

INSIDE CARNIVAL PRIDE:

MAKING PEOPLE SMILE

A CONVERSATION WITH HOTEL DIRECTOR BRIAN D'SOUZA

by

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As the Hotel Director on Carnival Pride, Brian D'Souza's responsibilities include the accommodations, entertainment and food - - all of the things that make or break a cruise vacation experience. For several years, Carnival Pride sailed from Los Angeles and was consistently rated by passengers as one of the top ships in the Carnival Cruise Lines fleet. Then, in the Spring of 2009, the ship was re-positioned so as to do cruises year-round out of Baltimore, Maryland. Despite the differences in these two markets, the Pride has continued to receive high marks. Indeed, if anything, the response to the Pride has been even better on the East Coast.

To set a framework for discussion of Pride's success, I asked Mr. D'Souza, who is the typical guest on Carnival Pride? "I think [it is] your average North American who is unpretentious, who wants to have good, clean fun and wants to get away from the craziness of the economy and the news. I think people do not turn on their TVs sometimes. They do not want to because every time you turn on the TV it is just bad news. I think that's what we actually do - - make people smile. And we do it very quickly. I think not being pretentious is a key, keeping things very simple."

"We are a very down to earth as a cruise line when it comes to our crew and even our guests. I talked to someone last week who said that there are some cruise lines out there where you go to talk to the management, the captain and you can't even go close to them. They stand in the back and nobody goes close to them, they are almost protected. For us, if you are not in touch with the people that you are serving, who are paying to be onboard the ship, it just makes no sense."

"On Carnival you can have lots of good fun for a great value. The options that we offer are tremendous when it comes to the Carnival Pride."

"We don't push you to do anything - - that has always been Carnival's style. We don't push you that you have to go participate in this; you have to go eat in the Lido. It is very flexible. You can either do nothing or do everything that you want to do. [You can] chill out completely and go into your Zen zone. If you want to hit the gym, you hit the gym. There are so many options now that we have onboard on cruise ships."

"On this particular ship, we have a lot of space for people who do not want to do anything, they can just do nothing. They can go to the Sunset Garden which is all the way on Deck 3 forward, just take a book, sit by the big huge porthole

and just watch the sea go by. There are a lot of nice spots; there is a lot of deck space. There are a lot of positives to this particular ship."

"It is a very convenient ship. Deck 9 is the Lido and [the other public spaces are on] Decks 2 and 3. The rest is all cabins. We have all these outside cabins with all these balconies."

When D'Souza first started with Carnival, all that a guest embarking on a cruise could get to eat was barbequed chicken or hot dogs - - a far cry from the numerous choices such a guest faces today. "Carnival has evolved. We have made some very good changes. The food is one of the major criteria when people choose [where to spend] a vacation. I ask different people who cruise other cruise lines and they say that Carnival is right up there when it comes to food. Again, it is because of the feedback that we get that we have actually made these changes."

"I think food-wise, Carnival has been very smart, listening to the guests. Like on the dessert menu, you have the Melting Cake. At first, it was only one night of the cruise. Then, we realized it was so popular, why not put it on every night of the cruise. It was done because we listened to the guests, to the paying customers. So, yes, we have evolved from the barbequed chicken days to the beautiful food lines that we have up [in the Lido Restaurant]. We give you different choices of international food every day. Yesterday was Mediterranean; the first day was Italian and today is Indian. We give you a whole spread, which was never there before."

"Now, we have Your Time Dining [a flexible dining option in which guests can decide when to have dinner] which is [the result of] the feedback that we have gotten. I think that a business that stops listening may survive for just a couple of years. They just live in their own little world. If you don't know what is going on out there and you don't listen to people who actually give you their money, sooner or later you are going to find that you are no longer in business."

"We listen to the guests, we listen to the customers. I have the comment cards right here," D'Souza gestured toward a large stack of paper. "This is for last week [s cruise] and I am going through every single one of them. I think that is why Carnival is in Baltimore today because we listened. We listened to the people and we realized that people do not want to fly. They want to lessen their travel time so we bring the ship to you instead of you coming to the ship. [In the early days] Miami and San Pedro were the only ports. Now,



Hotel Director Brian D'Souza.

just look at the ports that we are sailing out of. There is a lot of flexibility."

Another change has been the addition of a premium restaurant on Pride and several other Carnival ships. "That is an alternative that we offer the guests. You cannot get better value. That is top-notch. They are serving you prime beef up there. Only two percent of the beef in America is prime. So, we are serving the best cuts of beef. I don't think anywhere on land you will get something similar for the price."

"We have moved over from [the alternative restaurant being] a supper club to a steakhouse. We have relaxed the attire up there. Before it was jacket and tie, then jacket only and now we have relaxed that. Apart from the cruise elegant nights we don't insist on gentlemen having jackets. The menu is the same. It is just a shift again because we listened to the people. A lot of people were saying that we would love to eat up there but we do not want to dress up in a jacket."

The popular trend towards informality has



even affected what the officers wear. On the formal nights, the ship's senior officers used to wear dress formal mess kits, the equivalent of a tuxedo for those in uniform. Now, they wear a more informal blue uniform. "That again was based on what our clients [said to us about] formal nights. It is no longer called: 'formal'; it is called: 'cruise elegant.' Since we went to cruise elegant for the guests, we thought if we wore tuxedos and the guests wore cruise elegant, it would be kind of a mismatch. It seems to be working; we don't get any negative feedback. In fact, we get positive feedback - - they say they feel like we are more approachable."

Another area of evolution has been in the type of guest the line serves. "We have realized that we are very much a family cruise line. Our Camp Carnival has progressed a lot if you compare the Holiday class to what we have now and on the Splendor [which entered service in 2008], it is even bigger. At Camp Carnival, the number of kids goes up to 600 or 700 kids on a cruise."

"I think we are providing fun but good fun. That is what our guests are seeing more and more. Beverages are not in your face. People who are having fun and enjoying themselves will spend money and you do not need to get a person drunk. Over the years, like every company out there, we have evolved and realized that there is a better way to do business and I think that is what everybody is noticing now. We are a fun cruise line absolutely

but not a cheap one. I think there is a big difference between having cheap fun and having good fun."

"We keep things simple. I think that is where Carnival retains its edge. We have not forgotten where we came from. Even though we have evolved, you will still get your fried chicken on one day of the cruise. But now, we give you much more than that. We give you many more options."

"On the Room Service menu, we still have the BLTs - - it is always popular. It was popular 20 years back and it is still on the menu. But we have added chicken fajita as well because we realized that they need a hot option. So, we haven't taken away something that was liked, that the guests appreciated. If a majority of our guests like something, why take it away unless you substitute something that is much, much better than what it was."

"The guests who cruised with us 20 or 30 years back will still come back because they know they are still going to get the same hospitality and the food has only improved. And it is only because of the feedback that we have made these changes because if they had said that we just want barbequed chicken and we don't want all of this Italian food and all the other [we would not have it]. As the guests evolve and they get more used to cruising, you have to evolve because people have expectations and the expectations keep getting better."

The worldwide economic crisis has affected the cruise industry along with everyone else. Yet, Carnival Pride continues to sail at or near capacity. "We have a very strong belief that in these times, people still want to go on vacation. We think we are in the best position to cater to that market because at the end of the day, we provide the best value of any of the cruise lines out there. Last week, when we had all these travel agents [onboard, they were] amazed at what value we give for the buck."

"We have always been very good about managing our business overall and changing things around very quickly to suit the market. Some businesses will not drop their price irrespective [of economic conditions] - - that is it. They would rather sail half empty. Then, of course, what happens if it goes on for a couple of months, then you see job losses because why do you need to have a full staff if you are only going to sell 50 percent of your property." This, in turn, leads to a decline in service, which then leads to even fewer bookings.

Therefore, adjusting to economic conditions does not mean cutting back. "In a bad economy, people still need a vacation. They choose Carnival for a number of reasons - - it is great value; they are guaranteed to have lots of fun, lots of memorable experiences. If you start cutting costs in the memorable experiences, which is food and what we give our guests, we could lose that. Also in the bad times, these things get magnified. The economy is very frustrating for people, for all of us. I think it would be very bad business sense to start cutting back in these times because people are going to remember that and when the times get better - - and it is going to get better. [When] they get the chance to go on vacation again, they are going to remember their last cruise experience. If the negatives outweigh the positives, they will not come back and they will go somewhere else. I think that any business that starts cutting back in these times is going to suffer in the long run."

Moving to Baltimore

As noted earlier, Pride recently moved her base of operations from the West Coast to the East Coast. However, rather than sail directly from Los Angeles to Baltimore, Pride did a

series of transition cruises. "It was a big change coming from the West Coast. First, [we cruised] through the Panama Canal - - a completely different clientele. Then we had four cruises out of Miami - - a completely different clientele."

"We have done very well. I'm actually very proud of [the crew]. Our cruise through the Panama Canal was phenomenal, one of the best Panama Canals that I have ever done. Then to come to Miami with all the competition around us and still the ratings were very high. Remember when we came to Miami we were the odd ones out because we were not regulars. When you are not a regular it is kind of like, 'okay where are you going to dock, this spot is available, put the Pride in there' - - you don't have your own dock. In the four times that we were in Miami, we had three different docking spots. Every docking spot had a completely different logistical requirement, how we put the baggage out etc. That requires a team that is very flexible and extremely on top of their game. If you don't have people who are on top of their game, every single second you waste in the operation all adds up. I think we have a great team here right now. I'm very proud of them."

After the cruises out of Miami, Pride arrived in Baltimore and found the clientele was different yet again. "What I noticed the most, the difference between the West Coast and here, is that here, the guests are very relaxed. If you go into the Lido restaurant, it is quiet, people are eating quietly. In crew meetings, I get the feedback that the guests are very quiet and the rooms are very clean. They are very happy to be here."

This type of guest reaction helps to encourage the crew to perform even better. "At the end of the day, it is not about the hardware. It is about the software and the software is the people taking care of the ship. You can have the best hardware out there but you may not have a successful business if you do not have good software and the software is the people who actually work onboard the ship. That software needs to be motivated to go out there and give the guests the best time of their lives. The guests are a big motivating factor to the software."

Along the same lines, it is important for both management and crew to understand "the guests' ideology, where they come from and

what they are looking for, what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. Just telling [the crew] to do something is very easy to do but if you spend two or three minutes more telling them why they have to do it a particular way and why it was not okay on the West Coast but why we have to do it on the East Coast, they will understand and that is how you get to number one."

The guests Pride has been attracting since arriving in Baltimore come from the surrounding Mid-Atlantic region but also as far away as New England. "Quite a few people are from the Baltimore area. We are also getting people from Virginia, from New York, from DC, from Delaware, from Connecticut - - some from Boston as well, Philadelphia. We are getting a big, huge number of drive-ins. Very few people are flying in."

Although other cruise lines sail from Baltimore in the summer months, Pride is the first ship to commit to sailing year round from Baltimore. "I think we have latched onto a very good market that was untapped. It was tapped just for certain months of the year but now [Pride will be] cruising year round out of Baltimore - - we will have to see how it goes in winter, of course."

"One thing that is an advantage is that the people in [the Port of] Baltimore are very flexible about how they want to work with us, they really want to work with us. A lot of places we go, they have got their way they work and they are not going to change. Here, they are very cooperative. They are willing to help us and very friendly people and they will do whatever we ask them to do just so that we get used to the operation. I think it is a very good working relation we have with the Port of Baltimore."

"The facility is not bad at all. We would like things to be more weather-friendly. I am putting a report together to kind of guide them as to what we may need."

Baltimore lies far up Chesapeake Bay. There are speed restrictions in these confined waters and so it takes Pride nine hours to travel between Baltimore and the open sea. As a result, Pride arrives in Baltimore later in the morning than cruise ships usually arrive at ports where they disembark one group of passengers and embark another. However, the ship departs the port at the time that cruise ships typically depart on a cruise. The net result is that there is less time to disembark passengers, clean the ship and embark the next

group of passengers.

"It shortens the turnaround time by one and a half hours. That is why you need to have a plan. It is very important to have a plan because if we do not have a plan [it would take] longer. You need to be on top of your game."

"We had a discussion yesterday just to discuss what happened [during embarkation] the other day. Where did we go wrong, where did we go right, where could we have saved five minutes, where could we have saved ten minutes, why did we not save this, how did we offload the trucks, how did we get the luggage on, what can we do to avoid the luggage getting wet [in the rain], do we need to keep it outside in the terminal longer then bring it inside and leave it on the pier? You go back and after you have a plan, and you see to the plan and follow through the plan, you implement it, you go back to see, then you do a post mortem, you go back and see what could we have done better. Next time it is going to be even better."

