTURES: Michel Verdure; Richard l’Anson



“WE ARE SEEING AN INCREASE IN ‘NEW-TO-RIVER’ GUESTS AND MULTI-FAMILY GROUPS”

Jamie Loizou, managing director of AmaWaterways, says:

“While we may not have all our ships on the rivers for early spring sailings, our bookings for summer, autumn and the Christmas markets season in particular are very strong. Returning guests make up a large percentage of bookings but we are also seeing an increase in new-to-river-cruise guests.

These travellers are drawn to certain destinations off the beaten path, such as the lower Danube itinerary from Budapest into Romania. Multi-family groups are becoming more popular and we are also seeing an uptick in guests adding our pre and post-cruise stays.

We are adding two new ships on the Rhine and we have repositioned two more ships in France, with two new itineraries to delve deeper into historical and culinary experiences in the Brittany and Burgundy regions. We are also very excited to launch Egypt cruises in September 2021, which are almost 70% full already.”



“THERE’S A MOVE TO PLANNING, BOOKING AND LOOKING FORWARD TO ONE INCREDIBLE TRIP A YEAR”

Monique Ponfoort, chief executive of Aurora Expeditions, says:

“We’re witnessing very positive pre-registration numbers for our 2022 Global & Arctic programme,

“There is a strong desire for travellers to reconnect with the natural world and to do so on small-ship expedition voyages

featuring bucket-list destinations such as Alaska, the Russian Far East, Raja Ampat and Baja California.

Our new Greenland, Northwest Passage and Svalbard voyages, all in 2022, are also attracting considerable interest from UK trade partners, as is Antarctica with the arrival of our second purpose-built expedition ship, Sylvia Earle.

I’m hugely optimistic about the future of expedition travel. Our research indicates there is a strong desire for travellers to reconnect with the natural world and to do so on small-ship expedition voyages.

There is a move towards planning, booking and really looking forward to one incredible trip per year, rather than taking several smaller holidays, and we expect this trend to be a major contributor to the recovery of our industry.” **TW**

TRADE NEWS

Oceania Cruises has introduced an online platform for agents, Oceania Trade Connect, providing access to training, marketing assets and the OLife rewards programme. Agents will also be able to connect with the Facebook community on the Oceania Trade Insider page.

AmaWaterways has added a Danube training course to its Travel Agent Portal, in addition to its existing course. Complete the course and make a reservation with deposit within 90 days to earn a £25 Love2shop voucher.

Cosmos has a new river cruise programme (separate from sister brand Avalon Waterways), with eight itineraries on sale from mid-December covering the Douro, Rhine, Elbe and Volga. Agents can expect a variety of incentives.

Norwegian Cruise Line has put its 2023 summer programme on sale – the earliest the line has ever released its itineraries – with destinations including Alaska, Canada, New England, the Caribbean, Mediterranean and northern Europe.