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A Big Splash in Corporate Events

by *Howard London*

When it comes to corporate entertaining and employee celebrations, there is something great afloat for Houston area companies.



Corporate clients aboard Star Fleet's largest luxury yacht, the Star Gazer.





Star Fleet Entertainment Yachts

Shown above from left to right: *The Fleet - Star Cruiser, Star Spirit, Star Gazer*



Fleet Captain Tom Lober, Founder and President of Star Fleet, Inc.

Energy giants like Exxon and Enron; owners of major restaurants like the Pappas Family; and even Katy Mills, Houston's magnificent new retail mall, have booked entertainment yachts from Star Fleet, Inc., a Kemah waterfront business located about 30 minutes south of Houston.

Companies have found that a Star Fleet cruise gives employees, customers and prospects the opportunity to float right through meetings, sales presentations and celebra-

tions, far from the hustle and bustle, noise and distractions of Houston. In February 2000, after interviewing Fleet Captain Tom Lober,

Founder and President of Star Fleet, Inc., I accepted an invitation to accompany a friend's large corporate group on a Saturday night cruise.

As my wife Pat and I drove through Star Fleet's impressive marina entrance, I saw three glow-

ing, splendid yachts at their Kemah dock. Immediately, I knew that a cruise aboard a Star Fleet Entertainment Yacht would surely exceed my expectations. After we parked, Captain Tom Lober and his charming associates greeted us with an enthusiastic, "Welcome aboard the Star Gazer, Houston's first and still the largest custom-built, 100 foot, luxury yacht."

We glanced at the classy, spacious dining room as we ascended to the top deck for music, drinks, socializing and departure. By 7:15 pm, after all of our eager group of 133 had arrived and boarded, our floating, luxurious, two-story ballroom eased away from the shore. Surrounded by the ambiance of the lake, with ever-changing views slipping by, the mood of our corporate friends was immediately festive and exuberant. I wondered and then understood, what it is about regally cruising on a beautiful and soothing sea that brings forth special, magical feelings.

The Star Gazer, the largest of three Star Fleet Entertainment Yachts, is Coast Guard approved for

a guest capacity of 150 and has two levels for spacious dining, music, dancing and presentations

The second deck has an exceptionally large pilot house with a 12ft. settee for "wannabe" captains. The whole second deck is covered and has weather-proof drop-down curtains. I was delighted to discover that the only noticeable motion on our vessel was from passing yachts. Star Gazer's draft of 3'6" and extremely stable 26' beam allow the vessel to easily and smoothly cruise on either Clear Lake or Galveston Bay. A bow thruster enables the craft to spin around within its own length and gives the large yacht precise maneuverability.

After cruising a short while we approached the shoreline of the lively "Kemah Boardwalk," which attracts four million visitors per year to its diverse restaurants, shops, and waterfront festival atmosphere. Our DJ threw Mardi Gras beads, T-shirts and koosies to the evening crowds. We danced on the top deck and the crowds danced on shore to our on-board music. As we resumed our cruise of the



Kemah Boardwalk



*Star Fleet
Marina built
in 1999*



The Star Fleet Yachts are docked at Star Fleet Marina in Kemah, Texas

lake, a glorious sun descended and set on the horizon.

At 8:00 pm we all were seated in the main salon for a gourmet dinner, prepared by Star Fleet's premier chefs. The dinner featured exquisite Hors d'oeuvres, Caesar salad, filet mignon – in an exotic wine sauce - and chicken stuffed with shrimp, feta cheese and pine nuts. This delectable meal was accompanied by our choice of fine wine and followed with a selection of decadent deserts (my favorite was the Italian Rum Cake). Our glasses were never empty. The service and timing were perfect... and then the games began.

While we were elegantly dining our Star Gazer had quietly rendezvoused with the 90 ft. Star Cruiser, which had been creatively transformed into a floating Las Vegas Casino with games galore. Each guest was given \$20,000 in chips to gamble at the table or tables of their choice (I won \$157,000). Our chips were redeemed for numbered tickets eligible for many useful and fun prizes. After the excitement of the drawing we returned to the Star Gazer

to dance the night away.

For all of the revelers we returned to shore too soon. The total experience was awesome. We didn't want it to end. Captain Lober told me that 96% of all guests share that same feeling. The analytical Capt. Lober always has a good handle on what his clients liked about their last cruise with Star Fleet and what he might do to improve the experience.

Since he started his company Lober has used customer surveys for feedback and business forecasting. He knows where his business comes from, if the corporations prefer theme sit-down dinner cruises and if they also want entertainment and dancing. He knows that blackout shades, pull-down projector screens and multiple microphone jacks are needed for presentations and some clients like to be picked up at one of the Galveston Hotels or other locations on the Houston Ship Channel. Over half of Star Fleet's business is repeat and referral.

Capt. Lober and his expert cruise consultants booked 273 private cruises for his

Star Fleet luxury yachts in 1999. Seventy per cent of those were corporate and the balance for weddings and special occasions. This year they're on track to book more than 400 events. For his three yachts — the Star Gazer, Star Cruiser and Star Spirit — Lober has four licensed captains among his full time and part time staff of 50.

"We were very busy in 1999. We purchased land and built our own marina, lengthened one of our yachts by 27 feet, and added a third ship — the Star Spirit.

Furthermore, he said, "companies use our entertainment yachts for banquets, retreats, new product introductions and incentive awards dinners. Also, engineering and project management companies hire Star Fleet to celebrate the completion of a difficult project or the attainment of sales goals. Our cruises

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Star Gazer's elegant dining room.

“An event on the lake can be so memorable, companies love to come back.”



The Star Gazer cruising on Galveston Bay.

can improve communications and morale within a company and are also used for team building. Repeat customers are our favorite, of course; they are sold on the concept and just waiting for the next opportunity to cruise with Star Fleet.”

Capt. Lober offers turnkey events and plenty of options. Teresa Boman, Piper Heinrich and Lizette Deel are Star Fleet’s full-time cruise consultants. They have the experience and knowledge to handle all event details including photographers, videographers, limousines, bus service, flowers and about 50 different types of entertainment options on Clear Lake.

Cruises are usually three or four hours and can include “rafting up” several of the yachts for parties as large as 375 guests. Corporate clients often select a theme like Caribbean or Mexican Fiesta and expand that theme on many levels. Clients can use their imagination.

For their Caribbean Bash, Consultant Boman helped Katy Mills turn deck stanchions into palm trees and the Star Fleet florist made leis of real orchids and hibiscus.

This spring, Shell Oil booked its annual cruise for about 75 employees featuring barbecue and a DJ. It’s the Gulf Coast version of a company picnic. “An event on the lake can be so memorable, companies love to come back,” said consultant Heinrich. “Enron was Star Fleet’s first corporate client in 1993 and five years later, they chartered two of our yachts for a special event.”

Heinrich believes the most popular cruises are in the winter. “People love to get on the ships and cocoon. You are really snug inside, and we even have see-through panels on the open deck to pull down in case of rain.”

Lober said, “Some people think they can’t afford a

luxury yacht, but when they compare our complete package with upscale restaurants, hotel banquet facilities, country clubs and wedding manors, we are very, very competitive and our food, whether the client chooses Tex-Mex or Lobster, is gourmet quality,” he added. “Just like a 5-star hotel, we never cut corners on food or amenities.”

Capt. Lober got interested in a marine career from his dad, Robert T. (Bob) Lober, a former cargo vessel owner. For 5 years, before establishing Star Fleet, Lober was president and part owner of State Marine Corporation of Houston — leasing supply boats for the offshore petroleum industry. But all the while, the captain with Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Maritime Management, fantasized about owning his own charter yacht business. He eventually found a mentor in Florida and headed there to work for Anticipation Yachts as

a deck hand and food server, learning the charter business first hand.

In 1993 Captain Lober started his luxury charter business with one yacht—the 100-foot Star Gazer. Until 1999 he successfully operated out of South Shore Harbor. He then added to his fleet, bought six waterfront acres in Kemah and built the private Star Fleet Marina.

Lober’s mother Claire Lober, who lives in Houston, has also contributed her creative talents to his business. After a landscape architect designed the 35-foot archway that serves as the entrance into Star Fleet Marina, she suggested the poles should be lighthouses.

A smaller version of the lighthouse archway is replicated at the boarding ramp so visitors can have their picture taken under the Star Fleet arch before they board. “Mom says it’s the little things that are memorable,” added Capt. Lober. ★



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

