

INSIDE VIEW:

A WEALTH OF ENTERTAINMENT

**A conversation with Sue Denning,
Cruise Director of Celebrity Century.**

by

Richard H. Wagner

In 2004, Sue Denning went to sea. At first, it was a continuation of her career as a full time entertainer that she had begun in her native England. However, over time she became more and more involved in the management side of cruising as a cruise director at Fred. Olsen Line, Thompson Cruises and Azamara Club Cruises. She is now the Cruise Director on Celebrity Century.

I began by asking her what sort of cruise experience is she trying to create on Celebrity Century?

"I think Celebrity is a very warm company. They are good to work for and obviously they are customer-minded. Attention to detail is something that we really lean towards a lot."

"The Century is the oldest ship in the fleet but it does have a great heart. It has very classic decoration, which is really nice, the guests like that. The guests that are really into cruising like what they see around them." "From my personal point of view, I like the friendliness. I like the guests to feel like they are comfortable and that they are home away from home. I like the guests to feel

welcome - - feel like they can approach us. That is the style that I like to give out."

The cruise director on a ship typically is the member of the senior management team that the guests come into contact with the most often. She is on stage introducing the shows in the evenings, she is on the in-cabin television, she is out and about in the public rooms and on the gangways when the ship is in port and is often the one making the announcements over the ship's public address system. In essence, she becomes the face of the ship.

"I am out as much as I can be. I see my role as being with the people. I am a very visible cruise director. It is difficult on five and four day cruises because there is still an operation to run. But I physically force myself to get out on the gangways so the guests can communicate."

The ubiquitous presence of the cruise director does cause some passengers to think that the cruise director's area of responsibility is greater than it actually is. "They do think that you affect a lot of things. I

get spoken to about bathrooms, linen, tender boats and different things. Cruise directors in the past would run the cruise. They don't now. I look after the entertainment section."

"Of course, I am available for other things as well. I don't mind trying to solve other problems but at times it may [be] I will try to find out and get back to you."

Entertainment on a cruise ship is a large area of responsibility. It encompasses the production shows in the ship's theater, the theme parties, the live music in the various public rooms, the in-cabin television, the visiting entertainers and all of the organized activities that take place around the ship during the day. There are 61 people in Century's Entertainment Department including five managers who report to Ms. Denning.

An important part of the cruise director's responsibilities is planning the entertainment. "Along with my team, I have a good sense of what people need and want on the cruises. I am a performer. I have a good sense of the American way and the Canadian way. I certainly know how the British people will react."

But the cruise director cannot simply do whatever comes into her mind. The guests have paid for a Celebrity cruise and thus are expecting the type of activities and entertainment that is associated with the Celebrity brand. "We have what we call a 'Master Activity List, which is fleet wide. At the last count, there were about 800 activities [on the list]. We can go into our Master Activities List and say 'let's do that.' There are certain times you have to do things on the spur of the moment but we try and organize ourselves so we keep within the parameters of the company. We have to keep some sort of structure."

The Celebrity fleet is composed of several classes of ships with different features. Accordingly, every ship is not required to offer all of the activities on the list. "Some things on this ship do not work on Solstice and vice versa. We don't do glass blowing; they do."

Celebrity also takes into account the talents of the people serving on the various ships, authorizing



Sue Denning

activities that depend upon certain individuals' unique abilities. On one of the Celebrity ships, "we have a cruise director who was a stunt man and he does a section on that. But only he can do that. I do my own show so there are certain things I can only do".

Perhaps the most visible part of the entertainment program is the production shows performed in the Celebrity Theatre. "The production shows are created by a company in the U.S. The cast rehearses in Las Vegas and then they bring the shows over to us here. We have three production shows at the moment. We also do two interactive parties - - theme parties. The singers and dancers do one called 'Groove' and then the dancers do



'Sizzle.' All those shows come from the U.S."

"The times of shows are dictated by the times of dining. We try to make it so that people can see a show and can still enjoy whatever [e.g., a theme party] comes later without it being too late. The middle section of the night between the two shows, you can do something that is more generic e.g., dancing."

Another important part of the entertainment is the performances which take place on various nights of the cruise by visiting comedians, singers and other acts.

"[Celebrity's] entertainment director, who is Gary Walker, organizes all of the guest entertainers. They come through and we pop them in. He gives us an idea where he would like them and we move them around as necessary."

Another aspect of the entertainment is the live music in the bars, lounges and public rooms around the ship. "Contractually, you can only use your musicians so long in the day. So we have to be very careful how we place them. If there is a special event, for example, the strings will be used for the elegant tea. I then lose an hour of their time."

As noted earlier, Ms. Denning also does a one woman show of music and comedy. "I have been an entertainer all my life and have been so since I was a child. I still am. When I go home I have my own shows." Indeed, she is a recording artist and her acting credits include working alongside actors such as Sir Michael Caine.

"We are kind of lucky because on a 14 day cruise we have so much of a wealth to offer entertainment-

wise." Of course, the cruise director and her staff have to decide when and where this wealth of entertainment will take place as well as ensure that it does in fact take place as scheduled.

When Century does a shorter cruise, the planning and scheduling becomes even more difficult. "You'd think that the short cruises would be easier but they are not. They are more intense. It is then finding exactly the right things that the guests want to see and do. We have to shove a lot into this little small space."

As a cruise director, "there is a lot of time spent in admin. Of course, like any business, you get more and more of that all the time. But I delegate very well. If I don't, I can't get with the people. I need to be with them so they know I am here to solve problems, to help, to listen to what they have to say, to make sure that the attention to detail comes across. It's a big job but as long as you delegate you're fine. And I have a good team."