

The aqua park aboard the Carnival Fantasy cruise ship



Carnival Fantasy

SAIL AWAY

WHY THE PORT OF CHARLESTON?

Carnival Cruise Lines offers the first year-round cruise program from Charleston.

"The Port of Charleston was selected after careful evaluation of a number of factors," says Vance Gulliksen, public relations manager for Carnival, including "proximity to a large segment of the population, port infrastructure and overall appeal of the destination, including pre- and post-cruise opportunities, just to name a few." Since launching its Charleston service, Carnival reports it has consistently sailed with 100 percent occupancy and achieved high marks from guests.

"I think the community on the whole is very excited about cruises and is very glad to see them," says Byron Miller, director of marketing, public relations and planning for the South Carolina State Ports Authority. "Cruises are bringing great economic benefits and spending to the Charleston economy at a time when we could really use it. About 45 percent of cruise passengers are first-time visitors to Charleston, and 97 percent of these say they'll return. In all, cruises mean \$37 million to the local economy this year." Inspired by Charleston's success with cruises, Savannah has launched a feasibility study to evaluate the city's potential as a passenger cruise port. "We hired a consultant who's in the middle of doing that work now," says Bill Hubbard, CEO of the Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce and Visit Savannah.

Benefit analysis also weighs risks. That's something Savannah may want to keep in mind: "My concern is that we don't lose the character and charm of the city," says Randall Goldman, managing partner of Patrick Properties LLC in Charleston. "We need to be cognizant of who we are and what we as a city wish to be."

Carnival Fantasy embarks from Charleston

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Restful sleep from which you awaken naturally, no alarm clock. Tasty food always available, no pots and pans. Days (and nights) to do whatever suits your mood, no schedule. Sound ideal? That's the sort of vacation available aboard a cruise.

Embarking on a cruise from Atlanta is now easier than ever before with Carnival Cruise Lines' new service from Charleston, S.C. Carnival, the world's largest and most popular cruise line, began operating five-, six- and seven-day voyages from historic downtown Charleston to the Bahamas and Key West, Fla., this year. (Bermuda itineraries will debut in 2011.) Approximately 140,000 passengers are expected to enjoy the 65 cruises scheduled to depart from Charleston this year.

Of course you can fly to Charleston (or another port), but these days the opportunity to drive to the embarkation port is especially convenient. "A significant portion of guests sailing on the Carnival Fantasy from Charleston drive," says Vance Gulliksen, public relations manager for Carnival. While I recommend arriving in

Charleston at least one day prior to the sail date—to avoid feeling rushed, risk missing the boat (literally), or missing out on the opportunity to enjoy Charleston—it's possible to make the five-hour drive from Atlanta on the day of departure. Baggage is screened and, while there are some restrictions, there's far more flexibility than with airlines: For example, feel free to pack more than 3.4 ounces of sunscreen.

Once on board, cocoon in your spacious stateroom or explore the ship. The 2,056-passenger Carnival Fantasy, refurbished in

IF YOU GO

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2008, has a unique retro-Vegas-chic style and boasts 12 themed bars, full-service and casual dining rooms, a 12,000-square-foot spa and fitness facility, plus several pools and hot tubs. A new aqua park features a 300-foot-long water slide, 82-foot-long dual racing slides and a splash zone.

Designed by award-winning architect Joe Farcus, Carnival Fantasy boasts some

eye-popping décor. The Cleopatra piano bar features life-size Egyptian sculptures and hieroglyphics. The Majestic Bar features a grand marble staircase. The Cats Lounge, my personal favorite public space, has an Andy Warhol vibe with oversized cans, kitchen utensils and food containers on display.

The top deck features a walking/running path: Plan to use it often if you dine at every available opportunity. An extensive buffet is nearly always open. Casual eateries include a pizzeria, Mongolian grill and deli. Full-service dining is served at two scheduled times, and there's also a flexible dining option available.

Live entertainment includes jugglers, singers, dancers, comedians, bingo, game show-style events, deck games and more. At each port, excursion options abound. While there are supervised programs for kids and teens in three age groups, there's also an adults-only sun deck with hot tubs. Sitting quietly while watching the ocean waters shift from gray to blue to turquoise delivers effective recuperation.

Cruising offers the unique vacation advantage of allowing you to unpack once yet explore a variety of different destinations with a crew who takes care of the pesky details of planning a traditional getaway. **SP**