

Theme cruises let guests get personal with writers, vampires and fitness gurus

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High Tide's Murder At Sea offers mystery readers the opportunity to spend a week in the Caribbean with up to 24 New York Times best-selling and Pulitzer Prize-winning authors,

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The Tampa Tribune

Published: April 7, 2011

Updated: 04/07/2011 12:14 pm

There's one for murder aficionados. One for history buffs, vampire junkies, and Slightly Stoopid fans. There's even one for folks who aspire to lose big.

Despite the sinking economy, the cruise industry is staying afloat, reeling in passengers by appealing to their passions.

"No matter what you're interested in, there's probably a theme cruise out there for you," says Howard Moses, co-owner of ThemeCruiseFinder.com, a searchable database with more than 700 listings.

"A lot of people are no longer happy just sitting on a beach and reading a book, so they're looking for ways to enhance their vacations," Moses says.

Theme cruises bring in many first-time cruisers who wouldn't have considered such a vacation if it weren't for the specialty element, Moses says.

Theme cruises offers an intimate atmosphere for participants to meet others who share their interests, with amenities and travel experiences beyond those a one might get at a convention catering to their passion.

Travel partner not a fellow enthusiast? Not a problem. With the variety of things to do onboard most vessels, from mini golf and casinos to elaborate pools and interactive youth programming, there's something for everyone.

Jeffrey Weber, co-founder and partner of High Tide Cruises, is an award-winning music producer with more than 30 years of experience in the music industry, producing artists such as Luther Vandross and Pat Boone. With a range of projects yielding two Grammys and a list of top 10 albums, why take the plunge into theme cruises? He jokes that the company evolved from his desire to "create a business based on one sentence: 'Honey, we have to go to the Caribbean again.' "

Weber concedes there were many theme cruises already on the market when he launched High Tide. But he says they lacked in the depth of programming they offered.

"I didn't see the creativity and the fun factor on a large scale," he says. High Tide's goal is to up the "fun factor" and provide a fully immersive experience.

The company has several trips in the pipeline, including baseball and football Hall of Fame cruises. But first on the agenda: a bit of high seas crime.



Murder at Sea participants will depart Fort Lauderdale on Oct. 16, along with 24 best-selling murder-mystery writers, aboard Royal Caribbean's new 16-story Allure of the Seas.

High Tide's Murder At Sea offers mystery readers the opportunity to spend a week in the Caribbean with up to 24 New York Times best-selling and Pulitzer Prize-winning authors, including Don Winslow, Robert Ward,

Stephen Hunter, Joanne Fluke, John Hart, Lisa Jackson and Kate White, editor-in- chief of Cosmopolitan magazine and author of the best-selling Bailey Weggins series.

Sailing aboard Royal Caribbean's new 16-story Allure of the Seas, the largest cruise liner in the world, Murder At Sea participants will get a "behind-the-curtain look" experience with their favorite writers, Weber says.

Panel discussions, intimate author lunches and dinners, cocktail parties and author book signings invite readers to get up close and personal with the authors regularly throughout their vacation. And, Weber says, the authors will be as accessible as any other cruiser onboard.

At a typical book signing or author panel, "there's no finding out after that first or second drink how that character really came into play," Weber says. During the cruise, readers will have an opportunity to get comfortable and let the author get to know them -- who they are and why they like their work -- which is something authors don't get to do often, he says.

"You never know what could happen, you could be a character in that guy's next book," Weber says.

Award-winning crime novelist Bill Fitzhugh has never been on a cruise, but he jumped onboard immediately when approached by Weber to join Murder At Sea. He is looking forward to exploring the ports and meeting readers.

"After spending the better part of the year alone in a room working on a book, it's nice to get out and meet people. Especially on a cruise ship in the Caribbean," Fitzhugh says.

In addition to the author/reader activities, an interactive "whodunit" mystery will be produced exclusively for the cruise by Keith and Margo's Murder Mystery USA. The guest who solves the mystery will win a replica Maltese falcon cast from the mold of the original in the 1941 Humphrey Bogart movie, "The Maltese Falcon."

A high seas' bookstore, courtesy of the Mysterious Bookshop in New York, will carry a plethora of titles and rare, signed first-editions. A \$25 bookstore gift card is included in the cruise package price.

High Tide's maiden voyage also will allow readers to give back: A portion of the proceeds from the cruise fees benefit Reader to Reader, a nonprofit that provides books to individuals, community and school libraries, and Indian reservations. Cruisers who donate books while onboard will receive a 20-percent off coupon to use in the bookshop.

Murder At Sea sets sail Oct. 16 from Fort Lauderdale and make ports of call at Phillipsburg, St. Maarten, Nassau, The Bahamas and Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, returning to Fort Lauderdale Oct. 23. Packages start at \$1,349 per person, plus taxes, fees and gratuities. Visit www.hightidecruises.com for information and reservations.

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If mystery and mayhem don't float your boat, check out these other theme cruises:

Lighten up: Set sail with "The Biggest Loser" trainer Bob Harper aboard Celebrity's newest ship, the Eclipse, for "The Biggest Loser" Experience Cruise, Nov. 12 through 19. Seminars taught by "The Biggest Loser" experts will focus on overcoming motivational roadblocks and honing cruisers' nutritional and fitness expertise, according to the cruise website.

Former contestants will join cruisers in various fitness classes offered daily. Unlike most cruises, where gluttony is the rule, a "Biggest Loser"-approved menu will feature healthy, chef-prepared meals. Cooking courses will be offered so participants can recreate their dining experiences at home.

The cruise departs from Miami Nov. 12. Ports of call include San Juan, Puerto Rico, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas and Philipsburg, St. Maarten. Prices start at \$1,295, based on double occupancy, plus port

charges, taxes and gratuities. Visit www.biggestloser.com/cruise.html for information and reservations.



History buffs can visit the Kohunlich Mayan ruins in Belize with experts from The History Channel during a cruise that departs Fort Lauderdale on Dec. 4.

History at sea: Embark on an expedition to the Kohunlich Mayan ruins and visit Chacchoben -- "The Place of Red Corn" -- accompanied by experts in Mayan history on the seven-day History Channel Club cruise, sailing from Fort Lauderdale Dec. 4 through 11. See the Temple of the Large Masks, the Plaza of the Acropolis, the Plaza of the Estelas, Plaza Hundida, and Plaza Merwin at the Kohunlich ruins. At Chacchoben, learn about the temples and other structures recently uncovered in the rain forest, then explore above tree level by climbing the Gran Basamento.

Cruise rates start at \$649 per person, based on double occupancy, plus tax, fees and gratuities. A separate program of 20 seminars, a total of 30 hours, all while at sea, that feature a range of highly regarded history experts is available for \$1,425. Classes do not overlap, so guests may attend all 20. For information and reservations, click History Calls at www.insightcruises.com/top_g/hx01_top.html.



Music fans share a Caribbean cruise with some of their favorite artists during one of Sixthman's rock cruises. Up next: the Rombello cruise aboard the Carnival Inspiration Sept. 29 through Oct. 3.

Rockin' the boat: Join Slightly Stoopid, Michael Franti and Spearhead, G. Love & Special Sauce, Citizen Cope (solo) as well as Brett Dennen, Gaelic Storm and Jukebox the Ghost on Sixthman's Rombello cruise, a floating music festival onboard the Carnival Inspiration Sept. 29 through Oct. 3.

Sailing from Tampa to Cozumel, Rombello offers music lovers unlimited access to concerts, theme nights and artist-hosted activities, in addition to the vessel's array of luxury amenities.

In a press release, Sixthman founder and CEO Andy Levine says of Rombello, "This vacation promises to deliver amazing festival moments and features a collection of dynamic bands heralded as the best live performers today."

Prices start at \$699 per person, based on double occupancy, plus taxes, fees, and gratuities. Visit www.rombello.com for information and reservations.