

INSIDE VIEW:

THE AZAMARA EXPERIENCE

Edie Bronstein, Senior Vice President of Azamara Club Cruises speaks about the line's approach to cruising.

by

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It was something of a landmark day for Azamara Club Cruises. Azamara Journey was docked at New York's legendary Passenger Ship Terminal thus becoming the first Azamara Club Cruises ship to call in Manhattan. In addition, the ship was receiving international media attention as it prepared to embark on a cruise memorializing the 100th anniversary of the last voyage of the Titanic.

Azamara Journey's visit to New York also coincided with the anniversary of a more recent event - - the re-launch of Azamara Club Cruises in 2010. Accordingly, the line's Senior Vice President, Sales and Marketing, Edie Bornstein, met with the press in Journey's Drawing Room to talk about what the Azamara experience is all about.

Re-inventing A Cruise Line

Azamara began in 2007 when parent company Royal Caribbean Cruises Limited ("RCCL") decided

that it wanted to create an upmarket brand that was even more luxurious than its Celebrity Cruises brand. RCCL had recently acquired Pullmantur Cruises, which had in its fleet two elegant small ships, which had originally been built for Renaissance Cruises. Three nearly identical ships were at that time being marketed by Oceania Cruises as luxury ships. The two Pullmanutur ships were thus seen as natural candidates to serve as the fleet for RCCL's new upmarket brand and so they were transferred to what RCCL was calling Azamar Cruises.

Ms. Bornstein explained that the name is derived from the Romance languages - - "Aza meaning blue and mar meaning the sea. [Also, the name was inspired by] Acamar, the brightest star seen from the latitude of Greece - - that is where the name Azamara sprung from."

Although the two elegant small ships, re-named Azamara Journey and Azamara Quest, received good reviews, the new line was not an immediate success. Consequently, a new senior management team was

brought in. "Larry Pimentel [the line's new President and CEO] and I came onboard about two and a half years ago. We decided to re-launch as a more inclusive product and brand experience and hence the brand Azamara Club Cruises was born actually in April 2010." The word "Club" was added to the brand name in order to recall the ship's intimate but sophisticated atmosphere. "Before April 2010, it was just Azamara Cruises."

The new team sought to revamp the line both in terms of the onboard experience and with regard to the line's approach to the destinations that the ships visit. Although the broad outlines of this strategy were established at the start, it has been "an evolutionary process. We constantly endeavor to evolve, keep up and change."

The Onboard Experience

"This is a brand experience where a consumer who chooses to become our guest can experience a wonderful, once in a lifetime memory. I always say something very magical happens onboard these vessels. It is very hard to articulate in a collateral piece or in a print piece or even in a video because it is just a certain magic. I have been in this industry for 30 years and have had the privilege to sail on just about every brand and I mean it sincerely when I say that something magical or 'Aza-mazing' happens onboard."

The atmosphere is international. "The crew of 408 come from 50 countries around the world. Our 694 guest complement comes from a myriad of countries. That is why we always say that we are a global-centric product. Only about 50 percent of our guests come from the U.S. The remaining in descending order come from the U.K., Australia, Canada, Germany, the Nordics and a smattering of everywhere else. Regardless of where one is from, they must be comfortable with English as their first or second language."

In addition to the stately elegance of the ship's décor, there is a sophisticated enrichment program that includes lectures. There is also a spa that offers not only massages but things like acupuncture and fitness classes. Although the ships are relatively small, the guests are not packed in together and there is good people flow. "It is a much more quiet understated elegance and people are free really to create their own daily and nightly itinerary."

"We are primarily an adult-type sailing experience. We do get children from time-to-time [but] we don't have a children's program, we don't have a [children's] room. [Nonetheless], we welcome children. I have certainly been on many summer sailings in the Med where they seem to really enjoy the experience."

"We have an incredible dining experience onboard, an open-seating dining experience. Reservations are never required unless the guest wants to dine in one of our two specialty dining venues - - Prime C and Aqualina. For those reservations are required."

Despite its sophistication, the onboard experience is not stuffy. "It is a country club style of dress. So if a gentleman does not want to be in a suit and tie, he does not need to be. However, if somebody is celebrating a special anniversary, let's say, and they want to be in black tie they will feel comfortable and free to do so."

As mentioned earlier, a key aspect of the new management team's strategy was to include more in the ticket price. "We are a more-inclusive brand. The price includes now: bottled water, specialty sodas, coffees, teas, gratuities, pouring wines at lunch and dinner from boutique wineries around the world; shuttle service to and from port communities where available; and complimentary self-service laundry. If the [guests] are in a suite or above, they get not just any butler but butlers trained in the proper English style of butler service. We put our money where our mouth is and went out and hired the Queen of England's butler training people to train [our butlers]. The butlers score 300 out of 300 perpetually [on the guest ratings]."

"We are the value proposition. [Our prices] are on average 15 percent lower than our cruise competitors. We are also more inclusive. [Including items] that those other brand experiences have the guests pay for adds to the value proposition."

A different approach to destinations

The majority of the guests who travel on Azamara are experienced cruisers. "Just under 22 percent of our guests have never cruised before. They are seasoned travelers but they have never cruised before." Thus, Azamara guests are sophisticated travelers who are looking for something beyond the usual cruise experience.

"If you were to say to me, what makes Azamara different, I would tell you our key brand differentiator is absolutely, positively destination immersion. We synopsise that in six simple words: longer stays, more overnights, night touring."

Because the Azamara ships stay in port longer than the 9 to 5 port calls usually made by cruise ships, the guests have a richer experience. For example, staying overnight in New York allows guests to experience the city that never sleeps' famous nightlife. "The guests can go to a play, they can go to a Michelin star restaura-

rant, they can go to a disco or a club-club, if they want to. So if the party is going to get started at 11 p.m. like it does in a place like St. Tropez, they can do that because we are there overnight."

Staying overnight also enhances the daytime experience. "When we are in St. Petersburg, Russia, guests can actually feel that they are on vacation - - they can sleep late, have brunch, go tour, the next day go to Moscow on a Land Discovery shore excursion and not feel exhausted. It is very different than when you are just there 9 to 5 [and feel that you have to spend every minute touring]. The [Azamara guests] can become culturally-immersed in the destination."

"Typically, we [dock] in the heart of the destination. You get to really experience the place as you wish. So if you just want to go out and patrol on your own, that is your option."

Alternatively, guests can go on one of Azamara's shore excursions. "Land Discoveries, which is our shore excursion program, is very unique and different than what any other line is doing. There are different levels of Land Discoveries. They can be specific with the focus on art, architecture, or food and wine or they can be a get to know the city general type thing."

"They don't make them very big; they want to make the group as intimate as possible. We have one where you can go to the Hermitage at night so you are not with 10,000 of your closest tourist friends like during 9 to 5 hours."

Another component of Azamara's approach to destinations "which really makes us different is that we are really all about world events that people can check off their bucket lists. Whether that is a 100th anniversary of the sailing of Titanic or whether that is Carnivale in Rio or the Monaco Grand Prix, or the Chelsea Flower Show, or, in concert with our partnership with Perry Golf, the British Open in July 2013. The list goes on and on. As world events continue to occur, we strategically plan our itineraries around those events."