

YOUR DREAM CRUISE MAY BE JUST A SHORT DRIVE AWAY

The first quarter of the year typically tends to produce the greatest number of bookings for all types of travel. Though the past two years have been anything but typical, 2004 looks as though things are starting to return to more normal trends. This has been especially evident in the cruise industry where we are beginning to see pricing return to “pre-9-11” levels and availability drying up further in advance of sailing, even though there are a record number of ships plying the waters of the world.

According to the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), only 15% of the US population has ever taken a cruise vacation. With that in mind, the cruise lines have gone to great lengths to bring their ships closer to you in order to try and tempt you aboard. It seems to be working in that eight million North Americans departed on cruise vacations last year, a 6.9% increase over 2002. We in the Charlotte area have no less than nine cruise departure ports within a 12-hour drive of home. Let’s take a look at where you can depart from and where you can cruise to within an easy drive:

(1) Charleston, SC – is one of the most requested departure ports, but unfortunately offers only seasonal service at prices that are normally higher than most other departure ports. Current sailings from Charleston call at Western Caribbean, Mexican and Bahamian ports.

(2) Baltimore, MD – is relatively new to the cruise industry and features summer departures to the Caribbean, Mexico and Bermuda.

(3) Norfolk, VA – has become a year-round departure port just recently with departures to the Caribbean and Mexico and a few summer departures to Bermuda.

(4) Jacksonville, FL – is the most recent entrant into the cruise business and will become a year-round departure port beginning this summer. Jacksonville offers winter departures to the Caribbean and Mexico and will feature year-round sailings to the Bahamas.

(5) Port Canaveral, FL – is one of the fastest growing departure ports in Florida. Sailings to the islands of the Eastern and Western Caribbean, Mexico and the Bahamas operate year-round.

(6) Ft. Lauderdale, FL – is one of the busiest cruise ports in the world. Operating year-round, passengers departing Ft. Lauderdale sail to the Caribbean, Panama Canal, South America, Mexico and Europe. Ft. Lauderdale is often the departure port for World Cruise itineraries.

(7) Miami, FL – is the most thought of cruise port in this area and is one of the most impressive to sail from. Year round departures to the Caribbean and Bahamas begin in Miami as well as fall/winter sailings to the Panama Canal.

(8) Tampa, FL – is gaining in popularity due to its close proximity. Tampa is a major gateway to the islands of the Western Caribbean, Mexico and Central America.

(9) New Orleans, LA – is often overlooked by cruise passengers in our area, but is a very viable option. Cruises from the Big Easy call at ports in the Western Caribbean, Mexico and Central America.

So, if you've ever looked at I-77 on a weekend and wondered where all the traffic was coming from or going to, there's a high probability that a good number of those cars contain cruise passengers.

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