

Stranded crew shipped home

Bankrupt cruise line pays staff

BY DONNA BALANCIA
FLORIDA TODAY

After weeks of waiting and praying — and having their shore passes revoked for their final weekend here — crew members of the Mirage I finally are going home, their lawyer and a customs official said Monday.

Crew members were stranded while Ocean Club Cruises negotiated a deal in bankruptcy court to sell its only ship to pay off about \$4 million in debts.

The attorney for the crew members, Tonya Meister of the Melbourne law firm Morgan & Barbary, said Ocean Club received about \$200,000 in interim financing to repay the crew and send them home. They were expected to start boarding flights out of Orlando International Airport as early as today.

On Friday, the crew members — who come from as far away as the Philippines and India — had

their shore passes revoked and were in lockdown on the bankrupt cruise ship at Port Canaveral.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection renewed the crew members' I-95 cards on Feb. 3. The cards — which allow foreigners on American soil while employed on a cruise ship — were revoked Friday by the same department.

Department spokesman Zachary Mann said the crew would be processed and returned to their countries, but he gave no reason why the shore passes were taken away.

On Thursday, a bankruptcy court judge in Miami approved an interim sum of \$500,000 to help cover expenses such as crew members' repatriation as well as insurance on the vessel.

Meister said she was not given a reason why the I-95 cards were suddenly revoked. "It has been a difficult situation for these people, but I am delighted that this saga is finally coming to an end," Meister said. ■

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