

South Florida Sun Sentinel Atlantis buys rival gay cruise line

Spud Hilton

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Gay cruise company **Atlantis Events** bought out rival **RSVP Vacations** last week, but don't expect big changes coming from the merge, according to company officials and observers.

"Both brands will continue to be operated separately and distinctively. Future RSVP cruises will continue to be consistent with our heritage, our culture and our guest expectations," the companies said in a letter to customers, signed by the CEOs of PlanetOut and Atlantis. "RSVP will not be merged into Atlantis and (RSVP customers) will not be sailing on an Atlantis cruise."

PlanetOut, which owns Gay.com, the Advocate and Out magazines, and which bought RSVP in March 2006, has been struggling financially this year, in part because of troubles with marketing and booking several big RSVP all-gay cruises, one on the **Queen Mary 2**. Atlantis will take over, but will likely let RSVP be RSVP, somewhat the same way **Carnival** owns upscale, more sophisticated cruise lines that maintain their own identity.

What'll it mean for customers?

Most important is the financial stability of RSVP, according to Jonathan Klein of Now Voyager, a travel agency in the San Francisco's Castro neighborhood that serves a largely gay and lesbian clientele. "People can have the confidence that any of the trips they're advertising are really going to happen."

Each brand maintaining its current identity - and related customer loyalty - also is a big issue, Klein said. "They do have some differences."

Atlantis tends to attract a more party-hearty crowd, including passengers who Klein calls "circuit party boys." "They're always going to be a contingent of that on an Atlantis cruise."

While hardly sedate, he said, RSVP has tried to appeal to a wide range of subgroups within the gay community. "There tends to be a bit more diversity on an RSVP trip and a bit more of a comfort level for those guys who don't feel up to competing with the circuit party boys."

Some of that tone is set by the chartered ship: Atlantis leans toward Royal Caribbean vessels and Celebrity; RSVP cruises are often with Holland America.

According to Klein, RSVP also may benefit from Atlantis connections to the

entertainment industry, possibly resulting in higher-profile performers onboard.

All existing reservations with RSVP will be honored, according to the company statement, and all announced vacations will operate as scheduled. For more, visit www.rsvpvacations.com.

Hammerin' time: Yearning to spend a little time with a home-run hitter whose record never had an asterisk and who might actually be (gasp) a nice guy?

Hall of Famer Hank Aaron will be on deck (several of them, actually) during a 15-day Panama Canal voyage aboard **Crystal Serenity** (1,100 passengers) that leaves Miami on Jan. 4. Aaron, whose major league home-run record stood for 33 years, will talk about his life and career, as well as field questions and pose for photos with passengers.

The voyage, which ends in Los Angeles, includes calls in George Town, Grand Cayman; Cartagena, Colombia; Caldera, Costa Rica; Acapulco and Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Fares begin at \$4,495 per person, double occupancy. For more, contact a travel agent, call (888) 799-4625 or visit crystalcruises.com.

Royal redux: First, there was the **Queen Mary**.

Then came a sister, the **Queen Elizabeth**, named for the Queen Mother (then Queen Consort) to a younger, current Queen Elizabeth. After that burned and sank, **Cunard** launched another Queen Elizabeth, this one reportedly named after the first ship, not for a younger relative of Queen Mary (also a Queen Consort), and sporting a "2" just for clarity. Eventually, there was **Queen Mary 2** (named for the same semi-monarch as the first ship, not the ship itself) and, coming in December, the **Queen Victoria**, named for, well, Queen Victoria, and to be christened by won't-be-Queen Camilla and Prince Charles. Following so far?

Now, in a royal version of "I'm My Own Grandpa," Cunard plans to build another **Queen Elizabeth** (note the lack of "3"), likely to replace the aging QE2 that is being shipped off to Dubai to become a hotel - much like the Queen Mary (QM1, not QM2). The new QE (2,092 passengers, 92,000 tons) is scheduled to enter service in 2010.

Who OK'd the name?

"We are delighted that Her Majesty the Queen has given her blessing to our calling this new Cunarder 'Queen Elizabeth,' after our first vessel of that name," said Carol Marlow, president of Cunard Line.

For those keeping score: There are two Queen Mary ships, both named for Mary of Teck, who never actually ruled anything; and three Queen Elizabeths, none named for the current Her Majesty.

Go figure.