

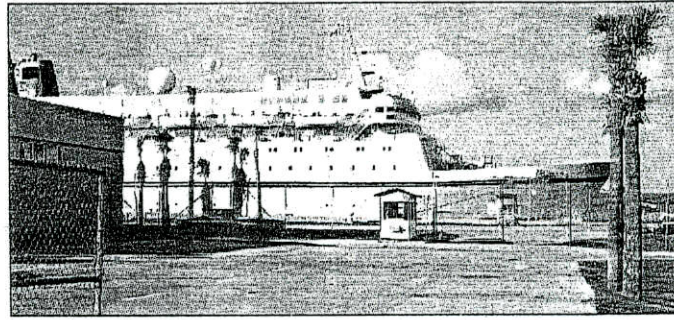
Ruling allows payment for Mirage crew

BY DONNA BALANCIA
FLORIDA TODAY

A U.S. Bankruptcy Court judge cleared the way Friday for an additional \$250,000 in emergency funds to be given to Ocean Club Cruises to pay off and repatriate the last remaining crew members of the Mirage I.

Ocean Club Cruises declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy in December and is in the process of selling off its only ship, Mirage I, in order to pay off its debt, estimated to be more than \$4.8 million.

A hearing will be held March 8 in U.S. Bankruptcy Court to set forth procedures regarding the sale of the ship. The first bid — for \$5.8 million — was submitted by Francois Bitan, an Israeli investor who has supplied interim financing to the company. Other bidders are expected to come forward, and a sale is expected to be held March 19.



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Good to go. A federal court has freed up \$250,000 to pay the crew of the Mirage I.

Since December, many of the ship's crew members have been stranded in the United States waiting for back pay and trying to find a way to get to their home countries. Ocean Club Cruises ceased operation of its two-day and three-day trips to the Bahamas.

"It's great that finally most of the crew will be able to go home. It's been a long struggle," said Tonya Meister of the Melbourne law firm Morgan & Barbary, who represents the majority of the crew members. "The money that was allotted today will help pay off the rest of the crew members."

There are 41 crew members

remaining on board the Mirage I, docked in Port Canaveral. Of that number, 24 will remain as a skeleton crew and 17 want to go home.

Ocean Club Cruises already has received \$800,000 in financing to pay back wages of crew members, make insurance payments and send crew members back to their home countries.

With that money, the company made insurance payments of \$285,000 and \$193,000. The company was able to make salary payments of \$269,407 to crew members, and paid \$41,331 in repatriation expenses. ■

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