

TOP PRODUCERS LAND IN THE LAP OF LUXURY

Dream Incentives

By Karen Brost

“Pull out all the stops.” Those are five words every incentive travel planner loves to hear. But what kind of trip does it really take to motivate top achievers who have already been wined and dined in some of the world’s finest destinations? We asked a few incentive travel professionals that very question, and their answers will intrigue you. But we have to warn you. They’re bound to make you a bit envious, as well.

O(h), What a Yacht!

You may not have been born a Greek shipping heir or heiress, but that doesn’t mean you can’t live like one, at least for a few days. While luxury cruises have long been a staple in the incentive industry, there’s a new option available that definitely raises the bar.

The Christina O., the storied yacht that served as the floating home of shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis for more than 20 years, is now available for private charters. The yacht was purchased by a group of Irish investors who have spent \$50 million to restore it to its former glory. That’s a pretty impressive sum when you consider that the yacht only has 18 staterooms and can accommodate a maximum of 36 guests. But those 36

lucky guests are also carefully tended to by 34 crew members.

“It’s amazing,” says Shari Wallack, president of Buy The Sea, a Plantation, FL-based company that specializes in matching incentive travel buyers with the ideal cruises for their needs. “It’s a gorgeous yacht. There is only one of these in the world. It’s going to be in the Caribbean from November through March, and then it goes over to the Mediterranean from the end of April through October.”

The cost to charter the Christina O. in the Caribbean starts at \$2,000 per person, per day, plus gratuities. According to Wallack, the most likely itinerary would be St. Martin to St. Barths to Virgin Gorda and back to St. Martin.

“The idea is to enjoy the day and early evening in the port of call and then dine while the yacht is sitting in port, and

The cost to charter the famous and luxurious Christina O. starts at \$2,000 per person, per day.

Photo credit: Bob Armon

only sail for a few hours late in the evening to the next port of call," Wallack says. She also indicated that charter rates for the Mediterranean are significantly higher than those for the Caribbean.

So what do you get for that price? The

dance floor. Oh, and did we mention the yacht has its own helipad?

Smooth Sailing

If the Christina O. is beyond your reach (or budget), there are several other

smallest is SeaDream. They have 55 cabins. It's a tiny ship, it can get into any port, and it caters to a very elite crowd."

Cruises can be an important part of the mix for incentive planners who are faced with the challenge of topping last year's dream trip year after year. "Most companies don't do a cruise every year," Wallack says. "One year they may do a SeaDream Yacht Charter. The next year they rent a castle in Scotland. The year after that, they have a series of villas in Tuscany. The following year they do SeaDream again, but instead of doing it in the western Mediterranean, they do it in the Greek Isles."

Wallack is seeing more and more clients choose cruises for their European trips. "Because the Euro is so out of whack, a lot of clients are doing the Med on a ship because they can buy the ship in U.S. dollars. There's no guesswork and no exchange rate."

The "Wow" Factor

"We're always looking for at least four 'wows' on every program," says Kevin Devanney, president of Incentive Travel Solutions in Charlotte, NC. "We look for things that are very unique to the destination." It sounds like he succeeded with an incentive program he recently planned for an insurance company headquartered in the northeast.

The incentive was a six-day trip to Denmark for independent insurance agents and their guests. One highlight was a private event at a castle in Copenhagen. "Kronborg Castle is a big part of the Danish heritage," Devanney explains. "We rented out Kronborg for the evening, and took the group up to the gates by horse and buggy. The biggest part of the evening was a private performance of Hamlet inside of Kronborg where the play is actually set. The pro

Incentive Travel Solutions in Charlotte, NC, utilized Kronborg Castle in Copenhagen, the setting for Hamlet, as a component of an incentive program.

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Buy The Sea
Plantation, FL

answer is unimaginable luxury and a rare chance to step back into history. Each of the yacht's spacious staterooms is named after one of the Greek islands and features fine Venetian linens, mirrored walk-in closets, picture windows and surround sound stereo systems. Guests enjoy two and three Michelin Star cuisine and fine wines and champagnes. They can also take advantage of world-class spa treatments, hairdressing services, water sports and laundry services at no additional charge.

And what about the history? In addition to following in the footsteps of the legendary Onassis, guests on the Christina O. will be able to relax in the Paris Bar where John F. Kennedy first met Sir Winston Churchill in 1957. Then there's the Lapis Lounge with its stunning lapis lazuli fireplace and walls lined with works of art by Renoir, Le Corbusier and De Chirico. There's one couple, you may have even heard of them — Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor — who once spent some quality time in this very room.

And as if those amenities weren't enough, the floor of the yacht's bronze-bordered swimming pool features a hand-crafted replica of an exquisite mosaic from the Palace of Knossos in Crete. At the push of a button, the bottom of the pool rises above the water to become a

luxury cruise options. "SeaDream, Silversea, Seabourn, Crystal and Radisson are the ones that are the most inclusive with the most luxurious accommodations," Wallack explains. "The ultimate is to charter them, so you can customize the experience completely. When you want to throw major parties, bring on your own entertainment, customize the itinerary, fly the company flag and all of that, you need to charter.

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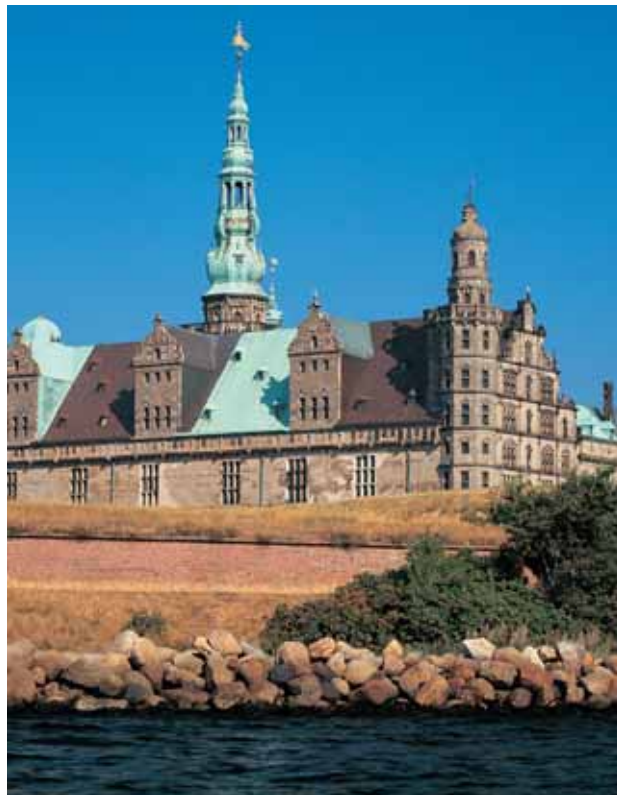


Photo credit: VisitDenmark

gram was in the Great Hall which is a gigantic room with what must be 10x10-foot fireplaces on both ends of the hall. It was only lit by candlelight and the performers were in full costume. It was spectacular.”

Devanney’s Kronborg event also included a private tour of the castle, a cocktail reception, and dinner in the castle’s original wine cellar. Then it was time to move on to the next “wow.”

“We were going to Stockholm, and we really needed something unique,” he says. “Over the years, we’ve created a signature lunch that takes advantage of the destination we’re in. We took

over a spectacular yacht and cruised out to the archipelago, which is a group of islands. We had music on board and then we got off and had lunch on one of the uninhabited islands. It was a high-end lunch with white table cloths and china in a little country setting.”

The prior year the group had traveled to Banff, Canada where Devanney staged another signature lunch. “We took the group from the Banff Springs Hotel to a helicopter port and flew them over the Canadian Rockies,” he says. “We landed in a valley at this horse ranch. Then they boarded their horses and we took them to the top of the mountain where there was this tented, five-star, four-course lunch waiting for them with spectacular views.”

Another component of Incentive Travel Solution’s Denmark program was an event in a historic building called the Round Tower. “It’s a 14th century tower that the king built to look at the stars,” Devanney says. “We took the group up to the top for champagne cocktails. They did what’s



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Charlotte, NC

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called a sabre d’or. That’s where they take a giant saber and they chop off the top of a champagne bottle. There are only three restaurants in all of Denmark that are qualified to do that. It was followed by dinner in an old monastery in Copenhagen called Sankt Gertrudes Kloster. It’s all made of stone and it’s underground. It’s a fantastic wine-cellar style restaurant.”

“We really have to outdo ourselves each year,” Devanney says. “On this trip we also had a cocktail reception in an ice bar in Copenhagen. The chairs, the bar, the glasses, everything is made of ice. They had to put parkas on. It was below zero inside

the bar. It’s one of the things they talk about the most, and it was just an hour-long cocktail reception.”

Creativity Counts

“It’s not always the budget that plays

an important role,” Devanney adds. “For a client a few years back in Paris, we took them on a high speed train down to Giverny where Monet painted and we had a nice picnic lunch down in the rose garden. That’s an example where the budget doesn’t have to be stretched.”

Exclusivity is a key ingredient of many dream incentives. Some companies prefer to look for a resort they can buy out for their group, so they won’t have to share the facility with other guests. “More and more companies are going that route,” explains Kenderly Haskins, national director of sales for Auberge Resorts in Mill Valley, CA. “It does give them a sense of exclusivity, and their people feel like ‘Wow, you bought out the place for us?’”

Haskins has a client in the financial services industry who is buying out Auberge’s Esperanza resort for a sales incentive program this month. Esperanza is a 56-room ultra-luxurious oceanfront resort located a few miles from Cabo San Lucas on Mexico’s Baja Peninsula. There will be approximately 120 guests for the four-day program. “Literally, whatever they want to do is what they can do,” Haskins says. “A yacht will be available for them daily. They can golf every day. They’ll have a cigar roller available and a big beach barbeque. They’re doing a Hummer tour and fireworks over the sea.

“Everything is complimentary for them,” she adds. “Dinners, the drinks, everything goes back to the master account. It’s going to be top notch.”

Making Memories

Cynthia Niemczyk-Hodges, president and CEO of World Incentives, Inc. in Worcester, MA, says, “The first thing that we always think about is creating once in a lifetime experiences, things that as an individual traveler you would never be able to do on your own.” Some of the unique experiences her company has arranged include dancing at the Eiffel Tower, private audiences with members of Parliament, and meeting members of the royal family. “We have contacts that have

Attendees were treated to champagne cocktails at the top of the Round Tower in Denmark.



Photo credit: VisitDenmark

those sorts of relationships and can make those things happen for us.”

If one dream incentive is good, then surely two or three would be even better. “For one client, we actually did a sequence of London, Paris, Rome,” Niemczyk-Hodges says. “We promoted three years of incentives then we launched them all at one time. The program built on itself so that if you made the award for London, you were automatically enrolled to be part of the sales incentive for Paris. That program was so successful it took on a life of its own. Sales for that company were hands down the best they had seen in years.”

Of course, everyone has their own idea of what qualifies as a dream incentive, and for some, that dream doesn't involve traveling with a group. World Incentives offers a product called Carefree Luxury Escapes™ that provides award winners with a certificate valid for an individual trip to the destination of their choice. “The award-winner also gets to choose the dates,” says Niemczyk-Hodges, “and there are a variety of activities they can choose from. We have the ability to put together one-of-a-kind travel experiences that you would have if you were in a group, but we do it for two people. They're chauffeured and they can have a private guide throughout. This is a very, very viable option for companies, especially those that work through dealers.”

Dangling A Whole Bunch Of Carrots

While it's great to keep the sales team focused on earning that big dream trip each year, it certainly doesn't hurt to throw in a few smaller incentives to keep them motivated along the way. Premier Incentives, Inc., in Marblehead, MA, handles a multi-tiered program for Brown-Forman Corporation, a Louisville, KY-based producer and marketer of wine and spirits.

“We're doing one program in Las Vegas for Brown-Forman where we're going to helicopter them into the Las Vegas

race track,” explains Dick Gaeta, president of Premier Incentives. “They're all staying in suites and getting valet service. They're all getting Rolex watches. This



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Dick Gaeta
President
Premier Incentives, Inc.
Marblehead, MA

overall program we designed for them is a series of rewards based on a series of objectives that they have to benchmark. If you do ‘X’ you get the Rolex, if you do ‘Y’ you get to go to Las Vegas, if you do ‘Z’ you get to go to New York.

“We've given out Harley-Davidsons for this company,” he says. “We've given out 42" plasma TVs as part of this program. We've given out Amex reloadable debit cards. Every time they hit a benchmark, \$500 goes right to the card. Some of these guys have probably already earned 5, 6, 7 or 8 thousand dollars over and above everything else. The client's name and logo are on the Amex card, so every time they pull it out of their wallet, subliminally they'll know who's paying for it.

“This one is truly an ROI incentive program. That's what we're in business for, to prove to companies that we can drive their revenues. Our Brown-Forman client knows his numbers inside and out to the point that at the end of the road he can go back to his corporate headquarters and say, ‘I know we spent ‘X’ dollars on this program, but look at the incremental revenue.’ The program is all paid for by incremental revenue.”

Deal Me In

Top achievers who play their cards right just might be able to talk the powers that be into rewarding them with the ultimate poker party. The House of Blues Hotel, a Loews hotel in Chicago, is play-

ing into the poker boom by offering a unique Royal Flush package. The package is designed for a group of six and includes accommodations in the hotel's

Blues Brothers Suite that is decorated with memorabilia from the 1980 film. But that's just the opening deal. The package, which comes with a high-roller price tag of \$5,000 per person, includes a private casino night in the suite, three hours of poker instruction by a celebrity poker player, and a keepsake poker set for each guest.

As you might guess from the price, this is no “beer and pretzels” poker night. The package includes a private, full premium bar with top shelf liquors and a menu that includes mini Kobe beef sandwiches, smoked salmon mousse with caviar, and seared Canadian Duck foie gras. Since sleeping really isn't part of the agenda for a big poker night, turndown service doesn't even happen until 3 a.m.

Realizing The Dream

Haskins gave one reason so many companies are finding it worthwhile to offer dream incentives. “You want to take care of the people who are paying your salary.”

Gaeta explains what it takes to make a program successful. “The criteria is that you do it well, you do it top notch, and you focus on the details. A lot of times people spend a lot of money, and they don't focus on the detail, and all that money almost goes down the drain because it wasn't managed properly. You want it to be memorable, rewarding, and everlasting in their minds.”

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