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Luxury cruise ship bringing chunks of traffic to tourist attractions

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[S.C. State Ports Authority](#) officials say a luxury ship in port today provides further proof that the cruise industry is a positive for Charleston.

The Crystal Symphony, ranked last year as the world's second-best medium-sized ship by [Conde Nast Traveler](#), pulled into Charleston Harbor this morning with 814 passengers on board. By the time the [Crystal Cruises](#) ship departs at 11 tonight, nearly half of its guests will have spilled into town on organized excursions.

Excursions:

Nearly four dozen are visiting Middleton Place.

Three dozen are visiting the Joseph Manigault House.

A dozen will take a city walking tour, including the Old Exchange and Provost Dungeon and the Heyward Washington House.

More than 70 will take private carriage tours.

Several will take a cooking class at Charleston Cooks.

61 will take a Civil War tour, including a visit to the confederate submarine H.L. Hunley.

65 are taking a historical tour of the city.

60 will attend an evening performance of Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* at the Dock Street Theatre.

14 will take a ghost tour.

The packages, offered by [Charleston Convention & Group Services](#), include an array of activities that send guests across the area. For instance, 65 cruisers will take a historic tour of the city, and almost four dozen will make the trek to Middleton Place.

“This is good spending and good impact for sites that really need it,” said SPA spokesman Byron Miller.

It’s not uncommon for hundreds of passengers to take advantage of organized on-shore activities during port calls. The previous three cruise ships that called on Charleston sent out a combined 2,400 guests on such trips.

“It’s convenient for them,” said Erin Mellen, president of Charleston Convention & Group Services. Her company has been working with cruise lines since 1986.

Inbound tourism operators, such as Charleston Convention & Group Services, sell packages to cruise lines, with prices ranging from \$35 to more than \$100. The cruise companies then make the excursions available to passengers at a marked-up rate.

Destination management firms, as the tourism businesses are known, receive discounts from local business in return for providing large chunks of traffic.

“Group business is a good portion of business for attractions in town,” Mellen said.

She said sites such as the ones along [Museum Mile](#) make a habit of offering discounted group rates.

Spreading the wealth

Port officials say that widespread spending by cruisers points to the “broad and diverse” contributions of the cruise industry in Charleston. And vessels such as the Crystal Symphony cater to a more affluent clientele than many of the major commercial cruise lines.

Fares for the ship’s 19-day voyage from New York to Los Angeles via the Panama Canal range from \$5,000 to \$30,000.

“We have a diverse tourism base here, and we have a diverse cruise base,” Miller said.

Excused from excursions

Port officials say that passengers who don’t participate in planned activities often tour the city on their own, still spending money at stores and restaurants. The [Charleston Area Convention & Visitors Bureau](#) provides information to all passengers inside the cruise terminal at Union Pier.

The ports authority says surveys it's conducted show that 37% of passengers stay in local hotels, 50% eat at local restaurants, 37% shop locally and 39% visit attractions and museums in Charleston.

The maritime agency also commissioned a study early this year that found that the cruise industry provided a \$37 million economic boost to the local economy, though critics have questioned the report's methodology.

Still, SPA President and CEO Jim Newsome has said that with the number of cruise visits increasing from 67 this year to 89 in 2011, the impact could rise to \$50 million or more.

More ships

Cruise traffic to the Port of Charleston has increased of late. Eight ships have called on Charleston in the past two weeks as the cruise season has entered a busy stretch.

The sight of multiple ships on a single day has given rise to alarm at the [Coastal Conservation League](#), which has repeatedly called for written limits on cruise calls be put in place.

Port and city officials have balked at the request and have repeatedly said that demand for cruises will likely never rise above more than an average of two ships a week. If it does, the ports authority agreed to discuss expanded service with the city and residents before moving forward, though the maritime agency would have final say on future plans.

"We're finding this a pretty big deal, considering this is the one argument they keep throwing back at us, is there's no need for a cap because there would only be one ship in a day," said Katie Zimmerman, a project manager with the league.

Miller said, "Two per week is an average number, and we stand by that. That's what the market will support."

The Carnival Fantasy became the first ship to call Charleston home in May, and the ship sails from here every five to seven days.

Charleston, however, has played host to more than just big-box cruise lines.

ResidenSea Management's [The World](#) made a port-of-call stop here last month. The 644-foot vessel features 65 private units that serve as a home away from home for ultra-wealthy passenger-owners, some of whom live aboard the ship full time and others who cruise intermittently.

Other high-end vessels have been among the port's 16 scheduled calls in 2010, and more are coming.

"We have some of the finest ships in the world that call on Charleston," Miller said.

Reach Daniel Brock at 843-849-3144. *Editor's note: An earlier version of this story mischaracterized the agreement between the city of Charleston and the S.C. State Ports Authority regarding potential expansion of cruise service. The correct version of the story is above*