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Cruise lines adding cell service

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Georgene Clark of Suntree says that even when she's on her cruise vacation she needs to stay in touch.

She's in luck because, soon, under a new deal between major cruise lines and Miramar-based Wireless Maritime Services, she will be able to call friends and family while at sea on her cell phone.

"You always want to be able to be reached in case of an emergency," Clark said. "And we have other members of our family who travel, and we always want to know if they arrived safely. It's very important to have cell phone communication, even when you're on a cruise."

In the past, cruisers generally have had to use e-mail and relatively expensive ship-to-shore communication to keep in contact.

Now, technology is making cellular calling more convenient.

"The idea behind this is people use their cell phones, they've come to rely on them, and we like to provide the same convenience for our passengers that they have at home," Carnival Cruise Lines spokesman Vance Gulliksen said.

Miami-based Carnival, the world's largest cruise line, announced a deal Thursday to introduce this technology fleetwide by early next year.

The cellular phone service requires no additional software or special dialing procedures. Cruise passengers make and receive calls, as well as transmit text messages and photos, as they would on land.

However, international roaming fees apply to shipboard cell phone calls.

"Is cell phone connectivity a good thing? It depends on who you ask," said Oivind Mathisen, editor of New York City-based trade publication Cruise Industry News. "If you ask the companies that provide the service, of course, they are happy. The cruise lines are happy because they earn money on this as well. And, let's face it, passengers are attached to their cell phones."

Wireless Maritime Services is a venture partly owned by Cingular Wireless, but people with other cellular providers also will be able to use the service.

Prices will vary, based on the provider and customers' individual contracts.

Norwegian Cruise Lines was a leader in providing personal cell phone service on ships, and the service has been spreading to other cruise lines.

Wireless Maritime Services said its cell phone connectivity is available on more than two dozen ships operated by various cruise lines, including Carnival, Celebrity Cruises, Holland America Line, Island

Cruises, Norwegian, Orient Lines, Regent Seven Seas Cruises and Royal Caribbean International.

"I think that's a definite improvement, to have cell phones," said Tim Albright, an advocate for cruise passengers, particularly those victimized by crimes.

He added that he believes cruise lines "should offer free cell phones to families and teenagers who don't have any while they're on board."

"It's a common cry of many of my clients that, when they felt the cruise lines weren't protecting them, they weren't able to call other entities, like the FBI," said Tonya Meister, a maritime attorney with the Miami law firm Lipcon, Margulies & Alsina. "If you don't have cell phone communication, you're at the mercy of the cruise lines."

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