

Looking to book a cruise to an exotic destination this summer or beyond? What if said destination also allowed you to step back in time, sans H.G. Wells' time travel machine, to a far simpler time, where you can still catch a ride in a 1950s-era taxi and enjoy the finest entertainment at the famed Tropicana?

Bonnie J Hedges, CTC/CTS, vice president of sales and marketing with Bentley Hedges Travel in Oklahoma City, encourages Cleveland County residents seeking a fun, unforgettable and educational vacation destination to consider one of several travel packages to Cuba "before the island becomes transformed with Western influence, updates, modernization and island infrastructure changes that are sure to come."

Visitors to Cuba, she said, will be fascinated by its sugar-white beaches and the tobacco fields that continue to play an important role in the production of the country's legendary cigars. The capital, Havana, she said, is lined with pastel houses, while Old Havana retains its beautiful Spanish-colonial architecture. For those seeking an active nightlife, dance clubs offer salsa music, and the famed Tropicana continues to host old-style cabaret shows.

Cuba-bound travelers, Hedges said, have the option of traveling in grand style aboard one of the five mid-sized ships operated by Celestyal Cruises, the only home-porting cruise operator in Greece and the preeminent cruise line serving the Greek Islands and the island nation of Cuba.

The cruise line has won awards for its emphases on providing guests with an authentic ethnic immersion in the Aegean and Cuba, with activities including on-board cooking demonstrations of Cuban cuisine, Cuba Cocktail Clinics, Cuban music and shows, and lectures on topics such as the history of rum and cigars. Celestyal Cruises guests also may enjoy special shore excursions designed to comply with Office of Foreign Assets Control regulations while providing opportunities for personal discovery and enrichment.

The ships' unique itineraries combine the well-known and more secluded ports, along with a "deep dive" into each region's culture while sailing. Hedges said guests experience the most popular, postcard-perfect islands, such as Mykonos and Santorini, as well as lesser-known islands like Patmos, Samos, Syros and Milos. In Cuba, she added, Celestyal Cruises is one of the only cruise lines that takes travelers around the island nation of Cuba to three unique ports of call, including two days in Havana, while offering them an authentic Cuban cultural immersion during their eight-day (seven-night) journey.

Hedges said the cruise line offers affordable rates along with deluxe accommodations, all meals on board, nonalcoholic beverages, entertainment, port charges and selected excursions. A 15 percent discount is being offered for cruises departing this spring, summer and winter through Dec. 29 with departures from Montego Bay, Jamaica. Rates start at \$1,495 per person (not including mandatory Cuban health insurance and visa.) The cruise line also requires that gratuities and an alcoholic beverage package be prepaid. The ship is virtually a cashless society.

"What intrigued me personally," Hedges said, "was that the Celestyal Crystal circumnavigates the nation of Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean, so passengers get to experience Santiago de Cuba, the former capital and the seat of the revolution, as well as Trinidad and Havana in the west of Cuba."

Hedges noted that Bentley Hedges Travel will be hosting the Oklahoma Bar Association on a Continuing Legal Education Seminar at Sea July 7-14. One need not be an attorney to join this group. For more information, contact Hedges at bonnie1@bhtravel.com or Susan Damron with the OBA at susand@okbar.org.

Are you a member of the South Oklahoma City Chamber? The chamber also will be offering a members-only fundraising cruise this fall onboard Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines Empress of The Seas from Tampa. For more information on this cruise, contact Angie Hendricks at angie@bhtravel.com.

Hedges notes that several other cruise lines sailing the Caribbean offer Cuba as one of their ports of call. These include Oceania, which offers 10-day luxury cruising to the Caribbean, also with Havana as a port of call, and Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, which sails out of Tampa on a five-night cruise with a 48-hour port of call in Havana.

Bentley Hedges' experienced travel agents would love to help you plan your next dream vacation, whether it's to Cuba or other destination. To visit with an agent, call 237.3333 or call 800.467.7402, or visit <http://oklahomacityok.vacation.travelleaders.com/>.