

INSIDE INTERVIEW

A COZIER CLUB

Club Manager Harald Bernberger talks about AIDAaura

by

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When last we spoke to Harald Bernberger, he was Club Manager of AIDAluna. One year, a new baby and many sea miles later, we find him heading the hotel operation on AIDAaura. Mr. Bernberger's enthusiasm for AIDA remains undiminished.

At 42,289 gross tons, AIDAaura is smaller than AIDAluna (69,200 gross tons). "Here, it is more intimate. On the big ships, you have your three ways of going from A to B on Decks 9, 10 and 11. The AIDA Bar is a little bit off track. On here, the AIDA Bar is a much more central place. Everybody goes through there, so everybody meets there. Everything is a little bit cozier, the people meet. [It] is a little bit more family. It is nice. But you have people from both sides - - some people like this, some people like that."

In addition to the difference in size, there are some differences in the ships' features. To illustrate, whereas the theater on the Luna is part of the ship's atrium, the Aura has a traditional theater. The Luna has three buffet restaurants as its main dining rooms whereas the Aura has two buffet restaurants.

Despite the difference in features, both ships

offer AIDA's informal, contemporary cruise experience. For example, there are no assigned dining times in the main restaurants. "In one restaurant, the Market, we have times when you can go. We close it in between - - we are refreshing it and refilling stuff. But you are not assigned to one of the times. People like it. The other restaurant, the Calypso, is open throughout."

How the experience is presented is altered to fit the physical properties of the ship but the overall experience remains the same. Take specialty restaurants for instance. Like the Luna, the Aura has "a Rossini restaurant. [But] we don't have a steakhouse, we don't have a sushi bar [as on the Luna]. It is combined here on the menu [of the Rossini]."

As a result, the same type of guest who travels on the Luna, travels on the Aura. "Overall, the demographics are pretty much the same. If you have a school vacation in Germany, you have more kids. Younger people want the sun, beach, suntan, diving. Mature people are more interested in seeing Boston and eating a lobster, having a cup of coffee - - a more cultural destination. But it doesn't matter which ship it is."

AIDA does, however use its smaller ships somewhat differently than its larger ships. "With the smaller ships, you go to new destinations. The Vita goes down to the Amazon, the Cara goes down all the way to the tip of South America. This one goes on different Caribbean cruises, it goes to Asia, it goes to the Black Sea "

"You send these ships first and see how the bookings go and then the big ships - - check out how it is accepted because not every destination is right away from the beginning full. We [also] see how the buses and the flights are before we put a big ship there."

Consequently, the smaller ships tend to attract more people who have cruised with AIDA in the past. "With the new destinations, you have more repeaters because they want to see the new destination."

This is not to say that the smaller ships just go to exotic ports. On the day that this interview was conducted, the Aura was docked one pier away from the Luna at Manhattan's Passenger Ship Terminal. "New York works out for everybody. New York is different. New York is New York. You can't compare it with anything in the world. It does not compare with anything else that has existed and that is also how the rest of the world sees it."

2010 was AIDA's most successful year thus far, with 511,400 guests traveling on the line's ships - - up 97,400 over the year before. "We are still full and for certain destinations, [it is difficult to get the cabin you most desire]."

Accordingly, AIDA is expanding rapidly. 2011 saw the entry into service of Luna's sister ship AIDA Sol. "Next year, the AIDA Mara is coming. We do a break - - one year with no new ships. Then we have ordered two new ships that will be built in Japan."

The latter two ships will be far larger than any ship in the current AIDA fleet - - 125,000 gross tons with 3,250 passenger berths. Given AIDA's success the increase in size is not that much of a surprise. However, the selection of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to build the ships did come as a surprise to many. AIDA is Germany's leading cruise line and all but one of its current fleet was built in Germany. Indeed, its most recent class of large ships, which includes the Luna, was built in Germany by Meyer Werft, a firm that has achieved a considerable reputation for high quality ships.

Mr. Bernberger explained that the reasons for the selection are straightforward. First, when a cruise line wants to build a new ship, it issues a document setting forth specifications for the new ship and inviting the various shipyards to make proposals for building such a ship. "Meyer did not even write an offer. He says: 'Why should I write an offer, I don't have space. I



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am booked with this, this, this and this. They have their books full." Indeed, Celebrity Cruises, Disney Cruises, Royal Caribbean, and Norwegian Cruise Line all have ships on order from Meyer Werft.

Second, the other European shipyards did submit offers "but compared to Mitsubishi, the price was tremendously [higher]."

Third, "Princess [a sister company to AIDA in the Carnival family of companies] has built already two ships [Diamond Princess and Sapphire Princess] in Mitsubishi, which they are very happy with. [It is like] when you build your house, you look to see who will build with the same quality for the price."

The first of these new ships will enter service in March 2015 and the second a year later.

Guests on the Aura, do inquire about the choice but they are satisfied once the facts are explained to them. "I think AIDA does very good public relations work. We always play with open cards".