

INSIDE VIEW:

TAKING A DIFFERENT PATH

A Conversation with Lisa Richard, Cruise Director, Celebrity Mercury

By

Richard H. Wagner

Lisa Richard followed an unusual path to become a cruise director. The holder of a Masters of Business Administration in Marketing, she spent 20 years in the business world eventually becoming a Vice President of Toshiba Corporation. While she greatly enjoyed Toshiba, family obligations intervened.

“My dad was diagnosed with cancer and so I left to take care of him. I tried to care for him while I was still working but it was impossible.”

She decided not to return to the business world after her father passed on. As a hobby, Ms. Richard had been an active participant for several years in a community theater group in the town where she lived in California. Now, the group asked her to undertake a role which required her to sing every night. She found that she enjoyed it and thought that she might like to sing professionally.

“I auditioned for *Mama Mia*. I was very lucky and had a new career.” Ms. Richard stayed with the hit musical for four years appearing both on the national tour and with the Las Vegas company.

She then decided that she wanted to do something more than just perform. “I went looking for a career that I thought would be a good blend of my management experience and education and my performance background. I ran my own production company for awhile, contracting entertainment to corporate events. That was fun but I wanted something that was a little more exotic.”

“I was doing a word search, putting in words like ‘director’ and ‘entertainment’.” I saw an ad for a cruise director for another line and thought: ‘Wait a minute, I’d be: managing people; managing facilities; there is marketing involved and they obviously want someone who is comfortable with a microphone and who can perform. So I did research into what the job would entail and I did research on the cruise lines. Celebrity was the only one I applied to. They called me 24 hours after they got my resume. I was very lucky.”

While Celebrity was impressed by Ms. Richard’s skills and experience, they did not immediately send her off to be the cruise director on one of their ships. Instead, she spent time with two of the company’s existing cruise directors studying

how they did the job. "I observed and thought, as a woman and as who I am, can I use similar techniques or is it smarter for me to have other techniques".

As a result, she has developed her own approach to being a cruise director. "My style is somewhat different. I tend to be more of the moment - - just be myself and hope that people will enjoy it. It was my choice to be less planned. I don't have too many stock jokes. Most of the rest of what I do is completely in the moment - - what happened in port, what did we see outside the ship etc. The cool thing about being yourself is that you never forget how to do it - - you are just you."

Ms. Richard is one of only a few women cruise directors. "I have never run into a single problem with officers, staff or crew."

"What I hear from the folks who are regular cruisers is that they feel it is something new and they find it fresh and exciting. To be able to give that to guests who have cruised 40 times is great because you are giving them something new."

"I do think there is some advantage to it in that there is a warmth that women get to have with guests that perhaps men don't. I get asked for hugs and I am thrilled to have that and not have it be uncomfortable. That personal touch is lovely. I also think I get away with a little more banter and teasing than a gentleman might."

So far, her new career is meeting her expectations. "I really enjoy it. I expected the job to be the hard work and long hours that everyone says it is. You are always in the public eye. But I am very familiar with the theater and the management piece of it and so the administrative part is not a challenge for me. I love that I get to interact with people from all over the world constantly. I feed off of the energy and happiness of the guests. The best thing about it [however] is that I just get to be me."



Cruise Director Lisa Richard

The Cruise Director As Planner

Being the cruise director on a modern ship is not just acting as the emcee at various shipboard events. A key element of the job is planning and scheduling the onboard entertainment and activities.

"I plan by cruise because I know ahead of time what the age groups are going to be. I get to see how many children I have, how many teens, how many 18 to 24, how many of the over 50s and how many of the over 80s. That is the initial planning."

"The second planning comes every single day as the guests come up to me and say 'I am a huge trivia fan.' Also, I walk the ship constantly and I observe that we scheduled for example karaoke at 9 p.m. and there were 100 people there. Now I know that I can't just have an hour of karaoke, we have to have more."

Along the same lines, the cruise director knows the nationalities of the passengers ahead of time. "If we have a lot of folks from a particular country then we will also print all the materials in their language. We watch that and cater to that."

The cruise director does not have carte blanche to do whatever she wants with the onboard programming. Celebrity, like other major lines, has developed a series of activities, events and services that help to create the vacation experience that it markets to the public. For example, Celebrity has recently introduced a programming concept called Celebrity Life that organizes the shipboard activities around the line's traditional strengths - enrichment, wine and cuisine and the spa. The cruise director has to work within this framework.

"There are guidelines, of course. [But] what I like about it is that I have the ability to react to what the guests are asking me for so that I can change on a dime. If I know that I am going to have folks that are big fans, for example of scrapbooking, then I can schedule more of that. Flexibility makes a huge difference to the guests' experience."

"The big challenge for me tends to be that I want to do everything the guests ask for and the Mercury has [only] so many venues that can handle large groups of people. So it becomes a little bit of a juggling act to make sure that I am doing the stuff the folks want and I have enough room to do the stuff the guests want."

Assignment Mercury

Ms. Richard's first assignment as a cruise director was to the Celebrity Mercury. Built in 1997, the Mercury is not as large as the mega-cruise ships that are leaving the shipyards today. Nonetheless, the ship remains popular, particularly with veteran Celebrity passengers.

"They like the family feel of the ship in terms of the officers and crew. [For

example] the officers are serving lunch to the guests [in the buffet today] and tonight we are doing our 'Dancing With The Stars' which we call 'Dancing With the Stripes' [with officers taking the place of the stars]. The officers are very visible."

"I think Celebrity goes out of its way to make the officers, staff and crew accessible and to make the guest's experience very personalized. Many of the guests who come back to the Mercury want the personal touch. I think an impressive statistic is that on the Mercury, you have one crew member for every two guests. That speaks for itself."

"The guests want to know the names of the servers and the servers to know their names. They want the cruise director to remember that they like a particular game. They know my name; they know where I am from because I have an opportunity to meet so many people. Not that you could say that this is a small vessel but it is easier for us to have that interaction" due to the ship's relatively smaller size.

"There is sort of a traditional cruising feel to the Mercury that people really appreciate." This is a more sophisticated style of cruising than on some of today's mass market ships.. "There are some things that we do not want to do. For example, we don't do microphoned-contests by the pool. We want that area to be kind of an oasis. We do evening parties there and we will have our band play there in the afternoon on a sunny day but that is much more about the atmosphere and less about the organized activities such as a big contests by the pool. We would rather the guests lounge and enjoy."

"People have specific things they need or want when they go on a cruise. There is definitely a market niche for what we do on the Mercury."