

INSIDE INTERVIEW:

GETTING BETTER AND BETTER

Captain Henrik Loy and Hotel Director Benny Weidecker discuss what has made Explorer of the Seas successful in a competitive market.

by

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Explorer of the Seas has been the Royal Caribbean's ship in New York Harbor for five years, sailing year round from Cape Liberty in Bayonne, New Jersey. During this time, several other cruise lines have unsuccessfully tried to break into the New York market on a year-round basis but only Royal and Norwegian Cruise Line have managed to make a go of it thus far.

"I think it proves that we are doing something right. Every single cruise regardless of the season, we are sailing totally full. I think our product is well-received by the market," commented Hotel Director Benny Weidecker when I sat down with him and Captain Henrik Loy to talk about Explorer's longevity in a very competitive market.

Part of the reason for Explorer's success is passenger convenience. "If you live in the area, it is very

convenient. Within six hours driving, [the guests] all drive. They do not have to fly. That's a big thing these days," noted Captain Loy.

But any ship based in New York Harbor offers area residents similar convenience. What is unique to Explorer that differentiates her from the competition?

"I think there are many factors," answered Captain Loy. To begin, Explorer does not do the same cruise every time she sails from Bayonne. "We offer 18 different cruises. You have a choice between the five-day Bermuda or the [Bermuda/Caribbean] longer ones, or the Canada/New England ones," Captain Loy pointed out. That gives vacationers options and people like to have a choice.

Another factor, Mr. Weidecker noted, is "the hardware we have is very, very good. We do have a Royal Promenade that other cruise lines don't have,

which is really unique."

Explorer is also well-suited to her itineraries from a nautical perspective. "The Voyager class is a tremendously excellent class - - it has it all" said Captain Loy.

To illustrate, Explorer calls at Bermuda on every cruise except for her Canada/New England cruises. "To get into Bermuda is tricky and this class, I would say, is the optimal. You have tremendous ship-handling and power so you can go in there even in severe weather. Even with the size - - 138,000 tons, three times the size of the Titanic - - we can still get up to 15 knots within two or three ship lengths. When it is blowing hard you need to be able to get up to speed [quickly] and you need to be able to make hard turns without devastating heeling. Other ships, other companies, I know they suffer there. When they put over that wheel, things fall off the table. But this ship is tremendously stable as well - - so many good qualities."

Of course, the success of a cruise ship depends to a great extent upon what is done with the hardware. "I think we have very good food. The guests love our entertainment. They rate us very well. They love our bands, the live music," said Mr. Weidecker.

But Royal Caribbean is not content just to rest on its laurels. Captain Loy explained: "The focus now is on the friendliness, that aura, the atmosphere, [forming] a connection because that, at the end of the day, brings people back. We have an average of fifty percent repeat guests. They come back to the Explorer again and again and they connect with our crew and form bonds. I think that is pretty special. We stay here all year-round; we don't go from here to here to here. The guests really connect with us."

Mr. Weidecker elaborated: "Not just Explorer of the Seas but our whole company is focused on personalized service. How can we get more interactive so we can build more relationships with our guests, to make them have a really memorable vacation experience. I think that through personalized service is just the right approach. That is what we have done this year quite successfully according to reports and benchmarks throughout the fleet."



Captain Henrik Loy

The Ability To Adapt

Explorer has evolved so as to adapt to the challenges posed by sailing year-round from New York. "It is something that you become better at," explained Captain Loy. "We have been here now for five seasons and we have got it down to the details. We have become experts on it. The crew and the officers that you have onboard here really need to be experienced about it. It is really different than on other ships that are out of Miami in the Caribbean year-round. The weather factor is huge. You still provide a service, still keep up to standards, even though you are facing environmental challenges."

"Happy crew; happy guests. Winter time out of Bayonne, you do not have happy crew automatically. That really takes extra planning and extra equipment. I mean how many ships have snow shovels, winter suits, gloves, mittens, and hats fully stocked so that everyone

is always warm? You really have to look after the crew here for their well-being. It takes years of experience to get to that. For some other ship to just come in with a new crew to take over what we are doing, that would be hard. It is really a result of years of experience here and we only get better and better at it."

Part of taking care of the crew is giving them opportunities to grow. "For everyone who is on a career there is always the opportunity to have shoreside training. They really identify, grow and build upon the talent that is identified."

Mr. Weidecker added: "I think that is one of the company's strengths because our crew members recognize that. They see that we have a hotel director who started as a stateroom attendant. Because he was interested and he developed himself, the company helped him get there. It motivates others. There is an opportunity for everybody to make a career for themselves whatever the career may be."

"I don't know if loyalty means so much anymore worldwide but I think it is something that we are trying to bring back here - - loyalty not only with the guests but with the employees," Captain Loy continued. "If you can get someone in early, create a great first impression and keep building them up from day one, that pays off in the long run."

Building a happy crew also requires having fun. "The toughest challenge is [balancing] between work and play and that goes for everybody. You have to find that balance where you have fun and laugh. We have things like sandwich days, where we make sandwiches for all of the crew members; we have our barbeque on the pier - - to have fun, not just drive and work and work and work."

In addition to the challenges facing the officers and the crew, sailing out of New York year-round is not easy on the ship either. "It definitely impacts it with the erosion, with the wind, with the salt, the constant sea spray in combination with the long cruises. Then in the Caribbean you have the sun, the UV rays, as any other ship has. But basically, it is the strong winds and the constant sea spray. In those weather conditions, it is hard to be out there doing maintenance. Plus, the vibrations, the fatigue - - you see this in pipes and equipment. It will definitely tire the ship more rapidly than a ship that is in calm seas all year-round."

"But the company has recognized that. It has put more funds in our budgets and given us more resources. They have recognized that we are high maintenance. We have gotten a lot of support for that."



Hotel Director Benny Weidecker

A Postscript about Ocean Lab

When Explorer entered service in 2000 and for several years thereafter, she hosted a very visible oceanographic research project known as Ocean Lab. Scientists from the University of Miami sailed onboard Explorer and took measurements of the ocean, gathering scientific data. They also interacted with guests with lectures and demonstrations. Then it seemed to disappear as the Ocean Lab activities were no longer in the ship's daily program.

However, Captain Loy explained, the program has not ended. Funding problems prevent the University from stationing scientists onboard but "we have the equipment and we still record. They come onboard regularly to maintain their equipment but they are not here as they were in the beginning. We are still recording a lot of valuable oceanographic data."