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**An Interview with Cuba Cruise President Dugald Wells**

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One of the more interesting cruise experiences I've had this year was my voyage to Cuba with Cuba Cruise, a Canadian company that has partnered with Cyprus-based Louis Cruises to offer cruises aboard the sleek Louis Cristal that completely circumnavigate Cuba.

From the fresh beef flown down straight from the Canadian province of Alberta to the international mix of guests from Canada, Europe and South America, Cuba Cruise has a product that is unlike anything else in the cruise industry.

Recently, I had the chance to talk to Cuba Cruise President and founder Dugald Wells about how this fascinating cruise line came to be – and what's still ahead for the line's upcoming second season in Cuba.

**You're no stranger to the cruise business, are you?**



The Louis Cristal and Cuba Cruise return to Cuba again this winter. Louis Cristal is shown here in Cienfuegos, Cuba. Photo © 2014 Aaron Saunders

I got started a long time ago – in 1992 – when we chartered an icebreaker from Russia and ran a cruise through the Canadian Arctic. My background is in engineering; I was doing design for icebreakers. But operating a cruise was more fun than writing engineering reports, frankly! So that's how Cruise North came about. It was a partnership with the local Inuit, and we were running these expedition cruises in a fashion that would benefit them as well. Our crew of 50, I'd say we had 14 or 15 Inuit youth as trainees onboard the ship as guides and administrators and that sort of thing. We'd sail into these small towns that had never really seen a tourist and our passengers thought it was fabulous that we were doing all that. The locals did too.

**How did Cuba Cruise come about? Was it similar to Cruise North?**

A very good friend of mine – a fellow by the name of Craig Marshall – was down in Cuba looking into potential exports for the Ontario market, and one of the guys he met said, "It's a real shame. I used to work for the [Cuban] Ministry of Transportation. We spent a lot of money refitting the Havana Pier for Pullmantur [who pulled out in 2006 following their acquisition by Royal Caribbean International]. The terminal's empty, and they're talking about turning it into housing..." Craig perked up, knowing my interest in shipping. He came home and told me about it. I said, 'that sounds incredible'.

**So you hadn't considered operating a cruise venture in Cuba before then?**



Just like the brochure promised! The stunning Cuban capital of Havana. Photo © 2014 Aaron Saunders

I'd never been to Cuba and hadn't thought of operating there. But Craig said, "Havana's an amazing place, you should check it out." So the two of us went down there, and asked for a meeting with the managers of the terminal, which we got. We didn't have an agenda; they showed us around and sat us down for a meeting. I described what I did for Cruise North and what we'd accomplished up in Nunavut with the destination and the local people. As I was saying it, it became clear it made sense to do the same thing down in Cuba. They [the port managers] seemed to think so too, and said, "When will you start?" and I said, I have no idea!"

**Aside from Havana, how did you determine which ports of call would be suitable for Cuba Cruise – or which could even handle the Louis Cristal?**

We did it all ourselves. We rented a car in Holguin and drove clockwise, following the coast back to Havana, just looking to see where we could bring a ship. We had heard there were some passenger piers, but we needed to see what they looked like and what their condition was. It was fabulous because Cuba is such a difficult place to get around but everywhere you go, you see people along the highway, so we were picking people up who would – by sign language or rough Spanish – show us all the craziest things. We saw this marvelous country that was unlike anything I'd ever seen in the Caribbean. It was like being on another continent.

**That's how I felt when I was there with Cuba Cruise in January. I'd never been to Cuba before either – and to be honest, I probably wouldn't have gone if there wasn't a cruise that goes down there.**



Cuba Cruise gave me a chance to see the real Cuba, like these schoolchildren performing an impromptu concert in Holguin. Photo © 2014 Aaron Saunders

You know, there's over a million Canadians going down [to Cuba] and all they do is sit in this little resort and never really leave. I guess my *modus operandi* is to always to look for something that I'd like to do. Taking a car for two weeks and picking up strangers is not for most people, but that's how we got going and started scouting locations. It was a gradual process; we went back and forth to Cuba a few times to develop a product plan to determine what it would look like, how it would work and who it would work for.

**Once you knew where you wanted Cuba Cruise to go, how did you proceed?**

Louis Cristal docked in Havana, Cuba on January 13, 2014. Photo © 2014 Aaron Saunders

Our timing was good because changes have been slowly, but now somewhat quickly, coming to Cuba. There are still a lot of changes to come, I am sure, but it came down to a technical question: if we were to do this, who would grant us the authority? Was it Cuba's Minister of Transport or Minister of Tourism? We were meeting with both, and eventually they took our proposal to their inner circle to decide who's going to talk to us. They got it figured out, and from that day forward it has been incredible. People were returning our calls and emails the very next day. We'd have meetings where there's 35 people in the room and they had a whole team assembled for us, ready to help. The Cubans – the authorities, the people – they've been incredibly supportive of us and fabulous to work with. The way they respond to challenges is amazing. I get a faster response in Cuba than [here in] Canada!

**What about the Louis Cristal? Was it always a given that you'd chose that ship?**



The Rendezvous Lounge aboard the Louis Cristal is one of the ship's social gathering points. Photo © 2014 Aaron Saunders

The Louis Crystal is perfect for us right now. We looked at a lot of different ships in the beginning. For a year we were "casting" a number of vessels, but early on the Louis Cristal just jumped out as us. Louis is a very good operator, I find. They operate ships for Thompson in the UK; their focus is more on running a nice, tight operation. They've very supportive of their crew. For us, as very much a small, niche kind of operation, it just seemed like a good matchup [between companies] and the ship was in good condition. And as we operated it, it just became more and more evident we'd chosen right. Louis joined us as a partner in the company, and they really liked the vision we had for the product. In our view, the product is the destination.

**The biggest misconception I encounter is that Cuba Cruise would be the exact same experience as one of the Greek Isles cruises that Louis Cristal does for Louis when they're not sailing for you. But in reality, it's a very different experience than any cruise I've ever taken. Was there a conscious effort to make it more diverse in terms of the entertainment or food?**

Shows aboard the Louis Cristal feature Cuban, Canadian, and international performers – and have been truly exceptional. Photo © 2014 Aaron Saunders

Cuba Cruise is like doing an expedition cruise, but it's a lot more accessible. We can do a lot more. We could never do the whole entertainment thing on a 100 passenger ship. On mainstream cruises, I have a sense that people that put on the shows for these ships very cost effectively. They appeal to the broadest common denominator. And we just didn't go that route at all.

**The reviews from your first season guests – including myself – are almost universally glowing. But the ship wasn't running full...**



Tendering ashore in Punta Frances, Cuba, for a day at the beach. Photo © 2014 Aaron Saunders

Our passenger numbers went up every single cruise. By February, we were doing two shows, two dinner settings, and starting to get in to the full swing of things. It makes for a nice vibrant atmosphere onboard when things get a little busier, but we started from nothing and we knew it was going to be an investment year. All the feedback from guests was so positive and the word-of-mouth has been so positive, and by January/February, we were getting new large tour operators asking if they could book space, and we sensed this snowball starting to grow.

**The big surprise to me was that it wasn't just Canadians onboard, despite having many Canadian-friendly features: Europeans made up almost half of the passenger base, and South Americans weren't far behind on my sailing. Curious or not surprising?**



At the Palacio de Valle in Cienfuegos, we enjoyed a cocktail on the rooftop patio overlooking the ocean. Photo © 2014 Aaron Saunders

It's interesting – North Americans do still have a certain mentality about Cuba, but Europeans don't. And we're continuing to see strong demand out of Europe for Cuba Cruise. But out of Canada, the challenge is getting easily accessible air packages to Cuba. There's a very unique industry around the charter airlines, and I am delighted to say that Air Transat has been phenomenal. We've got all kinds of really interesting plans that we're working on with them for the coming season.

**Cuba Cruise is coming back this winter for another season in Cuba, and you're even operating a Transatlantic Crossing from Athens to Havana this November. How do you see the season shaping up?**

Cuba Cruise is still a start-up, but certainly we have more than enough demand to commit to another year. We're projecting substantially higher occupancy numbers than last year, and we're ahead of even our own projections at this time. The main booking season is still ahead of us [for Winter 2014-15], so we're feeling very good about it.

The Louis Cristal will set sail for Cuba again this fall, with a unique transatlantic crossing from Athens to Havana. Photo © 2014 Aaron Saunders

For more information about Cuba Cruise and their upcoming season in Cuba sailing roundtrip from Montego Bay, Jamaica or Havana, Cuba, pay a visit to the Cuba Cruise website or follow them on twitter @YourCubaCruise.

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