

INSIDE VIEW:

THE NEW GRAND PRINCESS

A conversation with Captain Roger Bilton and Hotel General Manager Adam Gorst.

by

Richard H. Wagner

Since entering service in 1998, Grand Princess has been one of the most popular and successful cruise ships operated by a major cruise line. In the Spring of 2011, Grand Princess spent the better part of a month in a dry dock in the Bahamas. During that time, the ship was so extensively refurbished that she is often referred to as the "new Grand Princess." I sat down with her master, Captain Roger Bilton, and her Hotel General Manager Adam Gorst, to talk about the drydock and how it has impacted the Grand Princess.

"It was a major, major drydock. Most drydocks only take at most 10 days. This one was three weeks," Captain Bilton began.

"A total of \$80 million was spent, which is the highest amount ever for a Princess ship for a drydock," added Mr. Gorst.

"The biggest change was taking off Skywalkers, the nightclub at the back," Captain Bilton noted. Skywalkers ran the width of the ship and was suspend-

ed in its own structure over the open decks at the stern of the ship. It was a distinctive but controversial feature.

Captain Bilton is amused by some of the rumors about why Skywalkers was removed. "It was my wife who drew it to my attention 'Did you realize that the Skywalkers was going to fall off?'" he laughs.

"The main reason was for fuel economy. The ship [used to sail on an inclined] plane. It is now level, on an even keel, as we say. So you can get a better speed with any given revs on the propellers. We save a lot of fuel through that."

Has the removal of such a large structure changed how the ship performs in any other way? "It is difficult to tell. Since it has come off the ship does not stop as readily. So if you bring the engines back to stop, she keeps on going whereas she used to stop quite fast. But that could be due to another reason. During the drydock, they put silicon-based paint on [the hull]. It is

very slippery. So how much is due to the ship being on an even keel and how much is due to that new paint, I don't know. But all in all, in layman's terms, it makes her slide through the water more easily which produces fuel economy etc. But the trade-off for that is that you just have to remember to stop her a bit earlier."

A second reason for removing Skywalkers had to do with utilization of open deck space. "All of a sudden that after-deck has been opened up. Not many people used to use it because it was covered in shade. Now that we have gotten rid of the shade, it is a very popular place to go sunbathing and to use the pool back there."

Mr. Gorst added: "It was a bit out of the way. [During the day] some people found it nice to read a book there but that really was an underutilization of the space. Now, especially for the European season when we get a whole lot of British passengers on here, that whole aft section is full of people."

Removing Skywalkers required other changes. Captain Bilton explained: "We needed a nightclub somewhere which is why we got the One Five Club [port side on Deck 15]. It has become the function room plus it is the nightclub now. Our wedding chapel was moved from Deck 7 and now we have the Hearts and Minds up on Deck 15 on the starboard side. To do that, we got rid of the conference rooms and also the video arcade for the kids up there."

Yet, removing Skywalkers is only part of the story. "The ship was 13 years old [when the drydock took place]. When she first came out, 13 years before, the Grand was the Grand. But over that time, there [have been] more innovations coming out - - you are always moving forward. You have to look at what your passengers' expectations and needs are. You just have to reinvest in the ships if you want to keep up to date."

"We are doing that throughout the fleet. We have come up with these concepts that have been very successful. Because [they have] been successful, we want to transfer those concepts to each ship [in the Princess fleet]."

"We have a very broad repeat passenger base and one of the things we have found is that they like to come back to a ship where they know what they are get-



Hotel General Manager Adam Gorst (left) and Captain Roger Bilton.

ting, they know what to expect, that they feel immediately at home on once they walk up the gangway. You'll find that we are transferring a lot of our ideas and innovations so that they become a standard from ship to ship."

Consequently, a major part of the drydock involved transforming Grand Princess' atrium, which had been called the "Grand Plaza" into a "Piazza." The Piazza concept was first introduced on Crown Princess in 2006 and repeated on Princess' two subsequent ships Emerald Princess and Ruby Princess. It has been retrofitted into other Grand class ships including Caribbean Princess and most recently, Sapphire Princess.

The Piazza concept is modeled upon the town squares of Europe. The area at the base of the atrium has a marble floor upon which street entertainers such as jugglers, musicians and dancers perform from time to time. Immediately surrounding the central area are tables and chairs where guests can sit and have something to eat or drink. Beyond the tables and chairs are venues such as the International Café and Vines Wine Bar, which are new venues for Grand Princess added during the drydock.

"The Piazza has been a huge success for us. When we had the old atrium, it never used to get used. If you went down there on a sea day, you'd see maybe ten people at the most. Now, you go down there and it is like the hub of the ship."

In addition to being popular with guests, this change contributes to the overall efficiency of the ship,

Mr. Gorst pointed out. For example, in the past, the ship's large buffet restaurant, the Horizon Court, was operated as a 24-hour dining venue. "They have moved away from that because they have found it was really an under-utilization of staff. The service area was a big area but not that many people went there. So now we operate a really nice product [the International Café] with the 24 hour dining down here [in the Piazza]."

When Grand Princess entered service, she was considered an innovative ship. The drydock gave her the opportunity to be an innovator again as new concepts were introduced for the first time on any Princess ship. One of these is in the Piazza - - Alfredo's Pizzeria, a gourmet pizza restaurant named after Princess' corporate chef Alfredo Marzi. "They honored him by using his name there. He designed the menu and the pizzas that go on it."

Mr. Gorst went on to point out that, beyond the introduction of the Piazza, numerous other enhancements were made to the ship. Another new concept combines intellectual stimulation with a traditional refreshment. "The library and tea area is called Leaves. We are the only ship in the fleet that has one."

"The casino is brand new. It was completely renovated. So it is probably one of the best laid out casinos you could have on the ships. Although it is not massive, it is very functional and neatly laid out."

Next to the casino, "we added some mini-suites on Deck 6. They don't have balconies. There are six family suites there."

"The Art Gallery was completely redesigned. The Lotus Spa was completely renovated - - all the treatment rooms, the salon, offices were put in. The gym was completely modernized with new equipment. The other area that they did a lot of work on was the youth center. They did quite a bit of renovation in there. They

couldn't expand it but they have re-designed the layout."

Captain Bilton added: "We have got the Crown Grill, which we did not have before."

"The Horizon Court buffet was gutted and revamped. There are many more serving lines now. Now from an operational point of view, it flows much better. The service there is quicker and it can cope with the numbers that we get up there [at meal times]. Where before we used to have really long lines; now, it moves much, much quicker."

In sum, the drydock "has really made a difference to the ship. It has worked well. Although she is 14 years old, she has got everything that the newer ships have got."

Still, Captain Bilton explained, that is only part of the reason why Grand Princess remains a successful ship. "You can have all the amenities in the world, the best sort of thing, but if the crew are not happy that will transmit itself to the passengers. I think we have a very friendly crew on here. And I think that is a reflection of the management. We have a very happy management team on here. I do believe that that transmits itself down. If you have a happy management team, you have a happy crew. And really at the end of the day, I am a firm believer that morale of your crew is 50 percent of the battle."

"I think the itineraries that we do, particularly the European itinerary, are just amazing - - eight or nine different countries, ten different ports, in 14 days. They are all different. Every time you wake up in the morning, you are not just in a different port but in a different country and a different culture. Value for money - - you wake up one day and you are going to Rome. The next day you are in Monte Carlo. You can't do that anywhere else. I think we have great itineraries."

