

INSIDE VIEW:

LOOKING AT THE MERCURY

A Conversation with Sheldon Thompson, Hotel Director, Celebrity Mercury

By

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Sheldon Thompson is the hotel director on Celebrity Mercury. As such, he is responsible for the accommodations, the food, the drink, the entertainment and most of the other aspects the ship that shape the guests' vacation experience. Having worked on nearly every ship in the line's 20 year history, he is uniquely situated to put the Celebrity Mercury in perspective.

Why Mercury?

Ibegan by asking Mr. Thompson, why a person who is considering a cruise vacation should choose Celebrity Mercury over other cruise ships? "First of all, because we are part of Celebrity Cruises. Through the years, Celebrity has really created its own niche in the market. We are exploiting that, especially now with our new Celebrity Life program."

"With the Mercury in particular, I firmly believe it is an elegant, homey, friendly ship. The ship is known for its friendliness, for the crew and for the exceptional service. We get very good feedback from our guests. We have guests who have been on larger ships and they

come back to the Mercury and say they really enjoy this ship."

"I really believe the ship is in excellent condition. There is continuous maintenance and cleaning. You walk around the ship and at any time you'll see someone cleaning something. We are very pro-active in our maintenance group. We might not have all the new things as the new ships but as a classic, elegant ship, the Mercury is a beautiful ship. And this is the comment we get from our guests as well - - she is an elegant ship."

Proof that others share Thompson's views can be found in the composition of the guests who sail the Mercury. "We have a lot of guests who are repeating with us. They go on a cruise, they go away for a while and return. We [also] have a lot of guests who have been loyal to Celebrity for a long time. We have guests who sailed with us on the Meridian, the Zenith, the Horizon - - a lot of guests who were loyal to the Galaxy. A lot of guests who were loyal to Celebrity Cruises in the old days and feel like this is a cruise ship just for them."

Mercury also attracted new admirers when she began sailing out of Baltimore, Maryland during part of the winter 2009-

2010. "It is basically targeting guests who do not want to fly [to take a cruise]. We are getting guests from that circle around [Baltimore that is] three to four hours driving distance. They are really enjoying the fact that Celebrity is sailing out of Baltimore. There is a huge demand. A lot of guests are asking us to continue with this itinerary"

The Greatest Resource

Since friendliness and service are so important to Mercury's ability to compete, "there is a lot of time and effort spent on the crew because they are our biggest resource. As in all companies or any small organization, it is up to the leaders. We have a very dynamic leadership team onboard and we do our best to keep the crew happy. We have our HR department onboard which has a training and development manager. We have a crew welfare specialist. And all of us our personally invested in maintaining the crew morale."

"We have a very good recruiting structure in place in Miami. [In addition, when a new crew member] comes on board, we will assign them a buddy so they are not just left on their own. We make sure that they are supported, that they have people to talk to and to help them."

"We have our 'Shining Stars' - - the Star philosophies. Every crew member will be put through that so everyone will be on the same page. If crew members come from another company, there is specific training that they go through just to align them to Celebrity's philosophy." Key to this philosophy is that "the crew must always respect our guests. It is part of their training that the guests must always come first."

Having risen through the ranks, Mr. Thompson is well-positioned to understand the needs of the crew. "I have lived in the crew cabins as a crew member. I have had s off as a crew member - - all those things, I've never forgotten."



Hotel Director Sheldon Thompson

"I have been with the company for 15 years now. I can remember my first day like it was yesterday. I always meet the new crew coming aboard and I always let them know, it doesn't matter who you are on the ship, all of us have had a first day."

"When the crew members talk to me about something, I understand what they are feeling. It is very important for us in the leadership to listen to the crew. If someone does explain the challenges [in performing some requested action] to me, I can understand him. On the other hand, I can say 'let's get this done' and if they do not know how to, I can show them how."

Thompson strives to keep his understanding of the crew current. "For example, even though we have the officers' mess, it doesn't mean I'll eat there everyday. I still eat in the crew mess just to go down and make sure that it is okay there."

*The Distinction Between Celebrity and
Royal Caribbean*

Mr. Thompson has worked for Celebrity Cruises since before the line was purchased by Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., the parent company of Royal Caribbean International, in 1997.

When the merger was announced, "there were many rumors onboard the ships - - that we going to change the X on the funnel to an anchor and all those kinds of things. Of course, that never happened, it was only a rumor."

"The holding company made it clear right from the beginning that there would be two separate cruise lines. [As a result], I cannot go and work for Royal Caribbean International, the same as a Royal Caribbean captain, hotel director or anyone else cannot come and work for Celebrity. We don't cross over with the work force in any position."

"The reason for that is not only are we two different companies but we have different brands and different marketing strategies. Royal Caribbean is more out there, more adventure and family whereas Celebrity is more sophisticated and classy - - that is what our brand image is."

"Having said that, definitely we have benefited from the purchasing power of being part of a larger company. So when it comes to logistics and things like that, yes we do benefit."

Still, such interaction is limited to behind-the-scenes functions that do not affect the onboard experience. "We have guests who will say to me: 'I was on a Royal Caribbean ship, why don't you have the activities that they have.'" I say: 'Well, that's Royal Caribbean, it is not us. It is a different company.'"