

Travel Trade®

Host Spotlight

Princess Execs Unveil Arctic Cruises, Midsummer Crossings in '09

Princess Cruises executives announced that in 2009 the line will introduce nine new Europe itineraries and that the Ruby Princess and Tahitian Princess will make their Europe debuts.

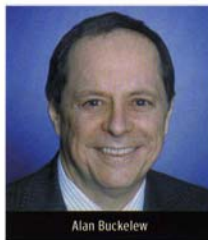
Participating in the monthly Travel Executive Forum sponsored by America's Vacation Center/American Express, Princess president and CEO Alan Buckelew and vice president national account sales Jim Baer said the Tahitian Princess will sail on a series of 18-day mid-summer "Top of the World" itineraries between New York and London that feature Iceland and Greenland. (See story on page 48.)

The line also plans to increase its Holy Land cruises, which Buckelew said were very successful this year.

The itinerary innovations planned for next year reflect the Princess history in worldwide deployment, Buckelew told the agents at the Webinar.

Princess was among the first cruise lines to sail in Asia and Australia and among the first to sail in Europe, he said.

Baer added, "We pioneered exotic cruising," reflecting the 41-year-old line's heritage with P&O and its tradition of exotic trades.



Alan Buckelew



Jim Baer

Princess Cruises was one of UK-based P&O's brands before P&O was acquired by Carnival Corp. several years ago.

Baer said that Princess has 90 itineraries to 290 ports on seven continents.

"We are well-represented globally with ships of from 650-700 passengers to 3,000 passengers, based on the concept of large ship choices and small ship feel."

Buckelew told agents that the Princess product is "smack dab in the middle of the premium segment."

In the Travel Executive Forum, Buckelew, Baer discussed new itineraries, tech programs.

Princess, the third largest cruise line, is famous for the "Love Boat" TV series that was the catalyst to propel the cruise industry into its modern state.

"A key component of our culture," said Buckelew, "is innovation and growth." He added that during his 20-year career at Princess, the line has grown from three ships to over 17 now.

"Looking forward, the new Ruby Princess will be arriving in November and details of the naming will be coming out soon. We are very excited about this new ship — it is the continuation of the long growth of our brand and the next step in our continuing expansion."

The Princess executives were eager to talk about the line's "silent disembarkation" program that makes the process more pleasant, according to Buckelew.

In the new program, passengers are each given an assigned time and place to assemble on the final morning and are personally escorted to the gangway by a member of the ship's staff, eliminating the guesswork as to the actual disembarkation time.

"It is a subtle innovation but one that sends customers home with positive feeling," said Buckelew. The program is being rolled out across the fleet.

Referring to the line's Grand Class ships, Buckelew told the agents that "we have built our ships differently from others. They are designed with more small rooms rather than lots of large rooms."

'Small Ship Feel'

For example, he told the agents, the line's Grand Class ships have three dining rooms similar in size to those on a 1,000 berth ship, rather than a single mega dining room.

"This allows us to offer Anytime Dining or traditional dining — and the ship is much more alive as the result. We are proud of our big ship choice but with a small ship feel that experienced cruisers love. We have made the balcony the standard cabin — which has changed the image and enjoyment of cruising," Buckelew told the agents.

Baer reviewed the line's technology tools for agents that he said are designed to help them close more sales.

The line's travel agent portal, Princess OneSource, will soon have a new reporting function enabling agents to measure their Princess sales.

"We are creating the best agent reporting tool we possible can in beta test now; it should be coming out soon," Baer told the agents.

OneSource gives agents access to product information that helps them sell more Princess cruises.

Indeed, the cruise line leverages technology to help agents increase their productivity. Baer pointed to the online Princess Academy that

enables agents to build expertise on Princess.

"Completing the courses in the Academy makes you more comfortable selling our product and you'll be able to close the sale."

Baer said that the Academy is really a business administration course, with Princess as the case study, that will train agents on ways they can grow their business — how effectively to close sales, how to set up a cruise night — among other lessons.

"We feel that if you take the time to become the expert, your customers should know about your expertise and that it will help you close the sale. That is why we believe it is critical to invest in training," he told the agents at the Webinar.

Promote Expertise

He added that Princess provides agents who complete the highest level of training — Commodores — with customizable marketing pieces promoting their expertise to clients and prospects.

Continuing with his briefing on the line's technology, Baer said the POLAR online booking tool is "incredibly easy to use."

It has a number of selling and management features and builds agency booking reports. POLAR allows the agency to build its own customized reports, as well as extend options up to twice — so they won't lose the booking.

"Our commitment to agents is incredibly strong and will not waiver. We will deliver tools needed to help you sell our product and make you comfortable with it to close the sale," said Baer.

Responding to one agent's question on the changes in the cruise industry in the past few years, Baer said that technology is allowing lines to provide better product and better service to both passengers and travel agents.

He added, "The industry is more professional as well — both vendors and sellers. They are treating it more like a business. I have been in this industry for 30 years. It was an elitist group of people who traveled and wasn't as professional an industry as it is today. Suppliers have engaged with the travel selling community and we have invested in training and tools — and that is critical. All of that has made it a better industry."

Replying to another agent's question, on the future of the travel agent profession, Buckelew said that today's agents have the tools to make their businesses what they want them to be — which was not an option 10 years ago.

The Princess CEO said that as his line, and the cruise industry as whole, grow, they are creating more opportunity for agents who will be more important to the cruise lines because "you have the opportunity to provide service" that complements and enhances the customer's cruise vacation.

That is the side of the profession Princess believes in — not the online sellers, Buckelew said. "You have expertise to communicate what Princess offers and you will be critical to our success in the future."