

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

THEME VACATIONS COME ASHORE

By Jon Marcus | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Jazz aficionados and country western fans may seem so widely divided in their musical loyalties that they're like ships passing in the night. But at least once this spring, several thousand of them glided into port together.

That clash of cultures happened when the Country Music Cruise docked in Costa Maya, Mexico, just starboard of the Smooth Jazz Cruise — discordant evidence of the sudden popularity and spread of theme vacations like these, built around musical genres, celebrities, and pop culture.

"It was both comedic and ironic," said Michael Lazaroff, who was aboard the jazz cruise as executive director of the company that organized it, Entertainment Cruise Productions. "It was very easy to see who was getting off the country music cruise and who was getting off the jazz cruise. You didn't need a scorecard."

You may need one to keep track of the booming theme-and-celebrity-travel trend, however.

This phenomenon began at sea. There are '80s cruises, NASCAR cruises, and cruises for fans of everything from David Hasselhoff to "Star Trek"

The craze has also now reached land. Rufus Wainright, Melissa Etheridge, and Ben Folds will each lead musical tours of Cuba this summer and fall; Todd Rundgren, a guitar camp in August in Stowe.

Like "The Bachelor"? Finnair and others are offering a Bachelor package to Finland, where the show was partly recorded this season — and a "Bachelor"-inspired Arctic honeymoon.

It's all part of a new strategy to fill ship cabins, hotel rooms, Finnish chalets, and seats on planes in a celebrity-centric era of reality TV and social media, said Makarand Mody, who teaches hospitality marketing at Boston University's School of Marketing Administration.

"Marketers are trying to find things consumers connect with, on TV and on social media and in their daily lives, and translating that into their travel experiences," Mody said. "Celebrities are influencers, and a lot of travel companies are using influencers to reach their target audiences."

Celebrities like Etheridge, who led a theme cruise last year and will take a group of fans to Cuba on June 22 in a four-day, four-night package ashore that costs \$5,799 per couple, not including airfare.

But there's more to it than marketing, the Berklee College of Music-trained artist said.

"You get to know people," said Etheridge, who will perform a concert for her tour group alongside Cuban musicians. "This is not inexpensive to go do this; people are making a very solid financial commitment to go have an experience with me, and I appreciate that and can then find out what these people do and what their lives are about."

Kendra Thornton, who owns a travel company and a public-relations business that specializes in travel, expects much more of this kind of thing.

"There's a lot of interest in reality TV still, and people do want to emulate people they see often, whether it's how they dress or where they travel," Thornton said. "Maybe they've seen the Kardashians go to Iceland or the real housewives to Dubai."

Hotels and resorts are getting in on it, too. There's the long-established Hard Rock chain, of course, which features famous artists' knick-knacks, and San Francisco's Hotel Phoenix, which promotes itself as a favorite of the likes of



Themed cruises are still going strong and ardent "Star Trek" fans can embark on their own voyages.

the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Its parent company last year came east to open 50 Bowery in New York City's Chinatown, whose selling point is art from the Museum of Chinese in America.

"It's not just about theme cruises and trips to Cuba," Mody said.

But cruises with celebrity or pop-culture themes are steaming full speed ahead, with the added opportunity to sell sponsorships — Playboy sponsors a jazz cruise, for example — as the market becomes saturated with more and bigger ships.

"The supply of cabins is enormous," said Mody. "How are you going to fill all those cabins? You have to think a little bit outside of the box."

Or outside the solar system. January's inaugural "Star Trek" cruise with William Shatner aboard the Norwegian Pearl sold out in 12 days, more than 16 months before it sailed; two more "Star Trek" voyages are planned for next year, hosted by George Takei.

It will be all "Star Trek," all the time, for seven days and six nights with devotees joining stars of the franchise including Takei, Michael Dorn, Jonathan Frakes, Gates McFadden, Brent Spiner, and Levar Burton.

"When was the last time you got on a cruise ship with 2,000 people who share the same passion you do?" asked Lazaroff, whose company also runs the "Star Trek" cruises in collaboration with CBS Studios. "It creates an atmosphere unlike what you would have on a regular cruise."

And for better or worse, that's something travelers like in a vacation, Mody said.

"People want to be with people who are like them, who think like them, who have things to talk about with, which to be honest is what travel is," he said. "It's this idea that when we travel we want to be in our bubble. That's human nature."

On a cruise ship, these like-minded passengers become a captive audience. Take it from Hasselhoff.

"It's also a sexy audience," he says in a video to promote his "Official World-Fan-Cruise" around the Mediterranean in November aboard the Costa Favolosa, organized by an

Austrian promoter to capitalize on Hasselhoff's cult following in Europe.

"Not only will we be at sea, which is really sexy, we're going to be rocking and rolling," says the actor and singer, who will perform on board and meet and greet his fans. "So you'll be able to get up close and personal, just hanging out with the Hoff"

Who are those fans, exactly? "I expect fans from all over the world hanging out and talking about why they're fans of David Hasselhoff. And most of it is because they grew up watching me on television," he says with a laugh. "I influenced their childhood."

Like the passengers, the celebrities on these trips are also captive.

"At first some of them are kind of nervous that they're going to be besieged. But once they realize the people are on the ship out of passion and have paid kind of a lot to be on this cruise, then they're more comfortable with that," said Lazaroff.

In fact, themed travel can be educational all around, said Danny Heaps, a former co-manager of Robbie Robertson, Sinéad O'Connor, Soul Asylum, and others. He organized the Cuba trips and the guitar camp with Todd Rundgren.

"It's a hybrid of education and entertainment," Heaps said. "People get a chance to really learn from someone who they have a lot of time with, and the artist gets a lot of inspiration back from the contact he has with them. These people will be exposed to incredible things the entire time they're awake. It's definitely not lying on the beach."

That's what Etheridge likes in a vacation, she said. "It's kind of a family experience," she said. "Every time I go somewhere, especially outside of the States — every time I visit another community, another land — I learn something about myself and I learn how to be more understanding of diversity and understanding that everyone has their own perspective of what life is."

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HERE

SEE FLYING DOGS AT CAPE FESTIVAL
Watch dogs leap from a platform into a 40-foot pool during Cape Cod's annual Paw Palooza Dog Festival, July 15 and 16, at Dennis-Yarmouth High School. During the DockDogs tournament, dogs from across New England



compete for the greatest height, distance, and speed during these flying canine maneuvers. Sign your dog up, too, and do some practice sessions in between competitions. The festival also features world record-holder Mike Piazza and his team of high-flying Frisbee dogs, nearly 70 vendors selling doggy swag, and 30-minute seminars on everything from ticks to dog behavior by experts at the Doggie University tent. Local sheriff and police departments will also showcase the skills of their working patrol dogs with a mock narcotics search, simulated criminal apprehension, and question-and-answer

session. Admission: \$5, 13 and older; free, 12 and under. Net proceeds go to the Animal Rescue League of Boston's Brewster shelter and the MSPCA shelter in Centerville. www.pawpaloozacapecod.com.

CAMBRIDGE'S CELTIC MUSIC FEST
Enjoy 12 hours of top Celtic music during the Summer Boston Celtic Music Fest, July 2, at Club Passim in Cambridge. The event highlights the richness of music, song, and dance from the Irish, Scottish, Cape Breton, and other Celtic traditions. A special Celtic version of Passim's Live Music Brunch features a performance by the traditional Irish music trio Daymark, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Wander outside to Palmer

Street from 2:30 to 5 p.m. for a free concert with Keltic Kids (young musicians from Cape Cod), The Rockport Celtic Duo (award-winning fiddlers and dancers), and Alba's Edge (a group that blends Scottish fiddle music with jazz harmony, funk bass lines, and the rhythms of Latin America). Make sure you buy tickets in advance for the evening performance in Club Passim with Daymark and Scottish/Cape Breton-style fiddler Katie McNally. Evening concert: \$10, students and members, \$18, nonmembers. 617-492-7679, www.passim.org.

THERE

TRY SMALL-GROUP LAND CRUISING
Spend seven nights cruising the famous Inside Passage between Sitka and Juneau, Alaska, with small-ship cruise line Alaskan Dream Cruises, and you can now tack on one of two land itineraries. The cruise line has teamed up with family-owned Alaska operator John Hall's Alaska, which specializes in local experiences and small-group tours, to offer a seven-night Denali Explorer and eight-night Grand Slam Alaska. Both tours travel by deluxe motor coach with no more than 42 guests, and take travelers to the heart of south-central and interior Alaska, where they visit towns such as Talkeetna, Seward, and Valdez. A professional tour guide accompanies guests as they go flightseeing over North America's tallest peak (Denali), visit a dog-mushing kennel, and take a private jet boat tour into Devil's Canyon. Land tours begin and end in Anchorage, and run through Sept. 3. Land tour rates for 2017 start at \$5,270, including meals and accommodations; cruise rates start at \$3,990, including meals, transfers, and shore excursions. 855-747-8100, www.alaskandreamcruises.com/land.

A TOP FAMILY RESORT IN THE BAHAMAS
Connect with Bahamian culture, enjoy authentic local experiences, and stay in fully renovated accommodations at The Coral at Atlantis in Paradise Island, which reopens in July. The family-friendly resort boasts a new lobby lounge where the Soda Fountain serves milkshakes, cocktails, and gelato, day and night. The contemporary rooms include king and double queen



beds to accommodate families, pint-size robes for little ones, and the ability to pre-purchase snacks for the in-room refrigerator. The new pool area offers family-friendly water activities and a swim-up ice pop bar with frozen treats made with Bahamian fruit. The resort also offers a new complimentary Family Trip Planner to help guests schedule activities, from poolside cabana rentals and family swims at Dolphin Cay to babysitting. The resort's new Marina Village, opening this fall, will feature authentic local food, artisans, and musicians. Rates start at \$329 per night, but call for customizable packages. 866-285-2684, www.atlantisbahamas.com.

EVERYWHERE

STAY TOASTY ON YOUR TRAVELS
Toss Hammacher Schlemmer's new heated blanket in your car or carry-on bag. The new Cordless Heated Throw is perfect for chilly airplanes, in cold hotel rooms, if stranded in your car, or even at a late-season Red Sox game. It's made of a machine-washable fleece, a water-repelling shell that also blocks wind, and a lining that helps trap heat. The blanket has a rechargeable battery that slips into a pocket on the blanket and provides up to five hours

of heat at the lowest setting; the handheld controller lets you set the temperature for low, medium, or high. It takes about four hours to fully recharge the battery, which comes with an AC adapter. The blanket with battery pack weighs about 2 pounds. \$189.95. 800-321-1484, www.hammacher.com.

SLEEP TIGHT ON THIS PORTABLE AIRBED
Summer sleepovers don't have to be a pain in the neck and back from uncomfortable guest beds. Take the Intex Queen Dura-Beam Comfort-Plush airbed with you and you'll sleep well wherever you go. The airbed inflates or deflates in less than five minutes using the built-in pump — just turn a knob and hit the on/off button — and the cord stashes in a compartment for easy storage. The mattress measures 22 inches high when inflated, and provides a firm and supportive surface thanks to the horizontal air chambers. The soft, plush flocking also makes for a quiet and comfy night sleep. The bed weighs about 22 pounds and comes with a carry bag. \$59.99 on Amazon.com. www.intexcorp.com.

KARI BODNARCHUK

