

VICTORY CRUISE LINES REVITALIZES EAST COAST CRUISING

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PHOTOS: VICTORY CRUISE LINE

As a name, Victory Cruise Lines couldn't have been branded better. Everything about the fledgling Miami-based company has been a victory of sorts, from its rapid development of authentic itineraries in the Great Lakes, Canada and New England and Cuba, to its acquisition of Haimark's former SAINT LAURENT – a ship purpose-built for these waters that was renovated, laid-up and ready to start sailing again.

At the helm is Bruce Nierenberg, Victory's President and CEO. Nierenberg is passionate about both cruising and Cuba. With a background that includes stints in high-level positions at the Delta Queen Steamboat Company, Costa Cruises, Norwegian Cruise Line and Premier Cruises, Nierenberg put his own plans for a ferry service linking Cuba and the United States on hold to concentrate on providing cruises there with Victory Cruise Lines and the VICTORY I.

Together with partners Cruise Management International (deck and engine support) and CMI Leisure (hotel operations), the formation of Victory Cruise Lines was announced in June of 2016. The company's first sailing began just one month later, on July 8, 2016.

According to Nierenberg, everything came together for Victory Cruise Lines at precisely the right time.

What were some of the driving factors in bringing Victory Cruise Lines to fruition?

It's good to be great at what you do,

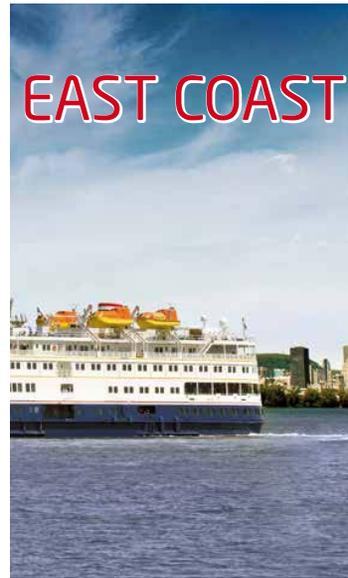
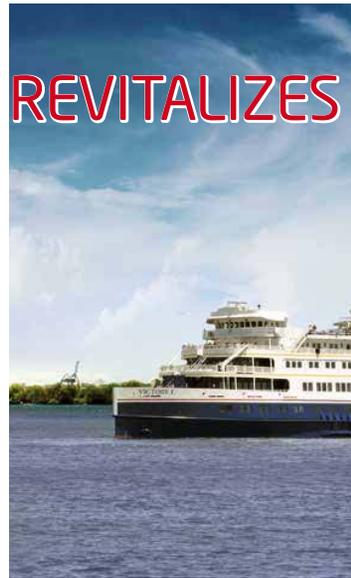
but sometimes it doesn't hurt to be a little lucky. The Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence are underserved. The Caribbean has been more of a mass-market product, and the rates down there have never really supported a high per diem. When the basic theme of a port is to go shopping, then there's something missing with that port. But now pops up Cuba, and Cuba is such a huge massively dynamic potential [destination.]

The ageing of the population is a factor, too. The "baby boomers" are in their peak earning years, they can go and come as they please, and they've all taken their first cruise on the mass-market vessels. Now they're looking for something a little more in-depth, based on their personal interests. So companies like us and Pearl Seas and Ponant are benefitting: the more we can do things that pique the interest of these consumers, the better off we'll be.

Americans are staying closer to home and they're not going to places like Europe they'd normally go to because of the incidents that have been happening. It's started to affect some of the big cruise lines. It even affects the affluent market we cater to even more: they have the time and the resources to travel anywhere, and they have no interest in going to places where they feel unsafe.

This market is going to drive this kind of traffic for [another] good 15 to 20 years.

How important was it to have the



"The baby boomers are looking for something more in-depth"

SAINT LAURENT (now VICTORY I) as Victory's first ship?

We have the ship – and that's a critical issue. Small-ships are really in right now. These small-ship exploration operations are doing very well; companies are even building brand-new ships that hold between 200 and 300 people.

The ship [SAINT LAURENT] was completely rebuilt when Haimark took her over. And then ran her only for a few months before she was taken out of service. And then instead of running in the fall, she's had very little use. It's like

a brand-new ship inside. So that made it very easy and fast to go ahead and get the ship back in service. We've got a lot of the crew members who were working on the vessel before, so there's that familiarity.

This particular ship was actually built for this type of operation. It was built to look like it was from the 1890's and cruising the coasts of Canada and the U.S. It was designed to go into small towns and harbours. It was designed to look a certain way; it's definitely not Scandinavian décor inside. So the passengers, being a mature market, also like that "classic" feel.

How is Victory trying to differentiate itself from other small-ship operators on the East Coast?

We're not going to turn it into a wild and crazy cruise. But we are going to

make it a little more interesting and a little more exciting than guests might expect.

Everyone in this industry has some sort of afternoon tea service, and I looked at it and thought, 'What can we do to jazz it up?' So on sea days, we have a tea service from a different part of the world, where we import teas and foods from that part of the world and the waiters put on appropriate costumes.

We've got a Viennese theme on one of the voyages that people really seem to enjoy, with authentic pastries and the whole bit. So with our English Tea service themed after the Dorchester, we bring in the clotted cream and the proper English tea, and the period Beefeater costumes. We do a Darjeeling Tea with waiters dressed like Maharajas, too, and we're going to expand it as we can.

Next cruise, we're having a Canadian-themed barbecue up on deck. On the Fall Foliage [sailing], we're going to have a full lobster bake up on deck. I get more enjoyment of developing something that highlights the destination rather than just building more ships.

Although you offer some spectacular itineraries throughout the Great Lakes and the eastern seaboard of Canada and the United States, your itineraries in Cuba are slated to start this fall.

Americans specifically want to go to an authentic, safe place, and Cuba is very much that.

We're going to try a new twist in entertainment and food on our Cuban

itineraries: we have the opportunity to pick up entertainers in each town and to have them come onboard and perform for us. That's the authentic Cuba – if we can have a salsa group from Cienfuegos come onboard for one night, that's the real deal. We're also going to invite local chefs come onboard and prepare something for us; a specialty of theirs from their own town. Why go to Cuba and not bring Cuba to the ship? It would be crazy to just make it another Caribbean cruise.

How supportive have the Cuban authorities been of your longer, more in-depth (some might even say "authentic") itineraries?

The attitude of the Cubans is absolutely right-on. I feel for the Cuban government because in some cases they've had a hard time keeping up with demand for business proposals and whatnot, but they're taking it one step at a time, and they're doing a great job. It just takes time [compared to business transactions in the United States].

We've been working with the Cuban government, and I've gotten to know the people down there really well. They're great to work with. They want to bring more Americans into the country, and they want to make sure that the cruises fit their culture. They don't want to turn it into a giant McDonald's; they want to make sure that visiting Cuba isn't just an extension of visiting the United States.

Cuba will be, by far, the most interesting and creative opportunity I've ever had. ■

Compass Lounge

Sea Scope Tavern



Cabin

Cliff Rock bar & grill

