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A good problem: Baltimore's cruise terminal at capacity

by Anna Isaacs June 15th, 2010

When Miami-based Royal Caribbean's Enchantment of the Seas sails from Baltimore on Friday, it will mark the arrival of the second year-round cruise ship to call there — and the immense growth the cruise terminal has seen since its 2006 inception. Maryland Port Administration spokesman Richard Scher said in 2008, about 27 cruises originated in Baltimore. In 2009, that number jumped to 81, with 10 more added this year and a record 113 cruises slated for next year.

"We've experienced a tremendous amount of growth with our cruise business here," he said.

That's thanks to a large population market and a strategic location, Scher said.

"The location is about as good as it gets — right off of Interstate 95, which gives us a really unique access point to reach the terminal," he said. "Cruise lines are taking notice of that — they're seeing where the people are."

Miami-based Carnival Cruises was the sole line to have a ship leave from Baltimore year-round until Royal Caribbean moved its Enchantment of the Seas cruise from Norfolk, Va., where it had been sailing from since 2007. The last Norfolk cruise departed Saturday.

Before that, Royal Caribbean had a seasonal cruise coming through, while Celebrity Cruises has a seasonal cruise that comes in the fall and sails through the winter.

Carnival spokesman Vance Gulliksen echoed Scher's observation.

"When you deploy ships near population bases, it makes cruising more accessible for a lot more people," he said. "The idea is to make cruising as easy to get to as possible."

While Gulliksen said Carnival has no plans to expand its cruise options in Baltimore any time soon, he said Carnival has begun with one ship at a port in the past before adding additional and larger ships.

Travel agents said they are feeling the demand as well, now that there are two year-round cruises calling at Baltimore. Carol Pennington, president of Inner Harbor Travel Inc. in Baltimore, said they're already booking groups for cruises into next year because of the new options.

Annette Nero Stellhorn, owner of Accent on Travel in Baltimore, said it's the down economy that's pushing vacationers to the sea instead of the air.

"Because of the economy, there's a segment of the population that would have previously traveled abroad here choosing to cruise from Baltimore because it's less expensive," she said, adding that being able to drive to the port is a money-saving plus for travelers.

Now, though, the MPA must consider how to make more room: Scher said the Port of Baltimore is at capacity with 113 cruises coming through.

Besides expanding the current terminal, one option could be actually constructing a second cruise terminal at the port.

"It's a great problem to have," he said, but "no hard decision has been made on officially which direction we're going to go."

This article also ran in Dolan Media.