

## Fantastic voyages

### From vampire wannabes to classic movie buffs, more fans are going overboard with theme cruises

By Norma Meyer • Special to the U-T

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On a regular Carnival cruise, you'd lay off the "Drink of the Day" after seeing a boatload of pompadoured Elvis impersonators sunbathing by the pool, golfing on the ship's minicourse, standing in the buffet line, and at every turn. But hunka hunka fan Veronica Dupre isn't all shook up.

For the fifth straight year, the 55-year-old Dupre will set sail on The Elvis Cruise, a four-day bash for 2,000 Elvis-o-holics who deck out in Elvis garb and replica jewelry, play Elvis bingo with Elvis daubers, eat Elvis' favorite fried banana-and-peanut butter sandwiches, swig cocktails named "Blue Suede Shoes," and reap stateroom gifts like Elvis beach towels. While giddily trapped at sea, the "Jailhouse Rock" junkies will be entertained by 20 hip-swiveling tribute artists and rub elbows with actors and others who worked with The Rock 'n' Roll King.

"It's indescribable! It's like we're all a big family," enthused Dupre, a Louisiana oil industry employee.

The Florida-to-Bahamas pelvis bender is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to increasingly trendy theme cruises. Here's the swell part of being, uh, in the same boat: There's tons to talk about with strangers (especially if you're flying solo), way more to do than napkin-folding art, and the people-watching is nuts. These amped-up adventures are like being with a floating cult.

Just imagine the caped, pasty passengers who'll dig their fanged teeth into Vamps at Sea, an undead outing to Alaska in June featuring "guests from the vampire world" and "vampalicious" drinks. Speaking of blood, or rather spitting it, hard-pounding rocker Gene Simmons will electrify beer-bonging face-painted fans on the first-ever Kiss Kruiise departing for the Bahamas this week.

On the tamer side, film buffs aboard the inaugural Turner Classic Movies Cruise will get the inside in-person scoop from 94-year-old Oscar winner Ernest Borgnine, who captained his own vessel on "McHale's Navy." The TCM cruise quickly sold out, but y'all can still throw your arteries overboard on The Paula Deen Party at Sea hosted by the butter-bombing Food Network star.

"This type of travel has become one of the fastest-growing," said Howard Moses, co-creator of [Themecruisefinder.com](http://Themecruisefinder.com), which lists about 500 niche trips. Celebrities are a draw but some R&R-seekers just want to be with their peeps — whether its hobbyists on a Beading Cruise stringing eyeglass chains or buck-naked hedonists on the Au Naturele Caribbean Cruise.

One of the most innovative theme cruise agencies is Atlanta-based Sixthman, which started out by combining high-octane concerts with nautical romps. Besides Elvis, KISS and other jaunts, Sixthman is behind Kid Rock's third annual



Chillin' the Most Cruise, blasting off in April on the Carnival Destiny. If it's anything like the Kid's previous cruises, man the lifeboats.

"Once, it was about 1:30 in the morning and he asked me, 'Can I get on the ship's PA?'" Sixthman founder Andy Levine recalled. "So he gets on the intercom, uses some cuss words, and yells, "Hey it's Saturday night! I've had some beers, I'm not going to lie! I want to DJ so everyone come on up to the Lido Deck!"

With that wild wake-up, snoozing mateys jumped out of bed to join Kid Rock as he drank, smoked cigars and spun tunes until 4 a.m.

Sixthman charters entire ships that hold up to 3,000 passengers so everyone is on the same wavelength. Other theme cruise organizers may book as few as a dozen cabins on a liner filled with the general public and hold seminars and events in special rooms. ("The difference is like having a party when your parents are in town or having a party when your parents are out of town," Levine quipped.)

"There's an energy. Going on a Sixthman cruise is like going to a little theme park," raved Souette Quinn, a 53-year-old Nashville special education coordinator. Obviously, the jammin' Simple Man Cruise showcasing Lynyrd Skynyrd floated her boat — she took it three times.

And to get in shipshape, Quinn grunted her way through Jillian Michaels' Ultimate Wellness Cruise led by the brutal "Biggest Loser" TV trainer who offers encouragement like "Faint, puke or die — keep walking!" Quinn said the festive voyage was "motivational," the low-fat Michaels-approved cuisine was yummy and she shed 12 pounds in four days. (Gee, she could actually pig out on the pendulum-swinging Hypno-Cruise since the first hypnosis lesson "will address enjoying all the great food without gaining weight!")

There's an ocean of choices: the Rum Renaissance Caribbean Cruise to the "birthplace of great rums" with rum tastings and "rum dinners" (a true booze cruise); the Lewis Black Comedy Cruise (the ranting comic promises to have "a Q&A with you idiots"), the Baseball Greats Cruise (Ken Griffey Sr. and old-timers autograph your childhood mitt) and the NRA-backed Freedom Cruise featuring FOX commentator Oliver North.

The ultimate theme spree, however, is the sold-out karma-taunting Titanic Memorial Cruise launching April 8 from England and retracing the ill-fated itinerary from 100 years ago. Disaster die-hards, who are being prodded to don period dress, will feast on the same dishes and drink as their doomed predecessors and — after a last meal presumably including roast duckling, pate de foi gras, Waldorf pudding and fine wines — arrive at the iceberg crash site for a memorial service above watery graves. Pack the Xanax for that bon voyage.