

## The Informer: Setting Sail Aboard Theme Cruises

by Millie Ball | Published March 2011

### Theme cruises are attracting a wave of passengers setting sail to feed their curiosity.

**Julie Longanecker** lifted her arms at the dinner table with the fervor of a believer at a revival meeting. "I'm in heaven!" she said. It was her first cruise ever and she was traveling on her own, but she felt like she was with people she'd known all her life: "I know these people in my heart."

"These people" were the 240 fellow passengers who had signed up for the weeklong Progressive Voices cruise last year on Holland America's *Oosterdam*. Sailing from San Diego to ports in Mexico, the group, which took part in private meetings and seminars throughout the cruise, starred political pundits such as MSNBC's Rachel Maddow; Ron Reagan, the decidedly progressive son of the former president; and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.



Longanecker is one of a growing number of travelers who have never before spent a day at sea and have little interest in lavish buffets or swilling rum drinks on deck but who are setting sail to spend a week or more with like-minded people on special-interest cruises.

These days, amateur cooks can sail with celebrity chefs, history buffs can listen to Ivy League professors lecture about the destinations they visit, and even runners can meet up to sprint in exotic ports of call. There are cruises for Catholic singles, ballroom dancers, grown women who want to have a bat mitzvah (there's an extra fee for the services of a cantor), motorcycle riders (mud wrestling contests included), tech geeks, and even dialysis patients. It was during a stop on the conservative *Weekly Standard* magazine's Alaskan cruise several summers ago—a luncheon at the governor's mansion—that editor in chief and former *New York Times* columnist William Kristol met then Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. He and others aboard were smitten and began spreading the word that helped lead to her eventual nomination as candidate for vice president.

The Cruise Authority travel agency, in Atlanta, handles most of the political cruises (co-owner David Bittner says there are at least twice as many conservative groups sponsoring sailings as liberal ones). Its Web site, [themecruisefinder.com](http://themecruisefinder.com), is a good place to look for cruises of any stripe, however. It's by far the most comprehensive source, with as many as 500 listings at any time. [Vacationstogo.com](http://Vacationstogo.com) and [cruise critic.com](http://cruise critic.com) are among other sites with theme sections, including message boards.

Before you sign on for a special-interest sailing, it's important to know that not all theme cruises are created equal. In general, there are three types, each offering a different experience. The most common are those arranged by an organization or travel agent representing a group, such as the Progressive Voices cruise. Participants on these sailings pay a fee in addition to the cruise fare—sometimes as much as the cost of the cruise itself—and events are open only to those who

book through the organization or agent. On the second type—arranged mainly by upscale cruise lines such as Silversea, Crystal, Regent Seven Seas, and Yachts of Seabourn—the line invites speakers, chefs, vintners, and other guests to sail, and everyone aboard can attend the sessions at no extra charge. Passengers can book these cruises through any travel agent (for a list of *Condé Nast Traveler's* top cruise specialists, see [travelplanners.truth.travel](http://travelplanners.truth.travel)). On charters, the third type of theme cruise, special interest groups (for instance, music, dance, or gambling devotees) take over an entire ship. These are best for those who care more about being immersed in the experience than about sunning on deck and visiting ports of call. Such cruises must usually be booked through the agency that chartered the ship.

If you're looking to rub elbows with big names, your best bet will be to book a small deluxe ship. For instance, Silversea Cruises' *Silver Spirit* World Cruise was able to lure mystery writer Mary Higgins Clark and former CBS anchor Dan Rather, among other VIPs, for sailings last year. Visiting chefs on Silversea cruises come from the prestigious Relais & Châteaux consortium of hotels and restaurants, according to Brad Ball, head of media relations for Silversea, which has six ships with passenger capacities ranging from 132 to 540. "They do presentations aboard and mingle with passengers in the bar and the public areas. We have open-seating dining, and speakers who meet guests on the ship sometimes invite them to join them for dinner."

It's this access to people whom passengers normally wouldn't meet—historians, journalists, intelligence experts—that appeals to Silversea cruise clients, Ball says. "Guests don't want to just lounge by the pool on sea days. They want to be enriched. We began these programs 15 years ago, but we're finding that demand has grown more and more in the past few years."

Not to be outdone, Crystal Cruises has recruited such speakers as that improbable political couple, Democrat pundit James Carville and his wife, Republican pundit Mary Matalin. It's not all about crossfire, though; Crystal's themes also include art and antiques, classical music, and film/theater festivals. To meet travelers' growing interest in giving back, Crystal is also launching a You Care, We Care program, which allows passengers to volunteer in various ports—such as assisting hospital patients with arts and crafts projects in Peru or cleaning up neighborhoods and doing a little light construction work in Mexico. As with most theme cruises, Crystal promises passengers opportunities for conversation and photo ops with the special guests after their lectures and around the ship, says Bret Bullock, Crystal Cruises' vice president for entertainment.

On the Progressive Voices cruise, Rachel Maddow listened attentively to each person who approached her—even passengers who weren't part of the group. "You give everyone so much of your attention," one passenger remarked. Maddow smiled. "That's why I'm here," she said.