



Craig Rubadoux, FLORIDA TODAY

Jerry Odal and Robert Salinas, both from the Philippines and ex-crew members of Ocean Club Cruises' Mirage I, play pool Wednesday at the Space Coast Seafarers Ministry in Cape

Canaveral. The cruise line filed for bankruptcy protection, leaving ex-crew members stranded and awaiting back pay. Odal said his mother cries every day and asks when he'll be home.

Ship's troubles strand former crew members

70 sleep on ship, pass time at ministry as they await back pay

By Donna Balancia
FLORIDA TODAY

Jerry Odal, an ex-crew member of Ocean Club Cruises, shot a hundred games of pool while waiting for a way to get home to the Philippines. But thanks to the open doors of the Space Coast Seafarers Ministry, he doesn't feel entirely stuck behind the eight ball.

Last month, Ocean Club—which operated one cruise ship, the Mirage I, from Port Canaveral—filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, leaving hundreds of crew members stranded without weeks of back pay and no way home. Of the ship's 300-plus crew members, about 70 are waiting it out in the hope they will get their money and get back to their families.

"We sleep on the ship at night and come here during the day," Odal said. "We haven't been paid and have no

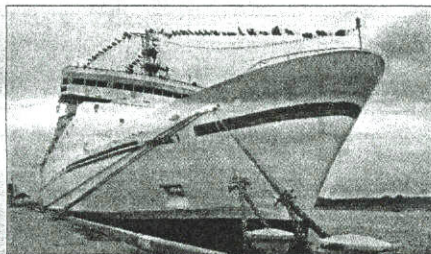
money to get home, but at least it's great we have a place to come to while we are here."

But, as the week ended, the possibility of going home seemed more of a reality, as an interim financing deal was in the works that would pay crew members what is owed them and get them home. The proposal will be discussed next week in U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Miami.

Ocean Club attorney Alan Kelley said the company hopes to have the interim financing of nearly \$500,000 in place soon.

It may still take a few weeks before the ex-employees are on their way home, but it has been a relief that the crew members—who come from as far away as India, the Philippines and Eastern Europe—have a place to go, even though most of them are virtually broke.

See Ship, 2A



FLORIDA TODAY file

Mirage I, shown docked last October at Port Canaveral, is the only ship in Ocean Club Cruises' now-defunct fleet. The ship may sail again, but with new owners. Story, 2A.

Ocean Club Cruises

First cruise: Mirage I started cruising from Port Canaveral in mid-May 2003.

Target niche: People who live in Florida.

Itinerary: Two-night cruises to Nassau; two-night cruises to Grand Bahama Island; three-night cruises to Key West and Grand Bahama Island.

History: Mirage previously was known as Seminole Empress

and went into service in the 1970s.

Halt of service: Ocean Club filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in December.

Mirage I facts:
Weight: 15,000 tons
Length: 485 feet
Maximum passenger capacity: 850
Registry: Bahamas

Ship's troubles strand crew

Ship, From 1A

"They're stranded, they haven't been paid for quite some time, and it's a difficult situation," said attorney Tonya Meister of the Melbourne law firm Morgan & Barbary, who is representing the crew members. "We're working to get the crew paid as quickly as possible."

But, in the meantime, the ex-crew members have been making the best of a bad situation.

"These people are stranded here, but we let them know that they're not alone," ministry assistant Shari Glover said. "We have pool tables, TV and an Internet connection so they can e-mail their families. Most importantly, while they're going through a tough time, they have prayer and companionship."

But conditions on the Mirage I, where the crew members continue to sleep, are deteriorating, many say. That is because Ocean Club has not paid port and service fees to the Canaveral Port Authority, and those services include taking the garbage away.

And there are other issues to contend with.

Canaveral Port Authority Executive Director Malcolm McLouth said the port's security mandate, as well as those of the U.S. Coast Guard and others, requires that a guard be posted at cruise-ship terminals 24 hours a day.

The guard at Ocean Club is costing the port about \$300 a day, McLouth said.

The guard isn't meant to intimidate Ocean Club's out-of-work employees.

"We're certainly not being harassed or anything," McLouth said. "We're trying to help the situation out. We really feel sorry for the crew that are on that ship."

But, to the crew members who are still in this country, the ministry has been a blessing.

"This is like heaven here," said Daniel Rozario of Bombay, India. Rozario uses the computer terminals at the ministry to contact his family via e-mail and keep up to date with the news in his home country.

"I'll try to survive, even though we were not paid wages we were owed by Ocean Club, and I have no way to get home. A ticket home is \$900."

Despite their different backgrounds, the ex-crew members have one thing in common: Their families are depending on them for financial support.

"Since the ticket home is so expensive, my wife tells me to hang around to wait for the money and take a chance," Rozario said. "I'm hoping for the best. I sent her what little money I have, and she is spending slowly."

For Odal, each day is spent shooting games of pool with fellow countryman and co-worker Robert Salinas, watching television, and waiting for some word on the status of his back pay.

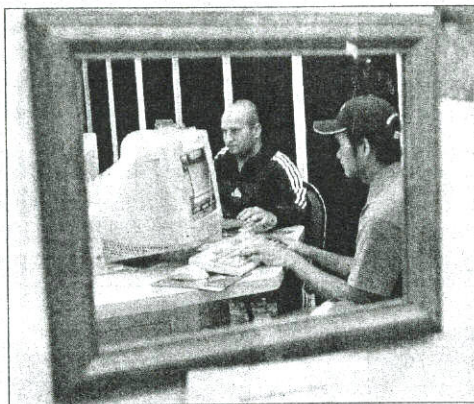
"My mother cries every day," Odal said. "She says: 'When are you coming home?' I try to tell her they owe me money, about two months' worth, and I am waiting." Odal is one of seven children, and as the oldest son, his mother depends on him for money to send home.

But while the ex-Ocean Club employees continue their tedium, ministry Chaplain Dan Bailey uses the word of God to comfort the stranded crew members.

"Prayer is very important to remind them that you can talk to the Lord no matter where you are in the world," said Bailey, who has been with the ministry for nearly five years.

During the seven years the ministry has been operating in the port, Bailey said he has administered the word of God to 14,000 crew members and visitors from 94 different countries.

He admits there are those who may be reluctant to hear his ser-



Craig Rubadoux, FLORIDA TODAY

Adi Marius of Romania and Dennis Naynes of the Philippines, both former crew members of bankrupt Ocean Club's Mirage I, kill some time as they work on computers Wednesday at the Space Coast Seafarers Ministry in Cape Canaveral.

mons, but Bailey said that goes with the turf.

"We get different reactions," he said. "Most people come here to hear the word of God. Then, there are some who are polite, but are not interested. We try to win over as many people as we can."

And the ministry has certainly won over its share of volunteers and community residents who take an active interest.

"This is a lovely place," said Doris Morgan of Albany, N.Y., who volunteers at the center. "They have all the computers, so people who work on the boats can communicate with their families. There's plenty of food, because a lot of churches are bringing in food and salad for the guys. It's quite a place."

But while the ministry's welcome mat is a comfort, it cannot compare to being home.

Iliyan Hristov of Bulgaria said many of the crew members on the Mirage could not expect any relatives to help out by sending money.

"If I had rich parents, I would be somewhere else," he said. "I make about five times (as much money) here than I do back home, and I would like to get another job. Every day, I send my information to different companies by e-mail and fax for another job. I think, maybe, every

one of us could find another job, but I don't want to risk violating my seaman's visa."

"If I go home, I'll miss this place," said Adi Marius of Bucharest, Romania. He has been looking at Romanian Web sites and keeping up with the news at home.

What does he miss about home? "Sarmalute," he said. "Stuffed cabbage, stuffed with meat and rice, with a red sauce."

Ministry assistant Glover said she tries her hand at cooking some home-style meals for the crew, and her efforts at stuffed cabbage have not gone unappreciated.

"These crew members are so thankful, and it's rewarding to us," she said. "They say that it's our ministry that's keeping them sane at the moment. They have no money and they miss their families, but coming here makes it tolerable for them."

New investors may purchase Mirage I

By Donna Balancia
FLORIDA TODAY

Mirage I — Ocean Club Cruises' only ship — may set sail again — only this time with a new owner.

At a hearing Thursday in U.S. Bankruptcy Court for Southern District of Florida in Miami, the seizure of Mirage I was postponed because the debtors said they had arranged some interim financing and have offers for the purchase of the vessel, according to Ocean Club's attorney, Alan Kelley.

It is the latest news during what has been a tough journey for Ocean Club, its employees and customers.

On Dec. 31, Ocean Club filed for Chapter 11 protection from creditors, leaving passengers without vacations they had paid for and employees without a job and no way home.

In addition to back pay for crew members and dockage fees owed to Canaveral Port Authority, Ocean Club has a lengthy list of creditors, many of whom were lobbying for the sale of the Mirage I, to pay off debt.

Kelley said that, on Monday, the motion to approve interim financing will be filed and the court will set a hearing for later in the week. By Feb. 18, the debtor intends to file a motion with proposed sale procedures.

"The reason for the interim financing is to pay the crew their outstanding wages and start repatriating the crew," said Kelley,

who is with the Miami firm of Fowler, White, Burnett. "That interim financing will also pay for the garbage removal, security costs and things of that nature."

Kelley said he expected the interim financing to be in the neighborhood of just less than \$500,000.

The prospective financiers would make a loan, and the purchaser would be entitled to that as a credit.

He said it would cost roughly \$200,000 to \$250,000 to pay the crew back wages, repatriate them and get them home.

According to documents filed in the bankruptcy court, Ocean Club Cruises — also known as Magic Cruise Line Services Co., a Marshall Islands-based operation — owes \$4.83 million to creditors, but has assets of only \$245,943.

Among its creditors are Alberta Trading Co., owner of the vessel, which supplied a loan of \$2.76 million, and Canaveral Port Authority, which is owed dockage fees of \$272,368.

Lottery results

Friday, Jan. 30

Cash 3: 3-8-3

Play 4: 7-8-7-9

Fantasy 5:

6-7-24-26-27

Mega Money: 3-13-14-40

Mega Ball: 1

For updates, payoffs and a link to past winning numbers, go to floridatoday.com or call 632-1555 and enter code 1234.



Corrections, clarifications, amplifications

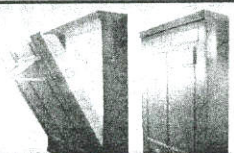
It is *Florida Today's* policy to correct errors of facts promptly that appear in our news reports. Corrections will be published on this page as soon as possible after an error is called to our attention.

WALLBEDS!

BEAUTIFUL & FUNCTIONAL SPACE-SAVING WALLBEDS

• FULL • TWIN • QUEEN Available

Mattress Optional



SUTHERLIN NISSAN

15th Annual AUDITOR'S Write Down!

New 2003 Nissan ALTIMA 2.5S

#595, 842, 849, 851, 852, 872, 887, 919, 920, 943, 965, 967, 971, 996, 1333, 91089

ONLY 16 REMAIN