



## How Cruise Lines Are Redefining Entertainment at Sea

By Zachary Laks

A new era of entertainment is under way at sea, as cruise lines redefine how performers engage with and enthrall audiences. The new standard is onboard entertainment that pulls audiences in, not just playing out in front of them.

Infusing cutting-edge technology and immersive storytelling, cruise entertainment experiences onboard Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) member ships are not just gaining fans, they are driving bookings.

### From revue to revolution

Today's cruise guests respond to innovation, says Joe Chantry, Vice President of Entertainment and Enrichment at Holland America Line. "Over the past decade, onboard entertainment has evolved from being a complement to the cruise experience to becoming a defining part of it."

Holland America's "Fosse and Verdon, The Duet That Changed Broadway," which debuted on the 2,650-passenger Koningsdam in late 2025, illustrates the new standard. Working directly with the Verdon Fosse Legacy estate, the line surfaced never-before-seen archival footage of the famous choreographer and dancer duo behind such Broadway hits as "Chicago" and "Sweet Charity." The footage is woven into live performances in World Stage theater equipped with a 270-degree panoramic LED wall, "immersing guests into the show's experience in a really cool way," says Chantry.

Noticing that guests are craving entertainment that reflects the regions they are cruising, Celebrity Cruises' entertainment team created The Bazaar, a new immersive, destination-inspired marketplace that features street-style festivals, with guests invited to join in. The Bazaar debuted onboard the 3,260-passenger Celebrity Xcel in the Caribbean. With cruise lines finding that guest participation equals high guest satisfaction, Celebrity also created for the ship "HOTEL," a narrative-driven, interactive game show, which Lisa Lehr, Vice President of Entertainment at Celebrity Cruises, says is a "comedic whodunit where guests aren't just watching – they are actively part of solving the mystery from check-in to check-out."

John Paul Lamb, Princess Cruises' Vice President of Entertainment, echoes the shift toward guest engagement. He says Princess Cruises is undergoing "a major shift toward interactive formats...moving entertainment beyond passive viewing and into active participation." As an example, Princess Cruises worked with the legendary Magic Castle in Los Angeles to create

“Spellbound,” a new multi-room immersive magic experience found on the 4,300-passenger Sun Princess and sister ship Star Princess.

MSC knows that sometimes the most delightful moments come from the unexpected, which is how MSC Street Theatre came to be. These European-style pop-up performances appear in public spaces on MSC ships throughout the day, captivating guests.

### **Popular programming**

Cruise passengers also respond to cruise programming featuring familiar names. As a new example, Royal Caribbean International will welcome one of the world’s biggest entertainment franchises onto a cruise ship for the first time with a new live version of the TV show “America’s Got Talent,” debuting aboard the upcoming, 5,600-passenger Legend of the Seas.

Norwegian Cruise Line is leaning into some of the world’s famous recording artists with concert-style shows, such as “ELTON: A Celebration of Elton John,” which debuted on the 3,550-passenger Norwegian Luna in March 2026 and shows paying tribute to the musicians Prince and Fleetwood Mac, both of which debuted on sister ship Norwegian Aqua last year.

“Hercules” is the star of the Broadway-style stage show on the 4,000-passenger Disney Destiny, which also features entertaining character encounters such as villainous Cruella de Vil (from “101 Dalmatians”) presiding over a guest-judged fashion show; and Dr. Facilier (from “Princess and the Frog”), performing close-up magic in a pop-up parlor.

### **Behind the scenes**

Cruise companies operate some of the largest dedicated entertainment rehearsal facilities in the world. These include the 132,500-square-foot Royal Caribbean Group Entertainment Studio in North Miami; Carnival Cruise Line’s Carnival Studios, seven dance rehearsal studios and a full theater, near Fort Lauderdale; and MSC Creative Studios, a new entertainment hub for creative development and performer training, which is opening in Edinburgh in summer 2026.

“Our performers train together for months at our world-class entertainment studio before ever setting foot on the ship,” says Celebrity Cruises’ Lehr. “This creates a synergy with our cast that guests can really feel from the moment they take the stage.”

Cruise lines recruit performers from around the globe, the onboard gigs desirable to performers. The salaries are competitive and attractive, as is a steady contract with minimal living expenses. Then there is the opportunity to work with leading creators that cruise lines partner with.

“When you’re developing productions alongside BAFTA-winning designers, World Choreography Award winners, and industry-leading directors, the talent we recruit gets to work at a level that rivals the best stages in the world,” Lehr says.

Princess Cruises’ Lamb says in recruitment the line stresses it is “a platform for innovation, offering artists the opportunity to create large-scale, immersive work in cutting-edge environments.”

Cruise guests are the beneficiaries as CLIA members put innovations in entertainment center stage.

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