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THE CRUISE PROFESSIONAL

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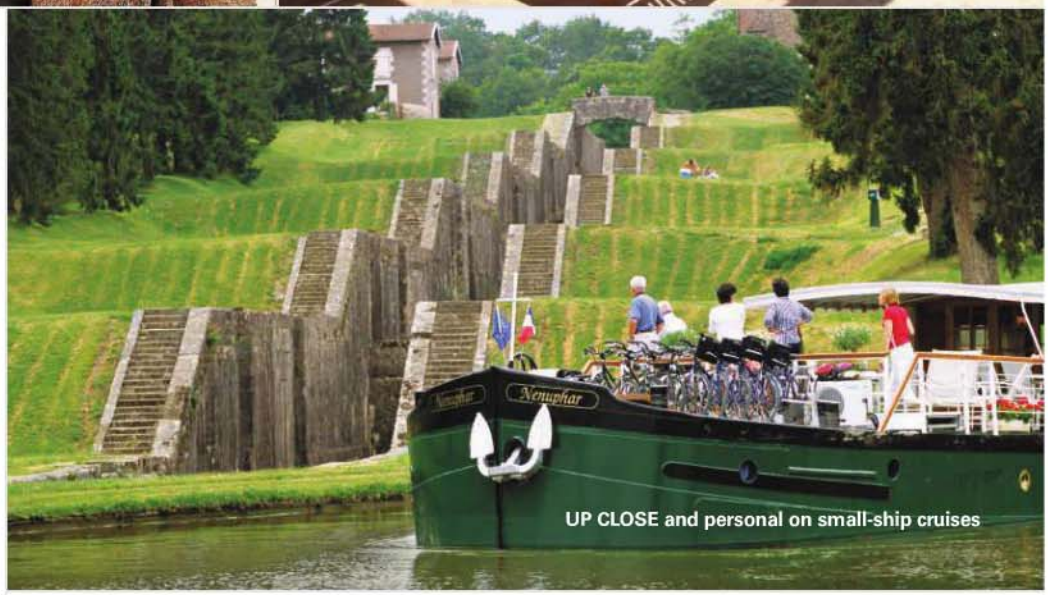

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From Toronto to Vegas to Belgium

The one unifying connection to my summer travels was the time that I was able to spend with the people who comprise the luxury travel industry.

I ended up doing a fair amount of traveling in the final few weeks of the summer, first to the Toronto area to visit with Mary Jean Tully of The Cruise Professionals for the cover story in this issue of *Luxury Travel Advisor* (she is pictured with me in the photo to the left), then to Las Vegas to attend Virtuoso's Travel Mart. Just a few days later I was in Edinburgh, Scotland, boarding the *Crystal Serenity* (I was actually embarking in the middle of a cruise that had already traveled throughout Scandinavia). Over the next few days I sailed to Amsterdam and Belgium, where I enjoyed a magical day in Bruges, a fascinating medieval town filled with canals and cafés and shops where you can buy everything from Belgian lace to Belgian chocolate. Bruges also has a very traditional European village square; I wasn't there for the Grote Markt, but I hear that it is a must if you are there on a Wednesday morning. This is a fabulous place to recommend to those clients who are looking for a true taste of European history. In fact, even the most seasoned luxury cruisers (and believe me, on Crystal's cruises there are many of them) said that it was one of the most wonderful port stops they'd ever made.

So what's the one connection amongst all of these disparate experiences, all of which seemed much too fleeting? Of course, it was the quality time spent with the people. At Virtuoso, it was great to get to know some of the new members of the association's executive team a little bit better, including Mark Belles and Clark Collins. I was also thrilled to be able to see my dear friends Maxine and Don Nohrr. Maxine is the president of Travelmax, Inc. in Indialantic, FL; I have witnessed the attention to detail that Maxine exhibits when she is escorting a group on a cruise and there are very few who can match her caring spirit and her professionalism.

As for our cover subject, I first met Mary Jean Tully at Silversea Cruises' top producers' meeting in Santa Fe earlier this year. We had been corresponding via e-mail since the launch of *Luxury Travel Advisor* last year, but meeting her was an entirely different experience—she is one of the most dynamic and enthusiastic people I have met in the business, and that is saying a lot. When I went to her offices in Mississauga in late August for the interview, I had high expectations: The Cruise Professionals is, after all, a $30 million-a-year powerhouse and a top producer for several of the luxury cruise lines. The office is as professional as you would expect it to be; in fact, any type of business that caters to the affluent could be operated from these posh quarters. But what I loved the most about my visit was observing the interaction between Tully and her staff. She employs many young women, several of whom are recent graduates from travel school programs and many others who have been with her for years and years, some since the inception of her business 19 years ago. Many of these women have literally grown up with The Cruise Professionals, and their admiration and dedication to Mary Jean is extremely inspiring to see. Read more about this fascinating company on page 54.

This year, as always, the summer was all too brief, but the first signs of autumn also indicate that I'll be out on the road even more. I am hoping that my travels will give me the chance to catch up with many of you and that I'll be able to hear how you enjoyed your own summer travels!

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The Cruise Professional

Mary Jean Tully masters the art of selling the high seas.

BY RUTHANNE TERRERO

Mary Jean Tully was well on her way to becoming a schoolteacher until one fateful morning when she opened the door of her Chicago apartment. There on her mat was a newspaper she didn't subscribe to. In it she discovered a classified ad from a local real estate firm that was opening a travel agency.

The ad called for resumes only; interviews would be set up after applicants were carefully screened. Knowing she had found her fate but fully aware she did not have the required background for the job, Tully went directly to the real estate office and insisted on seeing the person who would be giving the interviews. She got her way, pitched herself and landed the interview—and the job.

Within months she was named the assistant manager of the agency; however, fate struck again. Tully was sent on a fam (or "weekend visitation" as it was called 23 years ago) to Miami to inspect cruise ships. She climbed aboard the very posh *SS Norway* and fell in love.

The Cruise Professionals

Chairman and CEO: Mary Jean Tully

Number of employees: 46
(32 in sales, 14 administrative)

Volume of annual business: $30 million (U.S.)

Website: www.cruiseprofessionals.com

"I walked onto what they called the 'Champs-Elysées,' looked at its black slate floors and thought, 'This is it for me,'" says Tully.

When she returned to Chicago she called her Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) district sales manager with a simple question: "What do I do to get a job like yours?" she asked.

As luck would again have it, NCL was interviewing for a district sales manager for the north side of Chicago. Tully went after it with the same bravado she had harnessed for the job at the travel agency and she was quickly hired.

"I don't know if it's from being the oldest child, but I really believe that anything you want you really have to go for," says Tully, who today is chairman and CEO of The Cruise Professionals, a $30 million agency that is consistently ranked among the top producers for the likes of Crystal Cruises, Silversea, Regent Seven Seas and Abercrombie & Kent.

While the agency is renowned for its vast volume of luxury cruise sales, it is also known worldwide for its high level of service and for providing customized land excursions during the cruise and during the pre- and post- periods.

"What I tell the people in my office all the time is that there is no talent to selling a cruise from point A to point B," says Tully. "If you sell it just based on that and price, you are not going to win—because the next time the client is just going to go to the person who has the best price. Now, if you guide them and you sell them from point A to B, but you sell them a pre- and a post- and neat things to do in between, you're bringing value."

Flash back to the early days: Tully made her sales goal within the first year at NCL, which subsequently merged with Royal Viking Line. She finally enjoyed her first cruising experience and was completely hooked.

Her passion showed through.

"I thought I had the best job in the entire world. Agency owners and managers would tell me I had made them excited about wanting to get on a cruise because I got excited talking about it. To this day, I get excited talking about the cruise experience and how to use it to best suit your needs," she says.

Personal tragedy struck, however. Tully's father passed away, and her mother followed a short time later. As a result, she was anxious to leave Chicago to start anew somewhere else. She was dating a man from Toronto and decided to migrate north to his Canadian city.

The move was not a simple one. Local law required that, to obtain residency, Tully had to prove she could contribute money to the Canadian economy by opening her own business and hiring Canadians. Undaunted, she withdrew the funds she had vested in her pension plan with the cruise line and used them to open her cruise-only travel agency in Mississauga, a Toronto suburb, on June 1, 1987.

The move marked the birth of The Cruise Professionals, which made its home in a mere 470 square feet of office space. "The walls were painted Pepto Bismol pink," laughs Tully.

A key friendship Tully made in her early days was with Loretta Darcy, who was her first office manager. "She worked for a cruise-only agency in downtown Toronto, and lived in the

MARY JEAN TULLY (pictured in her Mississauga office) planned to become a schoolteacher before hitting it big in the luxury cruise business.

suburbs where I was going to be opening the agency," says Tully. "We met and clicked instantly. I didn't even have the office space confirmed yet. She was the only person I interviewed and I have never looked back. She has turned out to be the sister I never had and an employee that one can only hope for."

The business was based strongly at that time on selling Carnival and Princess, but with a heavy emphasis on Norwegian and Royal Viking because Tully knew the products so well.

"In 1990, we broke all records for Royal Viking Line, and they had to charter two planes from Toronto to bring passengers to meet the ship on our first two groups. It was for Caribbean sailings, and we marketed the hell out of it," says Tully.

Advertising was key to The Cruise Professionals' strategy from the outset. Tully consistently placed ads in the *Toronto Star* and the *Global Mail*. "I didn't miss a week doing it. When everyone said they didn't want to advertise over holiday weekends, I asked why, because that is when people are home and have time to read the paper."

LORETTA DARCY, shown above with Tully, was the first employee of The Cruise Professionals and is today one of its top agents.

BRAD TULLY, left, was instrumental in making The Cruise Professionals a global company.

Tully also eschewed having a storefront location, operating instead by appointment.

"I didn't want a retail location because I didn't want a husband who was waiting to kill time while his wife was shopping. I didn't want dreamers. I wanted people who, when my phone rang or they came to my door, were really serious—and it made a big difference."

Instead, Tully relied on the premise that if she did a good job, her business would grow. She also counted on her outgoing personality to help spread the word. "There wasn't a place that I wouldn't meet people. Whether it was getting my hair or nails done or going to the grocery store, people were intrigued by what I did."

Tully and her staff were also adept at providing strategies to lower the price of a cruise, such as paying six months in advance, or using incentives provided by credit card companies, such as on-board credits.

The business steadily grew by leaps and bounds, and the agency became a top seller for the likes of Crystal Cruises, Silversea and Regent Seven Seas.

While The Cruise Professionals was experiencing astronomical growth, Tully met her future husband, Brad, in 1993. An early adapter to the Internet, he created The Cruise Professionals' web site—a decade before most cruise lines and third-party vendors even had a web presence.

And so The Cruise Professionals went global, even though it was located in Mississauga, "a town most people can't even pronounce," laughs Tully.

"Anyone living in Australia, the U.K. or Germany could type in 'luxury travel' and we would come up because we had the key words," says Tully. "These people thought they had died and gone to heaven because [until then they didn't even know] anyone who had been on a cruise. They would say, 'You mean you've been on a ship? You know the maitre d's name?' So all of a sudden, on a daily basis we were getting 25, 30 e-mail requests from upscale clients who were genuinely interested in cruising," Tully says.

Interest was also strong in the United States, particularly from Californians "who were up on computers before anyone else," says Tully.

The Cruise Professionals was never an Inter-

net company, she stresses; rather, it was a travel agency with an Internet presence. "We never booked a trip online, we never quoted prices online and we weren't a discount clearinghouse."

Joining Virtuoso in 1996 was a move that provided a tremendous learning opportunity for Tully and strengthened her focus on the luxury market. And although The Cruise Professionals chose to leave the organization in May 2005, Tully says joining was still "the best thing I had ever done personally and professionally."

Today, at the same address for 19 years, the company encompasses 7,700 square feet. Tully's spacious office is a true CEO's abode, with a large picture window that enables her to look out onto the serene sea of agents, their sales support associates and administrative staffers who keep the empire moving. As a group, they generate a quiet hum as they speak on the phone with satisfied repeat clients or prospective customers who have found The Cruise Professionals on the Internet, via advertising in *Toronto Life*, *Robb Report* or *Condé Nast Traveler* (to name a few). They've also found Tully in the annual listings of *Condé Nast Traveler*'s and *Travel + Leisure*'s top travel agents.

What keeps the agency amongst those top rankings is its keen attention to providing customized service to its clients. That service goes far beyond matching up the customer with the correct luxury cruise; The Cruise Professionals is also known for its customized shore programs that are created by its Concierge Division.

In one instance, Tully and her team staged an exclusive, formal dinner amongst the ruins of Ephesus arena for a client sailing on Crystal through the Mediterranean. In other cases, she'll advise whether the client should take the shuttle bus to a port town that's provided by the cruise line, or if they should hire a private car and driver to give them a more personal experience.

"The clients like the fact that we can tell them where they can spend the money and where they can save," she says.

As a result, The Cruise Professionals has an extensive global network of ground operators, some from its Virtuoso days, others whom Tully and her staff have met through hotel concierges or their personal travels. The agency also uses the services of Abercrombie & Kent (this year it met the requirements to belong to its 100 Club) and Micato Safaris.

And while the name of the agency may not indicate it, The Cruise Professionals also creates itineraries that do not include a voyage of any sort.

"Every client we've ever had has contacted us initially to book a cruise. Once we've booked them a cruise, they'll do other things," says Tully, who may suggest they go to another agent to book a Disney vacation or ski excursion. But if it's a trip to Paris with a private guide, she is there for them. In fact, her business card describes the company as, "An exceptional travel agency specializing in all aspects of luxury travel including private jets and yachts."

Although The Cruise Professionals is a multi-million-dollar global operation, there is very much a family feel to the camaraderie that Tully shares with her entire staff. Whether they are agents who have been with her for 10 to 19 years, or young women who are interning as part of a high school work-study program, she has a maternal or sisterly feeling toward all.

The proof of that is in the cabinet that she keeps behind her desk, filled with pashmina shawls, Louis Vuitton handbags and fine jewelry that the staff has full access to if they are meeting with clients or going on a cruise. Tully keeps the cabinet stocked (and indeed loves shopping to fill it with new options) so that her agents will always feel at ease in the world of the affluent.

"When I send someone from the office on a cruise, I always pay for them to have a private car and driver, and I pay for a ship excursion," says Tully. "When they fly, I pay for them to fly business class one way and coach the other way, which teaches them to sell up. If they don't experience it, they can't sell it."

For Tully, it's been a long, successful voyage since she found that newspaper on her doorstep years ago. Just recently, she saw the musical *Spamelot* in Toronto, which, for her, summed up her entire experience in the industry. "I've found my holy grail!" she laughs. ■

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