

Cruise line executives talk Caribbean, Cuba

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The Caribbean will remain a key market for the cruise industry, executives said Wednesday, but islands must find fresh ways to stand out and compete as new destinations emerge.

Top leaders of Carnival Cruise Line, MSC Cruises USA, Royal Caribbean International and Norwegian Cruise Line discussed the future of the Caribbean and how the region is evolving during a panel talk at the Cruise Shipping Miami conference in Miami Beach.

Michael Bayley, president and CEO of Miami-based Royal Caribbean International, said the region “was, is and will always be the most important destination, certainly for the North American market.” But he acknowledged that industry growth is concentrated in other regions, including Asia.

“It’s a highly competitive world and the Caribbean has to always reinvent itself and it has to think about not only today and tomorrow, but what’s going to happen in the future,” Bayley said. “The question is, Does the Caribbean have the right brand relevance, not only as a geographic region but for each product within the region?”

Cruise lines could do more to promote ports of call, especially as new ships stir up interest, Norwegian Cruise Line president and chief operating officer Andy Stuart said.

“Together we can do a better job in talking about the excitement of the destination,” Stuart said. “You can help us. We will do it — and we’ll spend a lot of money doing it — if you give us the ammunition.”

Some of the cruise operators described their own efforts to create fresh reasons for passengers to visit familiar destinations. Doral-based Carnival Corp. is developing an \$85 million port facility in the Dominican Republic, Amber Cove, that will open to ships in October.

And Miami-based Norwegian is developing Harvest Caye in Belize, which will be open for ship visits in early 2016. Currently, passengers have to take smaller vessels called tenders from ships anchored offshore when visiting Belize.

“We looked at the opportunity to develop a new arrivals experience in Belize,” Stuart said. “It’s going to be a fantastic destination, but it’s not instead of Belize. It’s a way to experience Belize.”

Rick Sasso, president of MSC Cruises USA, pointed out the benefit of such projects to a crowd that included representatives from Caribbean destinations.

“You’re not going to have a cruise line do a \$70 million project in one port and then move all their ships to China,” he said. “These kind of investments are good for everybody.”

None of the executives were ready to discuss what kind of investments would be required to operate in Cuba; a question from moderator Anne Kalosh about what it would take for cruise lines to start traveling to the island got minimal feedback.

But all four were enthusiastic about the potential for Cuba to create new demand in the Caribbean once the U.S. embargo is lifted.

Christine Duffy, president of Carnival Cruise Line, said she believes itineraries that include stops in Cuba could help attract first-time cruisers.

“I think whenever we have new and exciting innovations, whether it’s new ships or new destinations, it really helps us drive demand, particularly to those who are new to cruise,” she said.

Sasso said he expects that Americans will have significant interest in traveling to a country that has been off limits — or complicated and expensive to visit — for so many decades.

“They’re going to want to go, and they’re going to have access to do that on a ship more comfortably, more safely, more conveniently, more cost effectively than any other way,” he said. “They’re going to come on the first cruise for Cuba. Then we’re going to sell then a cruise to anywhere else that we go.”

Later Wednesday, health professionals jumped into a topic less appealing than Caribbean beaches: public health issues. Touching on the threat of Ebola and other concerns but focusing on norovirus, the panel discussed steps that have already been taken and a to-do list for staying ahead of potential outbreaks.

Donnie Brown, who oversees environmental and health issues for the Cruise Lines International Association, said the association developed a policy with specific measures aimed at mitigating Ebola, came up with an enhanced questionnaire for passengers and crew and provided a sample protocol for cruise lines as the Ebola virus spread last year.

The trade group also formed a gastrointestinal illness task force within the last year so cruise lines can share best practices.

Mel Skipp, manager of health policy at Carnival Corp., said his company is exploring several possibilities to prevent the spread of contagious illness, including designing rooms to minimize contact; installing more hands-free equipment; using anti-viral surfaces and finding strategic places to put more hand-washing stations.

The head of the Vessel Sanitation Program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Capt. Jaret T. Ames, recommended an “aggressive” approach during the discussion.

Said Ames: “They should police those buffets and if you’re not going to wash your hands, you’re not going to eat.”

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