

# Caribbean is top cruise destination for 2012

BY LARRY BLEIBERG

WHILE the Caribbean remains the most popular destination for cruisers, Europe has edged out Alaska for second place in an annual report on travel trends from Cruise Holidays, one of the biggest cruise sellers.

The results are based on Cruise Holidays' 2011 bookings and from a survey of more than 100 of the agency's top cruise consultants. The company is part of a network that includes nearly a third of all travel agencies in the country.

Other findings include:

- The most popular new ships are from Celebrity;
  - The biggest bargains are in the Caribbean and Europe;

- More people are buying cruises six months before sailing — and at the last minute;

The survey results show that nearly three of five cruisers picked the Caribbean as the top cruise destination in 2012. Within the region, Western Caribbean cruises are the most popular, followed by the Eastern Caribbean and then Southern Caribbean.

Coming in second place is Europe, favoured by more than 11 per cent. (Last year the Continent placed fourth.) Alaska ranked third at nearly seven per cent, and Bermuda came in fourth, well above its seventh place ranking last year.

The other destinations in order of popularity were Hawaii, Panama Canal, Mexican Riviera, Trans-Atlantic, Canada/New England and South Pacific.

The survey also showed that passengers are drawn to luxury ships. The most popular new ship in 2011 was the Celebrity Silhouette, and the most anticipated 2012 debut is Celebrity's Reflection.

Surprisingly, the second most anticipated launch is a small upscale European river cruise ship: AmaWaterways' Amacerto. The other most popular ships for 2012 are the Disney Fantasy, Oceania Cruises' Riviera and Viking River Cruises' Freya, also a river-cruise ship.

The survey also found that while prices are edging up in 2012, they remain a relative bargain compared to earlier years. It suggests the biggest deals will be found in the most popular destinations: the Caribbean and Europe. However there are values to be found on west-coast Mexico cruises, as well.

In addition, the survey found that the average lead time for booking a cruise has lengthened. In 2011, 52 per cent of travellers booked their cruise at least six months before sailing. In 2010, it was 48.5 per cent. However, the proportion of people booking at the last minute has climbed too: More than seven per cent of cruises were booked less than a month before sailing.

(Courtesy of USA Today)

