Cruise Lines: An Ocean of Employment Opportunity

Yanni D Afthinos, University of Athens

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Cruise lines represent a rapidly growing section of the business world with a strong drive for survival. They evolved from a primary means of trans-ocean transportation to become a luxury vacation alternative and a vital part of the travel and hospitality industry. In fact, cruise lines were once faced with extinction due to the popularity of their modern rival, the airplane.

Vessels designed to provide basic living accommodations for extended transportation are now luxury resort hotels afloat. The new cruise ships are large and practically self-sustained small islands unto themselves. Passengers are now called guests and are provided with a number of excellent entertainment, recreation, dining and living accommodations. Some of the facilities aboard the modern cruise ships include: restaurants, bars, performing arts halls, casinos, movie theaters, shopping centers, swimming pools, gymnasiums, play rooms, courts for recreational sports and more.

A favored marketing approach in this business is the segmenting of guests into groups based on their interests. Cruise experiences (programs) are then tailored to accommodate the interests of various groups. The resulting product is known as a "Theme Cruise." For example, Norwegian Cruise Lines (NCL) is targeting sports fans by offering cruises where sports personalities are on board to rub elbows with the guests. The Disney company’s "Big Red Boat" targets families by having their cartoon characters aboard. Other cruise lines attract guests by offering cruise experiences that blend suitable entertainment, recreation programming and itinerary.

A typical daily schedule of cruise activities is impressive in terms of quantity and variety. Cruise lines offer activities and operate facilities up to 16 hours a day. Programs range from morning exercise sessions, midday poolside entertainment, and afternoon golf practice, to shows and disco dancing at night. The challenge in this type of entertainment/recreation programming is the satisfaction of all guests whether they are young, old, male, female, active or passive.

Career Opportunities

By nature, cruise ship positions have a high turnover rate. A typical employment contract extends four to six months. Most of the ship staff are not professionally trained in recreation. Experience is gained on the vessels since cruise lines usually do
not offer in-service training. The demanding work conditions create an environment where staff knowledgeable of recreation programming are always in demand. Position opportunities for full or part time employment at cruise lines range from the corporate level (in the entertainment department and as recreation consultants) to recreation positions aboard the ships (cruise and deputy cruise directors, specialist/program supervisors, and activity leaders/entertainment staff). Following are some examples of career paths in the industry.

**Corporate Director of Entertainment**

This is a demanding full-time position requiring individuals with advanced knowledge in recreation and entertainment as well as the cruise industry. The entertainment director is responsible for the entire leisure and entertainment program of all company vessels. Among his/her duties are the recruitment of the entertainment staff and entertainers; the conceptualization, planning, organizing and direction of the fleet’s leisure/entertainment programs; and the maintenance of these services to the highest quality. His/her primary goal is to seek the ultimate blend of leisure activities so guests are pleased with their cruising experience and may become repeat customers. An undergraduate or post graduate degree is usually required and experience on a ship as a cruise director is highly preferable.

**Recreation Consultant**

This is usually a limited-time position for experts in leisure and recreation services as well as the travel industry. Consultants are hired to assist a cruise line in solving specific problems. Consultants may redesign the company’s leisure services to meet societal trends or provide programming ideas to maximize limited deck space. A graduate degree is usually required along with practical experience in the field.

**Cruise and Deputy Cruise Director**

As a manager, the cruise director is responsible for the entire leisure, recreation and entertainment program afloat. The deputy cruise director programs the staff and entertainment work shifts and administers equipment inventories. Competency in programming and personnel management is very important for both positions.

From the performing standpoint, these are two demanding positions that require a well-rounded personality with exceptional oral communication abilities. These employees should be fairly accomplished in simple socialization, public speaking, lecturing and stand-up comedy. Ability to speak a foreign language is always a plus. Vacancies in the cruise directors’ positions are usually filled by candidates working as deputies with extended experience.

**Social Hostess**

Traditionally, this position is occupied by a female member of the entertainment staff. She is the most visible lady on the ship with public relations as her primary duty. She reports directly to the cruise or deputy cruise director and is responsible for all guest relations and social events.

This position requires a social person with an elegant appearance and likable personality. She should be widely educated so she can participate in a wide range of conversational topics. She should have a clear and concise voice, experience in addressing the public and can speak foreign languages. Her primary duty is to promote a warm atmosphere and make the guests feel welcome and comfortable. Some of her duties include:

- Hosting ship parties and cocktail gatherings, Assisting in hosting, VIP events, Assisting in the organization of special events,
conducting tours of the ship, overseeing the ship's library, and eating with guests.

**Entertainment Staff**

**Member/Fitness-Sport Leader**

These are entry level positions. The recreational activity leaders, including the sport/fitness instructors, are considered part of the entertainment staff. Therefore, teamwork, oral communication and socialization skills are very important. The goal of the entertainment staff is to make sure the ship guests enjoy their cruise experience as much as possible. This general position carries wide responsibilities ranging from welcoming guests to socializing, participating in all departmental functions, decorating rooms, setting audio/visual equipment, leading social events, helping to stage cabaret and production shows, and running recreational games and activities.

The sports/instruction, almost always a certified fitness trainer, organizes and carries out relaxation, stretching, aerobic, weight training, deck jogging/walking events and recreational sports, among other related activities. Furthermore, this position supervises all recreational sport and fitness facilities on the ship.

**General Employment Information**

An applicant for any of these positions should have either a valid U.S. passport or C/D entry visa. After employment has been secured, a consular form must be completed for the purpose of signing the "Ship's Articles," which bind the staff to Maritime Law during their employment.

All travel arrangements necessary to join the ship will be provided at the designated port and necessary vaccination will be available on board the ship. Communication by mail is available through the company.

Salaries are paid on board and employees are responsible to their native countries in all taxation matters. Salaries may not be competitive to what professionals in other recreation positions might expect; although, there are fringe benefits such as meeting people and visiting exciting vacation destinations. Uniforms, room accommodations and meals are free of charge. In addition, purchases aboard are discounted 20 - 50 percent. Employees are entitled to free medical care and attention aboard the ship. However, employees are liable for any injury requiring repatriation or hospitalization ashore.

Room space available on the ship is limited and therefore, staff share cabins and use limited personal storage space. A full cabin service is provided and staff have the option to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner from the various guest buffets or in the staff dining room.

The work schedule on a ship is demanding. Days run from 6:00 a.m. to after midnight, seven days a week. However, daily breaks and one day off per week are part of the schedule.

Entertainment department staff are evaluated on: grooming, punctuality, motivation, popularity among colleagues, creative initiative, accepting responsibility, sociability with guests, and microphone technique.
Practical Field Information

Following are some practical tips for those without any previous ship experience:

All new program ideas should be presented to the ship's entertainment staff as well as the different decision makers in the company for feedback. Different departments in the company will consider a new idea from their own point of view. For example, the marketing department will consider if any new activity is contradictory to the company's projected image and marketing goals. The entertainment department will consider the budget requirements and the fit of any new activity within the overall entertainment program. The legal staff members will consider any potential risk factors related to the new activity or the equipment involved. The technical department and the staff captain aboard the ship will consider the activity in relation to the convenience of the non-participating guests. Finally, the deputy and cruise directors will consider the fit of the activity as part of the vessel's overall entertainment program, as well as the staff, facility and scheduling requirements.

A "turnkey" approach to all new recreational activities aboard is highly preferable. Any new equipment and supportive material should be purchased, delivered, assembled, set-up and demonstrated to staff ready to use. Keep in mind that most of the activity leaders aboard are not educated recreation or physical education professionals. Therefore, the activities should not require professional training, but the other staff should be fully prepared to lead them.

Ship ceilings are low, especially on the older vessels. This in turn, restricts a number of indoor hand raising or jumping activities. The same applies to the installation of any new workout equipment in the vessel's gym.

In a "lawsuit society" cruise companies are very reluctant to add new activities or equipment that increase accident risk. Keep in mind that a release form does not cover the company in court. It only means that the potential risks of the activities were known and that the participants were informed.

Usually, every piece of equipment on board a vessel, permanent or not, must be fire resistant. If it is for outdoor use, the equipment must be able to withstand weather and sea salt corrosion.

For scheduling recreational activities ashore, staff should consider local laws, restrictions, regulations, and customs. For example, a sporting afternoon at the beach may not include a picnic with food from the ship because of food restrictions in different countries. In addition, special permission is needed to run any event in foreign public places.

Consider the wind as a determining factor when scheduling deck activities. When the ship is cruising against the wind, often times it is impossible to stage an activity on open decks. In a lateral wind, the event should take place on the opposite side of the ship.

Any activity resulting in sea pollution should not be scheduled. For example, driving golf balls into the sea should be avoided, unless special water-soluble balls are used.

A cruise's busiest days are those full days at sea from dusk to dawn. Most ships do not have a designated jogging track. Therefore, walking and jogging activities on open decks should be scheduled early in the morning or late in the afternoon so as to avoid high guest traffic.

The program of activities changes with the season and follows guest demographics. During the summer, there is a

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heavier load of families and young guests compared to winter, when most guests are older. Also, an alternative indoor program should be available when the ports of call are in tropical climate zones where it rains frequently.

Some recreation equipment should be altered to fit the existing on-board facilities. For example, pool volleyball nets should be shorter and safety pads should be used for play activities on open decks. The deck walls have hand rails and/or other protruding equipment that may become a safety hazard. The majority of the equipment modifications and maintenance can be made aboard the ship by professional carpenters and tailors.

The water in the vessel's swimming pool is not heated. Therefore, any participatory pool recreation activity should be scheduled before noon or after lunch (allow at least two hours) when the water will be warmed by the sun.

If you are interested in exploring any employment opportunities and would like more information, contact NRPA for a list of cruise lines who are members of the Cruise Lines International Association.

NRPA
2775 S. Quincy St.
Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22206