

Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings Joins Race to Cuba



Miami, August 6 (RHC)-- Add Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings to the list of cruise companies moving quickly to offer Cuba sailings, the newspaper USA Today reported Wednesday.

The Miami-based parent company of Norwegian Cruise Line, Oceania Cruises and Regent Seven Seas has applied for licenses from the U.S. Treasury and the U.S. Department of Commerce to offer trips to the island nation, Norwegian president and CEO Frank Del Rio revealed Tuesday during a conference call to discuss the company's second quarter earnings.

Norwegian also is talking with the Cuban government about obtaining necessary permission to visit, Del Rio said during the call. "I don't know the timeline for any of those three licenses to come through, but I am hopeful that they will happen before the year is out," Del Rio said.

The licenses would be for the limited types of trips allowed under the U.S.'s five-decade-old blockade of Cuba such as educational "people-to-people" trips. General leisure travel from the U.S. to Cuba including traditional cruises is still banned.

Assuming the licenses come through, Del Rio suggested the first ship the company would send to Cuba would come from its Oceania brand, which operates relatively small vessels that would work best with Cuba's limited infrastructure. Oceania's smallest ships carry about 700 people.

Oceania's move comes amid rush of travel companies announcing Cuba cruises. Just last week small-ship line Pearl Seas Cruises announced plans to offer people-to-people cruises to Cuba next spring on a 210-passenger vessel, and tour giant Globus and small-ship line Haimark also unveiled plans in recent weeks for people-to-people Cuba cruises to start in January and February, respectively.

Globus is selling cruise tours out of Miami that include a week on a 960-passenger, Cuba-based ship operated by Celestyal Cruises. Haimark is selling sailings out of Miami on its 210-passenger Saint Laurent.

Cruise giant Carnival Corp.'s new fathom brand also has announced plans to offer people-to-people cruises to the country on its 710-passenger Adonia starting in May, and tour company International Expeditions is starting people-to-people cruises to Cuba in December on a chartered, 48-passenger vessel.

Like Norwegian, Pearl Seas and Haimark are awaiting U.S. and Cuban government approval for its trips. Carnival Corp. has U.S. government approval but still is awaiting Cuban approval. Globus and International Expeditions already have all necessary approvals.

The cruise sellers are entering an increasingly crowded field of companies offering people-to-people tours to Cuba. Just last month, package tour giant Apple Vacations announced it would add such trips this fall, joining a growing number of land-based tour companies offering Cuba tours.

Under U.S. government rules, people-to-people trips to Cuba must focus on educational exchanges between U.S. travelers and Cubans, and they typically feature a full-time schedule of interactions with Cuban musicians, artists, chefs and other locals. They aren't tourist-oriented, and breaking away from the group for self-directed exploring or skipping an activity isn't allowed.

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