

INSIDE VIEW:

KEEPING QM2 MOVING FORWARD

A conversation with
Hotel Manager Robert Howie
of Queen Mary 2

by

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With the retirement of several senior Cunard officers during the last couple of years, a new generation of officers has moved to the front ranks. On Queen Mary 2, Robert Howie has succeeded the legendary John Duffy as the permanent hotel manager.

Howie is no stranger to Cunard but nor is he a member of the old guard. He came to Cunard in 2004 after Carnival Corporation acquired Princess Cruises. During 14 years with Princess, he had been involved on the hotel management side with bringing eight ships into service. At Cunard, he began as food and beverage manager on QM2 and then became relief hotel manager. Tapping his experience

with bringing new ships into service, Cunard put him on the new build teams for both Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth. He also served as hotel manager on both of those ships. After Queen Elizabeth was established, he returned to QM2 in 2011.

The question naturally arises, how will all of these changes in the senior team affect the onboard experience on Queen Mary 2? “As John said in his farewell speech, ‘Now, it is up to you guys to maintain the Cunard brand and what we stand for.’ At the same time, certainly from my perspective, you want to take the brand forward. You don’t want to be stuck in a rut. You don’t want to be

totally changing the brand but, within a certain perimeter, [you want to] keep moving it forward, keep it fresh.”

“We are taking a general look at the product as a whole to see where we are in comparison with some of the other lines. We have a few people who have now come in to compete against us. Celebrity has made it very clear that they are running up against us. We have to take a look with fresh eyes of what we are actually offering the guests and where we need to improve.”

QM2’s response to the competition will not be to just adopt ideas that have been successful at other lines. “There is a lot of plagiarism in the industry. We haven’t consciously gone out to do that. I don’t think we need to, to be honest. You have to be aware of your competition but we are not going to change our product just because there is somebody new on the horizon that has come to challenge us. We are what we are; we are what we deliver. At the same time, we are going to review it on a regular basis to see where we can improve.”

To illustrate, “we have made some significant improvements [behind the scenes], which from an operational standpoint, make it flow a lot better. And although these changes are not in your face, you do actually see in the comment cards that come back from guests at the end of the voyage the feedback that we had hoped.”

“We have introduced some new things up in the [alternative] dining outlets in the King’s Court in the evening. In the Carvery, for example, we do tableside preparations now, which we have never

done before. When the guests pass through and they see these tableside preparations - - duck ala orange being prepared - - they say ‘we ought to do this’ and book it the next night.”

Not all of these changes have flowed from the top. “A lot of things that we’ve done, [came from] the people who work there - - the dining room staff, the supervisors and head waiters. They are the ones who are facing the guests. So we asked them what they thought and they made suggestions. It is important that the people on the floor who are working are giving that input. We listen to that. The crew is the key to success in [this] business.”

Another recent set of changes to QM2 flowed from the work done in connection with bringing the Queen Elizabeth into service.

“When we introduced the Queen Elizabeth into service, Queen Elizabeth became our benchmark of all the new ideas that we wanted to [implement] within the company as a whole. Queen Elizabeth came out with all these new things. Consequently, as the [other] ships have gone into dry dock, we have gradually introduced these new things. The new daily programs, the new bed linens - - they are all the same as what is on Queen Elizabeth. We try to get a little bit of consistency between the three ships.”

“At the same time, we try and have this ship maintain its individuality. It is a one off. The other two ships are very similar in design but quite different in décor inside. Queen Mary 2 has a little more contemporary feel to her as opposed to the other two.”

“We feel the ships are basically the destination. So [for example] we did not want to have the same [alternative] dining concepts on all three ships. The only common theme that runs in the three ships is the Asian cuisine. But you’ll find that the Asian cuisine on all three ships is different. That is why on all three ships the Asian theme is named differently. It is Lotus on here, you have Jasmine [on the Elizabeth and], you have Bamboo on the Victoria.”

Yet another impetus for change is the fact that Cunard attracts a very high number of repeat passengers. “With the amount of repeat guests that we get, you

have to keep it fresh for them as well. We put little small changes in that hopefully enhance it. There isn’t going to be a radical change, just enhancements to the product.”

On Queen Mary 2, “no two days are the same. We have to keep it running like that because we do have a high number of repeat guests. Some of them come on not for just the seven day transatlantic; some will be on for a month. They will come on and do the seven days and they’ll go up to Europe with us and they’ll come back. It can be 23 or 30 days. You have to keep the product fresh and keep it moving.”