

CRUISE

Theme cruises eager to get the party going again

By Meagan Drillinger   | Feb 14, 2021



A scene from an Atlantis Events cruise.

Theme cruise popularity exploded in recent years, as millions of people realized that those who share their passion -- whether it be for music, photography, food and wine or, hey, even nudity, if that's your thing -- can sail together on cruises entirely devoted to that hobby.

But during a pandemic, sailings built upon the mixing and mingling of like-minded people, many of them total strangers, could prove difficult to operate.

Theme cruises have grown in importance to the industry because they attract the coveted first-time cruiser. Organizers of such sailings call their products "a gateway drug" to cruising and say that creating a social world at sea devoted entirely to a traveler's passion is a surefire way to create a cruise convert.

But as we emerge from the pandemic and sailing resumes, it could take longer for these cruises to come back, given that they are often full of activities that are anything but socially distanced.

Several theme cruise operators said that given the uncertainty around cruising's restart, they are in a wait-and-see mode, cautiously optimistic that when the time comes they will not have to make many changes to their programs. Yet they are still preparing for any possibility.



A DJ performs on last year's Groove Cruise from Miami to Costa Maya, Mexico, on the Celebrity Infinity.

Jason Beukema, CEO of Whet Travel, operates Groove Cruise, which is exactly what it sounds like: a ship with more than 3,000 passengers and 96 straight hours of electronic dance music playing on multiple stages. Slated to sail from Florida this month, the cruise was 93% sold out before it was canceled and postponed until 2022. Another Groove Cruise is scheduled to sail from Los Angeles in the fall.

Beukema is hopeful that by then, social distancing and masks will be a thing of the past. But he has done his research, attending events on land with more than 1,000 people during the pandemic to see how they operated safely.

One option for Groove Cruise, he said, would be to reconfigure the outdoor decks so that people can create private areas.

"Kind of like bottle service in a nightclub, but on the pool deck," Beukema said. "That way, not everyone is congregated right in front of the stage throughout the pool deck. Theoretically, they would stay in a specific pod at each stage with their friends throughout."

Atlantis Events, one of the largest companies providing travel and event service to the LGBTQ community, operates full-ship charters with as many as 5,500 people onboard. Atlantis' next charter is scheduled for June.

"We truly don't know what activities would have to be modified or eliminated for a variety of reasons," said Rich Campbell, Atlantis' CEO, given that "it's impossible to say what stage of the pandemic we'll be in at that time. ... We would work with [the lines and the CDC] and create an appropriate social program that followed any restrictions that are in place, if they exist at all."

A positive of holding these events on a cruise, he said, is that if there are any issues around ports, whether due to vaccine or testing restrictions, the events can easily be swapped out.

"That's the beauty of cruising: We can alter the itinerary as needed to improve the experience."

Sixthman, which holds music festivals on ships like Keeping the Blues Alive at Sea and the Kiss Kruise (aimed at fans of the rock band Kiss), said it expects protocols to continue evolving, but for now, only one thing is sure to change: "Saying goodbye to our beloved welcome high-fives," the company said.

"However, you can still count on a friendly Sixthman face upon your arrival to greet you and welcome you to the party."

Despite the hurdles they face, theme cruise operators feel like they have an important factor in their favor when cruising returns: the fervor that inspired their customers to sail in the first place.

"The folks who go on these theme cruises are quite passionate about these trips," said Howard Moses, operator of ThemeCruiseFinder.com. "Many create their own community, and the people travel to see each other as well as the headline event."

Johanna Jainchill contributed to this report.



Sixthman's Keeping the Blues Alive at Sea Caribbean cruise set sail in February 2020 from Miami. Photo Credit: @WillByington

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