

INSIDE VIEW:

TALKING COSTA CRUISES

A Conversation with Maurice Zarmati, President and CEO of Costa Cruises North America

by

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In October 2009, Costa Cruises inaugurated a series of cruises in the New York/New England/Canada region on the Costa Atlantica. "This fall is just the beginning of much more to come, with additional cruises next spring and fall through the region on the ship," explained Maurice Zarmati, President and CEO of Costa Cruise Lines-North America.

Costa Cruises has a long history. It can trace its ancestry back to 1924 when the Costa brothers bought their first cargo ship. However, the company emphasizes that it has been in the passenger business since 1948 and thus has more than 60 years of cruising experience. At first, the Costa ships were focused on transporting passengers between Europe and South America. Over time, the scope of the itineraries grew and the line did more and more pleasure cruising. By 1986, the company was involved exclusively in cruising.

Over the years, Costa developed a reputation for luxury. Indeed, in interviewing Italian officers who work for other lines, Costa is frequently used as a benchmark against which they measure their own performance. Given this reputation and the fact that Costa has such a long history, should guests expect a very traditional approach to cruising such as on Cunard Line or Holland America? I asked Mr. Zarmati, how he would you describe the lifestyle that passengers will encounter on a Costa ship?

"Our product style is international and contemporary. Guests sailing with us will enjoy a true European experience created by our authentic Italian hospitality and from the cosmopolitan, international guests we welcome. All of this, combined with the savoir faire that comes with being in the business for over 60 years, creates a unique experience unlike any of the contemporary prod-

ucts in the market."

Still, Costa adheres to traditional where it is what the guests want. For example, in dining: "We offer the traditional two-seating approach - our guests seem to be most comfortable with this. In addition, we offer flexible dining options with our lido buffets and specialty dining with our à la carte restaurants and wellness restaurants on select ships."

Costa is the largest cruise operator in Europe, serving over 1 million passengers a year and has the largest fleet of any European operator. Still, a substantial number of North Americans sail with Costa. "We naturally attract many Europeans given the fact that we're based in Italy and have been for 60 years. I always say, most cruise lines own the Caribbean and visit Europe and Costa owns Europe and visits the Caribbean. Travelers who prefer to stay in European-branded hotels when they travel to the continent and are enamored by the charms of European travel will enjoy sailing with us. In fact, those who love sailing with us tend to continue doing so - we have a very high percentage of repeat guests."

Different nationalities often mean different languages. However, travelers who only speak English should not be intimidated by the fact that there will be passengers from a number of different countries on a Costa cruise. "It's a much more fluid process than you'd think. On any given cruise, we'll have more than five main languages spoken by our guests onboard - usually Italian, English, Spanish, French and German. However, English has become a universal language. Travelers who have been to Europe know this is the case - so many Europeans speak English. This is the same case for us on our ships, especially as it pertains to our officers and crew. We also have international hostesses who serve as a 'conciierge' and information source for guests throughout the week in their native language."

The Costa fleet is quite varied with relatively small ships and quite large ships. For the new Canada/New England itineraries, Costa has selected the Costa Atlantica, which at 85,619 gross tons is a large ship but not the largest in Costa's fleet. It is a design that is known for its speed and good seakeeping abilities. However, nautical considerations do not appear to have been the reason it was chosen for this run. "Our North American guests love the Costa Atlantica design and are quite familiar with her layout. This, along with ship's capacity, made her the right fit for these routes."



Maurice Zarmati
(Photo courtesy of Costa Cruises)

As Mr. Zarmati noted, North American travelers are quite familiar with this class of ship. Costa Atlantica is a sister ship to the popular Spirit-class ships (Carnival Spirit, Pride, Legend and Miracle) operated by Costa's affiliate Carnival Cruise Lines. "While the layout is the same, the design is very different. The ship is inspired by the art and culture of Italy which is reflected throughout the design - everything from Murano glass chandeliers, Italian mosaic tiles, even paparazzi prints from the 'La Dolce Vita' era in Italy. The ship also has an incredible replica of the famous Caffè Florian in Venice. Beyond design, our onboard ambience is different as well - we exemplify 'Cruising Italian Style' and it shows. Dinner hours are slightly later, dance floors are larger, our selec-



tion of culinary offerings is very Italian and European. The list could go on and on."

The cruise experience is also likely to be more international because in addition to North American guests, Costa expects guests to be flying in from Europe to join the ship. "We find that many Europeans are attracted to the fall foliage cruises as are many North American guests. There's only a short window of time to see the foliage change, which makes the routes that much more special."

Costa is not the only cruise line offering Canada/New England cruises. Indeed, most of the

major lines including Princess Cruises, Cunard, Holland America, NCL, Royal Caribbean, and Celebrity to name but a few, have ships in this market. I asked Mr. Zarmati what he would say to a prospective guest who was considering all the various offerings to make him or her select Costa for their Canada/New England vacation?

"I would ask them a few simple questions. Do you love Italy? Do you enjoy the continental charm of Europe? Do you value excellent service, delicious cuisine, superb amenities and stunning surroundings? If so, we're the brand for you."



Caffe Florian