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MEETINGS, CONVENTIONS & HOSPITALITY



Captain Tom Lober, Star Fleet President, greets BP Amoco's Margie Breaux, who recently planned a cruise on the Star Gazer for company officials. Houston companies are heading out to sea. Story on page 40A.

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Heading out to sea for corporate meetings and events

It sounds like a romantic rendezvous – dinner under the stars atop a 100-foot luxury yacht, water quietly lapping at the sides of the boat, seagulls cawing in the distance. Instead, it could be a corporate event. Houston companies such as BP Amoco and KPMG are heading out to sea for employee receptions and client outings.

Located in Kemah, a few blocks from the Boardwalk, is a marina that's home to Star Fleet, a young but growing fleet of 74- to 100-foot yachts built with entertaining in mind, with wide open decks, dance floors and dining rooms. A typical dinner cruise lasts about three or four hours and takes passengers on a tour of Clear Lake and Galveston Bay.

CORPORATE FOCUS

Star Fleet isn't the only charter cruise line in Houston, but Tom Lober founded the private charter business in 1993 with the aim of becoming a full-service caterer and party planner, specifically catering to the high-end corporate client. Some 70 percent of his bookings are for corporate events, such as employee celebrations, client entertaining, retirement parties or onboard meetings.

"Getting on a boat is unique because you can't leave the party early. There's no where to go, so you actually bond," he says.

Another 20 percent of Star Fleet's business is weddings. The other 10 percent is other celebrations, such as anniversaries. "We want to attract people who want it done right". He says, "Our clients are first-rate companies."

That list includes firms willing to pay for attentive service and minute details, such as real flower leis. Often they include law, accounting and pharmaceutical firms, as well as oil, gas, and chemical companies – "a lot of large companies", Lober says.

"It's different," says Margie Breaux, who recently planned a cruise for BP Amoco officials. The local plant officials recently hosted the dinner meeting of about 50 BP Amoco management officials, including several visiting from London.

"I tried to think of something different for dinner," Breaux says. A Caribbean theme was carried out in every detail, down to the Birds of Paradise floral arrangements on each table. Star Fleet's cruise consultants help plan everything, from the music to the menu. Star Fleet also has a catering and service staff.

'Getting on a boat is unique because you can't leave the party early.'

TOM LOBER, OWNER OF STAR FLEET



(Shown from left to right) Star Cruiser, Star Spirit, Star Gazer

A dinner cruise is a great way to showcase a company, says Lee Ann Stewart, a college recruiter at KPMG, which recently hosted a night of dinner and dancing for about 100 of its college recruits. Even locals are impressed, she says.

"It's a great way to sell Houston," Stewart says. "If you're from Houston you know about Kemah, but maybe you haven't been there since its been renovated."

A similar event on land, with dinner and music for about 100 people, would cost about the same, "but it's much more impressive atmosphere than putting it in a banquet facility with the standard five-course meal," Stewart says. "You get to go outside and do something fun with dancing."

Both BP Amoco and KPMG hosted their parties on the Star Gazer, the fleet's largest party cruiser, appropriately named for the view from its expansive upper outdoor deck. The 100-foot, two-level yacht can accommodate 150 guests total and seat 96 dinners. It's decked out with a bar and its own kitchen. The bottom-level dining room is enclosed in glass. In event of rainy or cold weather, the open deck can be enclosed.

Guests are free to roam the decks – and even assist the captain in steering the massive vessel.

THE LAUNCHING

Star Fleet runs a tight ship, with three full-time cruise boats operated year-round by a staff of 50, including

five captain's. The company will soon add a fourth vessel and has plans to make 400 cruises this year alone, according to Lober.

A native of Houston, Lober graduated from Texas A&M Maritime Academy in Galveston. He holds a master's degree in maritime management and is a licensed captain. Before launching Star Fleet, he was president and part owner of State Marine Corp. of Houston, which leased supply boats to the offshore petroleum industry.

But always floating in the back of his mind were visions of luxury passenger yachts. In 1991, when Lober decided to enter the charter business, he had several choices – overnight cruises, eco-tourism and the private charter markets. "I always liked the idea of private charters," he says.

In order to learn the business first hand, Lober took an apprenticeship on a charter yacht in Florida. After spending a year trying to raise money to finance his dream, he designed and built his first yacht, the Star Gazer, in 1993. "I got turned down by a lot of banks," he says. "But I learned with each one, and I would tweak the business plan a little more each time."

With the help of a naval architect, Lober created a unique layout that combined dining and reception space.

Soon, the business began to grow into a fleet. Ironically, however in

order to grow the boating business, Star Fleet needed not just more boats, but more land. Star Fleet added a 90-foot boat, the Star Cruiser, and built an on-land kitchen for the catering business in 1997. But the fleet was scattered in three different locations: South Shore, Kemah and Watergate Marina. In April 1999, the company opened Star Fleet Marina in Kemah, which has one common dock for its entire fleet, as well as the company's administrative offices and kitchen.

"We have room to grow and space for 500 cars," Lober says proudly. Also in 1999, Star Fleet added its third ship, the 74-foot Star Spirit, which can hold 100 passengers.

NEW VENTURE

The competition in the corporate entertainment business can be fierce.

"We have hundreds of competitors – banquet facilities, hotels and upscale restaurants," Lober says. "We're competitive with upscale facilities on land."

To stay ahead of the game, Star Fleet recently added a 16-passenger boat that will become the "lake limo" – a tour boat and a water taxi that will ferry folks to the local hotels, restaurants or bars. Launch is planned for early August.

Currently, Star Fleet is working out a deal with restaurants in the Clear Lake area for boat-side service. When the lake limo docks at a restaurant, the waiters will serve the diners on board. After a dinner cruise, the boat will return to the dock, the table will be cleared and dessert will be served.

"It's designed for passengers to dine on it, so it's better than a limo because a limo sits with the meter running while you eat," Lober says.

Star Fleet also has found a creative way to host parties of up to 375 people – by "rafting" (or lashing) boats together. Or, a client may use one boat as the main dining facility and gathering area, and host another activity, such as a mock casino, on the second boat... passengers also get the salty breezes and calming sound of the waves. ■

To contact Star Fleet Entertainment Yachts, call (281) 334-4692 or visit their website at www.starfleetyachts.com