

NORFOLK LOSES CRUISE LINE AS BALTIMORE STEAMS AHEAD

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Bon voyage.

Royal Caribbean International's last roundtrip cruise from the city left Saturday, ending the line's run in Norfolk.

The cruise ship Enchantment of the Seas is moving to Baltimore, where it will be homeported beginning Friday, said Harrison Liu, a spokesman for Miami-based Royal Caribbean, which has sailed from Norfolk since 2007.

"It's not a reflection on Norfolk," Liu said. "It's about us being able to deploy a ship year-round out of Baltimore. We offer cruises where the demand is, and we believe that Baltimore offers the year-round demand that we're looking for."

In the spring of 2007, Norfolk opened its \$36 million Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center next to Nauticus, with hopes of capturing a share of the lucrative U.S. cruise market.

Recently, however, the city's cruise venture has been dwarfed by Baltimore's.

Since the 2006 opening of its \$13 million cruise terminal, built on the site of a former paper warehouse off Interstate 95, its business has grown dramatically, said Richard Scher, a spokesman for the Maryland Port Administration.

This year it expects 91 homeported cruises - starting and ending in Baltimore - serving about 190,000 passengers.

Next year, it's anticipating 113 such cruises, with up to 240,000 passengers, Scher said.

Norfolk expects 11 homeported cruises this year - starting and ending in Norfolk, said Stephen Kirkland, the city's cruise manager. Counting cruises that just stop in Norfolk, the city will see about 60,000 passengers.

Next year, he said, Norfolk has so far scheduled six homeport cruises and expects to see about 40,000 passengers on those and from other cruise stopovers.

While Norfolk's passenger count includes visits from ships making stops in the city, Baltimore's restricts its count to only those passengers on cruises that start and end there.

"Of course I'm concerned about the numbers - that a facility that started off with excellent numbers, that years later the numbers are dwindling," Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim said.

He cited a number of possible factors - the state of the economy, conditions within the cruise industry, different business models in Baltimore and Norfolk, and Baltimore's advantages as a "drive market" compared with Norfolk.

Scher pointed out that Baltimore's cruise terminal is a 10-minute drive from Baltimore's airport, about 90 minutes from major airports in Washington, and about two hours from Philadelphia's airport.

And in addition to being positioned in one of the largest population markets in the nation, Baltimore is in Maryland - the state with the highest median household income in the United States, Scher said.

Fraim, however, said he was pleased with the way the Half Moone facility has performed, not only as a cruise terminal, but as a venue for special events. His daughter's wedding reception was held there last year, he said.

Scher said that Baltimore's cruise terminal also is available for special occasions.

Norfolk cruise officials are talking with three other cruise lines that might sail from the city, Kirkland said.

There is no problem filling up cruise ships departing from Norfolk, he said. It's just that they don't always fill up fast enough, leading cruise lines to cut prices closer to departure dates, lowering their per-passenger yield, he explained.

"This is absolutely, 100 percent, a marathon and not a sprint," Kirkland said. "Long-term, we are very well-positioned for growth."

Was also in The Washington Examiner, WAVY Channel 10, Norfolk, VA., WBAL AM Radio, and The Miami Herald.