

NEW ADDITION

THE Rocco Forte Collection will officially be a dozen large when its twelfth member, **The Augustine**, opens in Prague on May 14. The 101-roomer is being created from a complex of seven different historic buildings (roccofortecollection.com).

FRENCH KISS OFF

JULY 4 marks the 250th anniversary of the siege of **Old Fort Niagara**. Not ringing any bells? It was only, like, the highlight of the French and Indian War. Go reenact this and that with muskets, etc. (oldfortniagara.org).

WELL-CENTERED

THE supersized **City Center** project in Las Vegas may be scaling back, but some of what's opening is already on sale. On October 1, the Rafael Vinoly-designed Vdara Hotel will be the first to debut, with rates starting at \$159 (vdara.com).

**NEWS
+
NOTES**

By JASON COCHRAN

WHAT a difference a few months make. Last summer, cruise lines were slapping insane fuel surcharge fees on customers. Fast forward to now and they're begging for your businesses.

When a 14-day cruise to sunny climes on Royal Caribbean starts at \$399 per person, well, you know times are tough all around.

Simply, right now might be the best time in history to get a great deal on a cruise. Low fares are just the beginning, though. Here's what else is making waves in the industry.

EASIER TERMS

Used to be the cruise lines would punish you for cancellations or changes of any sort. Now that it's a buyer's market, they're loosening up.

Holland America slashed deposit requirements by half and cancellation penalties by a quarter. It's not alone. All the lines have been strong-armed into eliminat-

ing their fuel surcharges — at least until gas prices soar again — and a few have even been forced by the government to refund the money they charged customers.

TONS OF FREEBIES

The big travel sellers are doing whatever they can to stimulate sales. Until March 5, Travelocity is tossing in on-board credits between April and August: \$25 per person for a few nights, \$75 for a week. Silversea Cruises, an upscale line, is offering free airfare from 27 US cities for its European sailings this year (book by April). MSC Cruises is letting kids 17 and under travel free, while Holland America is slashing excursion fees by half for advance booking. Free upgrades are rampant.

MORE EXTRA FEES

Royal Caribbean leads the way on turning a formerly all-inclusive cruise into a semi-inclusive shower of fees. Like the airlines, it charges more if you want perks. Recently, this means forking over \$15 for a fancier steak dinner or \$4 if you want room service between midnight and 5 a.m.

Ready, set,

**ALASKA'S PRICEY**

The story so far: Alaska needs taxes. Hello, \$50 fees on cruisers. Effect: Royal Caribbean cuts its 2010 cruises there by a third, or 42,000 passengers, and

Cruise West pulls three of its eight ships. One of the few lines to increase service is Crystal. Another twist: As of June 1, most passengers will need a passport on cruises stopping in Canada.

MORE PARK 'N' SAIL

Cruises are cheap, flights aren't. More lines are going after the drive market. Next winter, Norwegian doubles its capacity out of Manhattan for Caribbean sailings.



my HOUSTON

I love Houston. Some of the best moments of my life took place there. This will always be home to me!

Beyoncé
BEYONCÉ KNOWLES
Entertainer

For the rest of Beyoncé's thoughts and to find out what others are saying, log on to
VisitMyHouston.com



my HOUSTON

I would consider Houston one of the greater melting pots in the United States — a lot of races, creeds and cultures, and everybody seems to have that same generous spirit.

Clay Walker
CLAY WALKER
Entertainer

For the rest of Clay's thoughts and to find out what others are saying, log on to
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sail on!



Andy Newman/HAL

Cruising from New York saves big money on flights.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

For the past few years, cruise lines have courted affluent customers by adding trips as far-flung as Australia, Abu Dhabi and Goa. Now they're paying the price, because fewer people want to spend the cash flying there. The pullback is just beginning. Celebrity junked its plans to take its Millennium Down Under through

2010. Yachts of Seabourn, a luxury line, hacked its summer rates by as much as 65 percent.

NEW SHIPS

There are still more than 10 new ships on the horizon, the result of building contracts signed in flusher times. This fall, Carnival sends its biggest ship, the new Dream (it'll have some five-person cabins and the line's biggest spa), to New

York for a few runs before sending it south.

A few weeks later, Royal Caribbean is launching Oasis of the Seas, the largest ship in the world with 5,400 guests, adding thrills like an over-deck zip-line, carousel and an outdoor amphitheater for diving shows and water spectacles. Don't expect its equal for many years to come.

Lone stars

5 walks on Texas' creative side



The Menil Collection

1) Art Week Austin What was once the Austin Fine Arts Festival has morphed into a week-long explosion of culture (Apr. 22-26) that celebrates art in a city of art lovers (artallianceaustin.org).

2) Bishop Arts District Dallas While Dallas is only too happy to play to type, it also can surprise you with its more down-to-earth side, evidenced in this quirky neighborhood south of the Trinity River (bishopartsdistrict.com).

4) Blue Star Arts Complex San Antonio Just a short stroll from the Riverwalk, this mini-city of creatives features not only compelling contemporary art, but also outstanding local beer at the on-site microbrewery (bluestarartscomplex.com).

5) Museum of Modern Art Fort Worth In a town famous for its Western heritage, the Zen design (Tadao Ando) makes the museum itself a star (themodern.org).

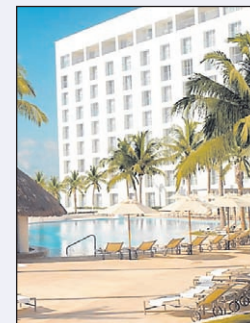
AMERICA IN 2009

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WEEK 7: TEXAS

3) The Menil Collection Houston

The crown jewel of a sprawling arts scene is the result of a life's worth of work on the part of local legends John and Dominique de Menil. Come for the surrealists, stay for the Byzantine frescoes (menil.org).



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my HOUSTON

Houston is special because it is the perfect mixture of different cultures, the arts, big city influence, neighborhood intimacy, good old fashioned ranch living and a lot of Texas pride.

Chandra Wilson
CHANDRA WILSON
Actor

For the rest of Chandra's thoughts and to find out what others are saying, log on to

VisitMyHouston.com



my HOUSTON

No matter how big and cosmopolitan Houston becomes, it still has that down home feeling. Houstonians love fashion, and they have embraced and supported all of their hometown designers.

Chloe Dao
CHLOE DAO
Designer and Owner, LOT 8 Boutique
Project Runway Winner, Season Two

For the rest of Chloe's thoughts and to find out what others are saying, log on to

VisitMyHouston.com