

PRACTICAL TRAVELER

Cell Connections Head Out to Sea

By BOB TEDESCHI

ADAM SHARPLES, a technology consultant in Manchester, England, was on the second evening of a weeklong Mediterranean cruise on the *Island Escape* last month when, on the way to dinner, he glanced at his cellphone and saw something peculiar: a text message from a friend, saying he had made it safely to Kuala Lumpur.

That he received a transglobal text message wasn't unusual. That he got it while on a cruise ship that was nowhere in sight of land was startling. "I was looking around to see if we were near the coast, but we weren't," Mr. Sharples said.

Cruise passengers are by now accustomed to the sight of wireless callers leaning against deck windows or railings squeezing out a few final moments of phone time as the ship drifts away from land-based cellular towers. But new initiatives among technology companies and cruise lines are starting to bring cellular technology onboard, allowing passengers to make and receive cell calls while in the middle of the ocean, and to avoid exorbitant charges for cabin phones.

"This is just the beginning," said Carolyn Spencer Brown, editor of *CruiseCritic.com*, a Web site owned by the Independent Traveler, a travel publishing company based in Pennington, N.J. "If these guys can do it, everybody can. And they will."

Part of a Trend

While early in providing cell connections to its users, *Island Cruises*, a joint venture of Royal Caribbean and First Choice Holidays, is not the first. The trend began in earnest last year, Ms. Brown said, when *Costa Cruises*, an Italy-based line owned by Carnival, began offering the service to its customers.

The *Island Escape* rolled out its services in July. Because it works only with phones that use the so-called G.S.M. standard, which most United States cellphones do not use, most American consumers will not be able to make or receive calls. But United States-based wireless aficionados will be able to make calls on Norwegian Cruise Line ships and others, starting later this year.

Norwegian Cruise announced in August that it had begun outfitting its ships with miniature cellular transmission towers and antennas throughout the decks, with the goal of offering cell calls to users everywhere on the ship. Furthermore, the new system, provided by Maritime Telecommunications Network and AT&T Wireless (the same used by



Island Cruises) will eventually run on both G.S.M. and C.D.M.A. technology, which means that virtually any passenger will eventually be able to use it for cellphones, text-messaging and even Internet browsing via a handheld computer.

Norwegian Cruise said it hoped to establish the service on all 12 of its ships by the end of next year.

Meanwhile, the initial rollout of the service will support only G.S.M. phone users operating at 900 megahertz and 1900 megahertz, which includes many AT&T Wireless and Cingular customers, as well as some smaller regional cellular vendors and about 200 foreign cell carriers.

According to David Kagan, chief executive of the Maritime Telecommunication Network, the ships will soon test a system that works with C.D.M.A. phones as well.

"Ideally, for any customer with a C.D.M.A. or G.S.M. phone, the technology works as it does on land," Mr. Kagan said. "You get a call on your cellphone and it rings. Anywhere."

The length of time for deployment on each ship will depend largely on how much time the ship is not in service, Mr. Kagan said. "Some lines don't like to have the passengers bothered by us running cable during the cruise."

The cellular transmitters, Mr. Kagan said, will look like "little fire detectors hanging from ceiling tiles in different places."

Rates will vary, depending on the user's wireless company, but they will generally fall into the range of international roaming rates, and will remain consistent for the entire cruise. For instance, AT&T's roaming rates for the Caribbean — currently \$1.69 a minute — will prevail, no matter which island the ship is nearest. When the ship is in port, users will be switched off the ship's network, and will

pay the country-specific roaming rate.

Less Than Satellite Calls

Those rates are a steal compared with what cruise ships typically charge for expensive satellite hookups. Norwegian Cruise passengers, for instance, pay \$7 a minute to make and receive calls from the cabin. The quality of the cell calls is the same as land-based cell calls, said Mr. Sharples, who estimated that he made \$40 to \$50 in calls on his trip.

"With the calls I made, it was fine," Mr. Sharples said. "And I received a couple of calls, which surprised me. I sort of expected the technology to only work one way."

That expectation comes from past sailings when friends or family members tried to call his cabin but ended up asking the crew to leave written notes tacked to his door, Mr. Sharples said. "It's like going back 20 years in time," he said. "So it's a benefit that people can ring me."

According to Rob Marjerison, vice president for business development at Maritime Telecommunications Network, his company and AT&T will probably announce similar agreements with other cruise lines in the coming months. A spokeswoman for Carnival, the largest cruise ship line, said it was looking into providing cellular service on its ships but had not yet announced any plans.

Jaye Hilton, a spokeswoman for Royal Caribbean Cruises, which also owns *Celebrity*, said that based on the experience in helping roll out the service on the *Island Escape*, the company would begin offering cell connections on its *Navigator of the Seas* by the end of 2004 and on all 29 Royal Caribbean and *Celebrity* ships next year. For travelers, the trend toward the use of cellphones on ships could leave airplanes as the only refuge from intrusive bosses and other round-the-clock cellular zealots.

"I never minded not having a cellphone on a cruise because I didn't want to be interrupted," said Ms. Spencer Brown, of *Cruise Critic*.

Others will lament the loss of civility that sometimes accompanies cellphone use. This year I was on a Hawaiian cruise with my daughter Juliana, peacefully scanning the sea, looking for dolphins, with no one within 20 yards of us, when another passenger approached, talking loudly about a business deal. He told the other caller to hold on, then stopped suddenly, perhaps two feet away from us, before resuming the conversation at maximum volume.

I looked at him, puzzled. He smiled sheepishly and shrugged his shoulders, as if to say it was the only place he could get a clear signal.