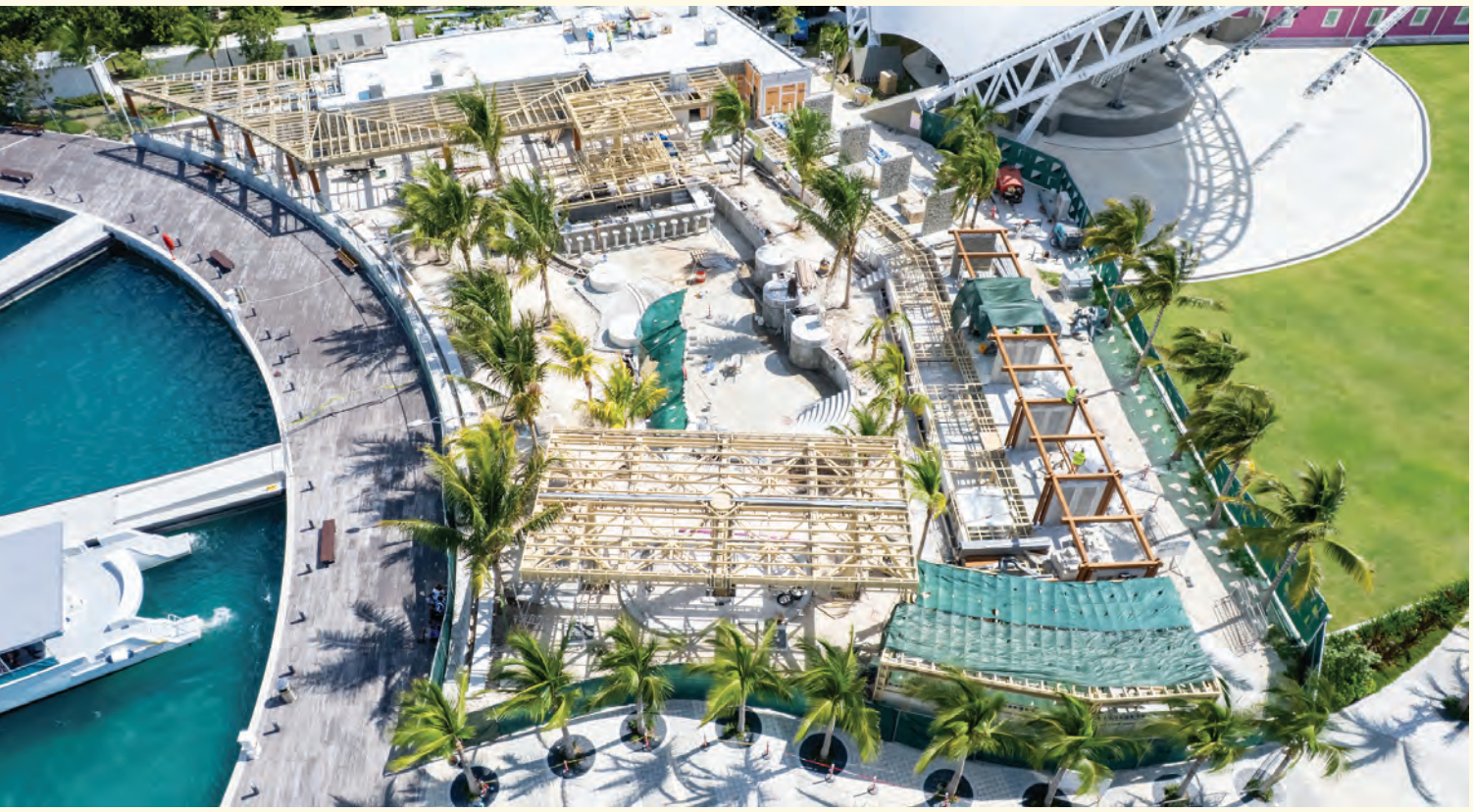

Day Club construction.

GPH acts as "global local" in evolving America's cruise industry

BY **KARI REINIKAINEN**

Global Ports Holding (GPH), the world's largest cruise port operator, often describes itself as a "global local". Its approach, according to Michael Maura, regional director Americas and general manager of Nassau Cruise Port, allows the company to reap the benefits of local expertise and use these foundations to set up best practices throughout the group.

GPH operates five ports in the Americas. Nassau Cruise Port, the busiest of them, is expected to handle some 6.5 million passengers a year once an ambitious investment programme is completed. Its other operations in the Caribbean are St Lucia, Antigua, and San Juan in Puerto Rico, and its fifth port is Prince Rupert in British Columbia in western Canada.

Maura is himself from the island of New Providence in the Bahamas, which is also the location of the capital, Nassau. GPH is heading a consortium that plans to invest $350 million to transform not just the cruise port but also the waterfront where it is located. "We wanted to get local small businesses involved – not just large international luxury brands," he told *CruiseTimes*.



Shopping at Nassau Cruise Port.

This is an important step from two points of view. Focus on local retailers, food and beverage offerings, and even art and entertainment underlines the "local" element of GPH's ethos. It also helps to differentiate Nassau "from the previous port and the next one", as Maura said, referring to customer


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experience. Customers looking for luxury retail offerings do not need to go far from the port to find these: they will be available some 500 feet away, in the town.

Although the core business of GPH is to operate cruise ports, on long-term agreements with the owners of these facilities, it also works to develop tourism in the cities and countries where it is in close cooperation with local stakeholders. These include tourism authorities and a wide range of businesses. The aim is to encourage people to get off the ship and offer them experiences that they will love.

What GPH is doing in Nassau is a template that it can also use, with modifications for local conditions, in Antigua and St Lucia. Prince Rupert is a different case, because it is not a year-round port of call. It serves the Alaskan cruise market, and its offering is focused heavily on local nature. "Prince Rupert is a gem. It offers a rainforest, grizzlies, whales, and a civilisation going back millennia," Maura said.

Global experience helps to develop tours

As the cruise industry keeps growing, and ever-larger ships enter service, GPH needs to invest in fixed infrastructure to make sure that the ports it operates can handle the ships and do so safely. In Prince Rupert, the port has to be readied to handle ships in the 170,000-gross-ton category. They are not the largest in the world, but their arrival means an increase in the size of ships that cruise in Alaskan waters.

More ships and bigger ships mean rising passenger volumes. For Prince Rupert, considerable growth is expected: 69,000 passengers in 2025 should grow to 150,000 in 2026. GPH is therefore in talks with local tour operators, important stakeholders in each of the company's ports, to update the offerings at Prince Rupert for a much larger audience. "75 per cent of the ideas that tour operators have are fantastic. But a quarter of them could need to be developed further," Maura said, adding that here, GPH's global reach offers a platform to fine-tune ideas.

This is important everywhere, Maura said. If a tour operator launches a product that does not trigger adequate interest, the financial losses to the operator can be significant. If it turns out to receive largely negative feedback, the result in a world of instant, globally available online reviews is equally unwelcome. Getting things right, by contrast, can have a direct financial benefit for the tour operator.



Mike Maura Jr, regional director Americas, GPH, and general manager, Nassau Cruise Port.

San Juan in Puerto Rico is a port of call on many Caribbean cruises, but it is also a major turnaround port, a gateway to the southern Caribbean. The operations of turnaround calls differ considerably from those of calls where ships continue to their next destination with the same passengers on board.

Smooth disembarkation of passengers and their luggage, re-provisioning of the ship, and then embarking the passengers of the next cruise with their luggage requires a lot of work. It takes, in Maura's words, "a well-rehearsed choir". GPH and its local partners are working hard to encourage people to stay a few nights in San Juan before starting the cruise. The Old Town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which in itself is a strong incentive for people to stay a bit longer.

Premium ships to focus

GPH operates 33 cruise ports, and Maura said that in the future, the company is looking to cooperate with potential new partners to develop offerings for cruise ships at the high end of the market. "We watch the cruise industry very closely. Our work does not only concern building piers, but also listening to what countries and people want to achieve," Maura said.

In some cases, this means focusing away from the mega-sized ships and the thousands of passengers they carry, and tailoring an offering to the luxury and premium end of the cruise market. "Some islands would like to support a higher-end, exclusive experience," Maura said, referring to the Caribbean region. Differentiation of a port's offering could also mean that large vessels with more passengers would use one part of a cruise port, and high-end ships with hundreds rather than thousands of passengers would dock in another part. "Not all destinations are the same; some want to offer something different," Maura said.

The growth of the cruise industry can encourage more ports to have a slice of this rapidly growing business, including in the Americas. A fundamental question for a port aspiring to this is the depth of the fairway. Where this is not adequate, it is important to consider that dredging it is very expensive. This can have a material effect on the capital requirements to develop a prospective cruise port. Smaller luxury ships that do not have the deep draft of very large vessels may offer an option for such ports to gain business without an enormous investment in this part of the infrastructure.



Port vibes at Nassau Cruise Port.