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Cruise ship tours return to Great Lakes this summer

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Captain Vangelis Panagiotakis of the MTS Arcadia doesn't look like Gavin MacLeod, the actor who played cruise ship Capt. Merrill Stubing on television's "Love Boat."

His crew is almost entirely Greek. They will never be mistaken as Hollywood stars, though they do speak perfect English.

And Panagiotakis' ship isn't nearly as large as the luxury ocean liner seen on the beloved "Love Boat" series.

Those differences aside, the president of the company chartering the Arcadia predicts the ship's 2001 cruises of the Great Lakes will become as popular as the long-running ABC program.

"It's amazing how much interest there is in these tours," said Ralph Diehl of Great Lakes Cruises Inc., the Wisconsin-based firm planning the inaugural summer tours around Michigan's coastline. Bay City will be a port of call on two of the Lake Huron cruises.

"We're already 60 percent booked for the entire season, and we've hardly done any advertising at all," Diehl said.

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The return of such cruises after a nearly four decades absence is fueling the surge in reservations, he added.

When the Arcadia arrives on Michigan waters this spring, it will be the first passenger ship in 35 years to offer a full summer cruise schedule throughout the Great Lakes, Diehl said.

Great Lakes Cruises has introduced 11 different tour packages on each of the five lakes in 2001, beginning with Lake Ontario in June and concluding with a trip on Lake Superior and the Georgian Bay in mid-October.

Each cruise, which ranges in per-person price from a budget three-night minimum of \$430 to a 17-night first-class fare of \$3,395, includes ports of call in cities throughout the state - from Detroit to Mackinac Island.

The seven-night "Beautiful Huron" package, for example, includes six-hour visits on the Canadian side of Lake Huron as well as stops in Sault Ste. Marie, Mackinac Island, Bay City and Detroit.

Another package, the seven-night "Northern Shores" cruise that begins on Lake Michigan, offers passengers on-shore excursions to Alpena, Traverse City, Muskegon, Chicago, Milwaukee, Mackinac Island and Detroit.

The passengers booking these trips are fairly wealthy retirees who average just short of 70 years old, Diehl said. Most are cruise veterans who have already sailed around the globe and are looking for new adventures, he added.

"We have had some bookings from people in their 90s. If you're 69," he quipped, "you're in the young half."

The journeys to Michigan should provide a boost to local economies, Diehl said. Tourism studies show the average per-person expenditure during port-of-call shopping trips varies from about \$100 to \$1,000 per port.

"These are the kinds of tourists who come with their American Express card in hand ready to buy, with a

specific mind set to spend money in stores," Diehl observed.

Ninety percent of the Great Lakes Cruises' advance sales have come from residents living in the United States, primarily Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Florida, California and Arizona. The majority of the remaining 10 percent are coming from England, he said.

"They see these cruises to the Great Lakes as something new and unusual," Diehl said during a telephone interview last week from his office in Waukesha, Wis.

"These are people who can afford to go anywhere on the planet they want to and have, and they see going to these waterfront communities on a cruise ship through the Great Lakes as exotic.

"You and me, we're living here in the Great Lakes and it's been here our entire lives," Diehl continued. "We take its beauty and grandeur for granted. Hey, 25 years ago Juneau, Alaska, wasn't considered all that special. Now they have so much shipping traffic in and out of there that they're trying to get rid of passenger ships."

The Great Lakes tours on the Arcadia will differ from traditional cruises to Alaska or the Caribbean in at least two key respects.

The Great Lakes Cruises' fees are somewhat more expensive than most cruise ships that sail to the Caribbean during peak seasons, according to Gena Gates, branch manager of the AAA office in Bay City.

A seven-night stay on a Caribbean cruise sells from an average of \$600 per-person to \$1,600; that's about \$200 to \$300 less than rates on the Arcadia.

Diehl said the prices are higher because he has a better-trained, more experienced staff.

The Arcadia also is smaller than the airplane hangar-sized ships that usually serve as cruise ships.

A 367-foot-long Greek cruise ship built in 1969 and completely refurbished in 1989, the Arcadia has six

decks, weighs 5,110 tons and has a 224-passenger capacity.

The real-life cruise ship that was used as the "Love Boat" on TV, by comparison, carried between 600-700 passengers and weighed 22,000 tons.

That ship, owned by Golden Sun Cruises and called the Pacific Princess, was built in 1975 and rebuilt in the late 1990s, said Diehl, who has traveled aboard the Pacific Princess on past cruises.

Other than the Arcadia's size and visage of Panagiotakis, the Arcadia and the "Love Boat" are "pretty darn similar" in terms of accommodations, Diehl added. Unlike the balding Capt. Stubing character played by MacLeod, "our captain is 5 feet 10 inches tall and weighs about 230 pounds. He's a teddy bear with a rather full head of hair," laughed Diehl.

The Arcadia is part of a newly emerging "less is better" trend in the cruise industry that emphasizes less crowded travel accommodations, more personal service and calmer surroundings, Gates of AAA said.

The tour packages of the Great Lakes does not include flashy dance shows or other cruise amenities like gambling casinos, she noted, though the Arcadia has a nightclub that features cabaret-style piano jazz and a dance floor. Children are allowed but not encouraged, and there are no children facilities on board the Arcadia.

"I think it's a wonderful idea because it's a whole different type of experience," Gates said. "For some people, being on the big cruise ships with lots of people around all the time is more like being in a baseball stadium.

"These (cruises) seem more like a way to enjoy a more intimate experience that feels more like a family environment," Gates said.

The Arcadia must travel from Greece before cruising to its Great Lakes destinations this summer.

Great Lakes Cruises Inc. will take possession of the Greek ship May 14 in Piraeus, Greece, then bring her to the United States via London, England, and

Toronto by June 12.

The company has largely relied on news media stories and word-of-mouth to promote the tour packages, Diehl said, because they didn't want major publicity until Great Lakes office staff members were fully prepared to deliver thorough customer service.

Thus far, the Lake Michigan and Lake Superior tours have attracted the most requests for advance bookings because they're by far the best-known bodies of water, he said.

But Diehl said they will step up marketing efforts of all the tour options later this month.

They plan to advertise in upcoming issues of the AARP bulletin newsletter with 18 million subscribers.

They also will help underwrite the PBS-TV program "Great Lakes Ports of Call," which has 750,000 weekly viewers. The producers of the series are scheduled to film a special cruise on board the Arcadia during the summer that will air later this year, Diehl added.

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