

# AN INTERVIEW WITH CAPTAIN CLAUDIO CUPISTI

By Richard H. Wagner

Captain Claudio Cupisti began his nautical career with two years in the Italian Navy. After leaving the service, he worked for a short time on a coal carrier but "I tell you honestly, I didn't like it." Consequently, when an opportunity arose at the Home Lines, Cupisti took it and worked on its ships for 11 years. After that line went bankrupt, Cupisti went to work for Carnival Cruise Lines and has now worked for Carnival for 20 years.

His first ship with Carnival was also the line's first ship, the MARDI GRAS, formerly the Canadian Pacific EMPRESS OF CANADA. He then served on FESITVALE, another converted ocean liner, and then on the first ship built specifically for CARINVAL, the TROPICALE. "It was my newest ship at that time and I was so excited," Cupisti recalls.

He first took command of a ship with the CARNIVAL DESTINY (101,353 gross tons) and has been captain of FANTASY (70,367 tons), her sister the ECSTACY and the earlier JUBILEE. In addition, Cupisti was part of the team overseeing the construction of the Spirit-class ships (88,000 tons). As a result, he lived in Finland near the Kvaerner Masa shipyard while CARNIVAL SPIRIT, CARNIVAL LEGEND, and CARNIVAL PRIDE were built. Subsequently, Cupisti commanded CARNIVAL LEGEND.

## *The Technical Side of the Job.*

Captain Cupisti's present command, CARNIVAL MIRACLE is also a Spirit-class ship built at the Kvaerner Masa shipyard. "This one is the one before last of the series. They started the series of these Spirit class ships with the ATLANTICA for Costa, then the SPIRIT, the PRIDE, the LEGEND, the MIRACLE and then one more for Costa, which was built just right after this."

As noted above, Captain Cupisti has commanded a number of the different classes of Carnival

ships including the larger Destiny-class ships "and by far, I prefer this class of ship." In comparison to the Destiny class ships, MIRACLE has "more power for maneuvering, it has more speed. The hull is [better suited] to cross the ocean. [in the Destiny class], the shape of the bow is much larger. It has a tendency to bounce in the water. It can be annoying for somebody who is not used to [the sea.] This one is more like a liner. It cuts through the waves. It is much more comfortable for everyone."

The designers of the Spirit-class used the design for the lower hull of the Fantasy-class ships as their starting point and then improved upon that design. Indeed, the resulting design has proven so successful that versions of this class, also known as the Vista-class, have also been built by the Fincantieri shipyard in Italy and are now in the fleets of P&O Cruises and Holland America Line. "We are more or less the same ship. Of course, they have a different [interior] a different position of the cabins."

The MIRACLE is powered by six diesel generators which provide electricity both for propulsion and for the lighting, air conditioning and other onboard uses. Unlike some of the Vista-class ships, the MIRACLE has no gas turbine engines. "The gas turbine works very well for a warship but they are not thinking about consumption of gas. We don't need to do 40 knots. I know some [cruise ship lines] adopted it for awhile and then they dropped it. I was looking today and oil is \$90 a barrel. So, you really don't want to go gas turbine."

For the main propulsion, the generators feed electric motors housed in two "azipods" suspended below the hull. These pods resemble huge outboard motors and can turn 360 degrees. When the captain wants to change the course of the ship, he simply turns the pods. Consequently there is no need for a rudder.

The pods are also used in conjunction with the ship's three bow thrusters to dock and maneuver the ship at

slow speeds. Because of the power of this combination, the ship can move sideways, reverse, or stand still relatively easily. Therefore, "generally, we never use tugs. The only port is New York, where on the river, we have major variations of currents. It is a sort of insurance for us in case, God forbid. We can go in and out without tugs without a problem with anywhere between 25 and 35 knots of wind on the side."

The powerful propulsion system also facilitates a more comfortable ride at sea. "We have lots of balconies and they create pockets of wind. But, due to the propulsion that we have, the ship does not lean too much to one side or the other. We also have [fuel and water] tanks to balance her. It is not a soft ship, she doesn't turn, she doesn't lean that much either. She is pretty stable. It is well designed."

#### *The Human Side of the Job*

Once Carnival Cruise Lines finds a ship design it likes, it tends to stick with it. For example, there are eight Fantasy class ships. However, within these classes of ships, each individual ship has a different personality or character. Indeed, Carnival's noted interior designer Joseph Farcus creates a different theme for the décor of each ship. "The décor gives you the difference between say a British ship, a muscular ship or a very efficient modern ship, which is very cold. That is the first step." Captain Cupisti explained.

"Then, it is the people themselves that make the character, if you will, on a ship. Why the people? You will argue: 'But the people change.' Yes, but the first management [of a ship] leaves a definite imprint on the activities and on the spirit aboard. And, it will never change. If you have a ship, it may sound superstitious, but if you have a ship that starts off bad, it will never go back good. A ship that starts with a nice spirit [continues that way]."

Within the Carnival fleet, CARNIVAL MIRACLE has been consistently rated highly by both by passengers and crew. While part of this is tradition, much of it also comes from the captain and senior management. "I am a firm believer that you make your atmosphere. You can influence other people positively or negatively."

"We try to maximize our interaction with the passengers. Personally, I like to go around to get the feeling of the people. Sometimes talking to the people can give you good ideas. They can tell you what direction to take in the future to make the product better. They give you right there on the spot the feeling of what to change or what to improve. So, it is nice to go around. Also, the passengers like to have interaction



*Captain Claudio Cupisti. (Photo courtesy of Carnival Cruise Lines).*

with the captain; they like to see the officers around, have the possibility to approach the person. What we have lost with the introduction of bigger ships is the personal touch that we can give to the passengers. Many of them may feel if they don't see you around, if they don't have the possibility to talk with you, to be like cattle -- [we] bring you from one place to the other, get off the ship and then go. No. I go around and interact with them, give them the possibility to express themselves, right or wrong."

In addition to these informal meetings, there are welcome parties hosted by the captain on the first formal night of the cruise and then on the second night, the captain and the senior officers gather in the ship's lobby so that passengers can approach them to ask questions, chat, or express concerns. "Those are two advertised events, advertised in our daily Capers, so the guests have the time and the location where to meet us rather than just walking around." Also, the captain hosts a table in the dining room, "we organize parties [for VIPs]. Then, we have repeaters party for those who have come back

to the ship. So, we try to be as visible as is possible."

On the MIRACLE the goal is to provide "an all inclusive experience that actually exceeds your expectation." To do this, service is key and good service can only be provided with a good crew. "We have more of a cosmopolitan clientele so we have more European staff because they are much more educated in terms of university and languages. They are exposed to different nations. For example, in Rumania you are next to Hungary and Russia, so you know at least two or three languages. So, you can give a better result to our product. We also have a large number of Indonesians and Filipinos. Their culture is more of a smiling culture so it is very well received. The integration of the two groups, if you will, because there are many nationalities, is better for us because they give us the strength, hospitality and the smiling needed to keep the old customer and to have the first-time customer come back."

"We have a training school and then we train people onboard, we keep training them." The "Carnival college" is located aboard certain ships in the Carnival fleet. Thus, new employees are "trained on the ships with proper trainers. Then, after that they have been sent to a ship, they work their way up. For example, people hired for the dining room start down in the crew dining room then they move up into the main dining room."

Cultural background and training, however, are not enough to ensure a good crew. "Besides managing the type of work, you have got to make sure that these people, who in many cases are not used to confined spaces like ships, have the necessary time to relax and to enjoy themselves. If you don't find this balance, you will stress these people much sooner than you have. On the other hand, if you give too much on the fun side, if you will, you are going to stress them as well. So, the whole problem is to find this balance to both enjoy work and free time. And also, which is more difficult, to give the activities toward the culture of the people. For the East Europeans they are more active in soccer and the Filipinos more active in basketball or ping-pong, for example."

On MIRACLE, "there is an excellent crew and an excellent management. We really thrive on maintaining and [upgrading] the ship. I can't say without boasting [but] the management here is very well dedicated [and I] expect them to do, correct and maintain the ship the way that I like."