South Carolina gets 1st home-ported cruise liner

BY BRUCE SMITH
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLESTON — A new era in tourism opened in South Carolina on Tuesday as the first cruise liner to be permanently based on the state's coast arrived.

The gleaming white Carnival Fantasy operated by Carnival Cruise Lines arrived in port as the sun broke through the morning clouds, a sail boat fired a cannon in salute and a tug boat sent arcs of water spraying into the air.

"Today is an historic and meaningful event for Charleston," said Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. "Charleston is one of the oldest ports in North America and has always had ships calling."

"A world class cruise line, Carnival, has chosen a world class city, Charleston, as a homeport," added Jim Newsome, the president and CEO of the South Carolina State Ports Authority.

In the past, only a handful of passenger cruises have sailed from Charleston in the winter.

But Jim Berra, Carnival's chief marketing officer, said Charleston is a good place for summer cruises, which is a growing market.

"We think it is, simply because the draw in the summer in Charleston is so strong," he said. "You're offering the guests time either pre- or post-cruise in an amazing city and then you have the chance to do a five, six or seven night cruise onto the Bahamas or Key West," he said.

"It would have been harder if you didn't have the natural gravitation to Charleston as a tourist destination," he said.

Berra said the Charleston cruises will attract passengers from Atlanta, the Carolinas and Tennessee and save passengers the drive to Jacksonville, Fla., or a flight to south Florida to catch a cruise.

The Fantasy carries 2,056-passengers and was to sail full from Charleston late Tuesday.

Some passengers were already boarding before midday while local officials and cruise line representatives exchanged small gifts during a reception in one of the lounges aboard the ship.

Tourism is an $18.4 billion industry in the state and a study for the South Carolina State Ports Authority in February found the cruise industry will mean $37 million for the state economy this year.

There will be 67 cruise calls in Charleston this year but that number will increase now that the Fantasy has arrived. During the next 12 months, the Fantasy itself will call 67 times, Berra said.

The State Ports Authority is planning a new cruise terminal in a renovated building on the waterfront, opening the site occupied by the current aging terminal and surrounding area to redevelopment.

Newsome has said he hopes the new terminal can open in about two years.



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In this photo released by Carnival Cruise Lines, the Carnival Fantasy arrives in Charleston. The 855-foot-long, 2,056 passenger vessel is the first cruise liner ever to offer year-round voyages from the Port of Charleston.

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