

INSIDE INTERVIEW:

THE NIEUW AMSTERDAM EXPERIENCE

A conversation with Hotel Manager Mark Zeller.

by

Richard H. Wagner

For Mark Zeller, being a Holland America hotel manager "is like a family tradition." His father worked for HAL as a hotel manager for 43 years. After Mark finished his university degree in hotel management including an internship with Hilton International, "I just wanted to do one contract on a cruise ship to see why my dad enjoyed working on ships so much. So I did that one contract and 11 years later, I am still here."

Mr. Zeller's latest assignment for HAL has been to manage the hotel operation of the Nieuw Amsterdam during her inaugural season. Of the 880 crew members aboard the Nieuw Amsterdam "about 750 are part of the hotel department."

Zeller is pleased with the way Nieuw Amsterdam has performed. "We are a new ship. The ship came out July 4 [2010] from the shipyard in Venice. It usually takes about a year for a ship to settle in then start performing to its expected level. But this ship from the start when we did our Mediterranean season, it was

very successful in what the guests experienced."

"We are the biggest ship in the Holland America Line fleet together with the Eurodam. We are both the same size and the same capacity. On average, we have about 2,100 guests."

"She is a beautiful ship - - almost a carbon copy of the Eurodam. But the interior has this recurring theme of Nieuw Amsterdam and old New York, you see it everywhere. We have also made a few changes like no more brass. It is now changed to chrome, which gives us a bit more contemporary look and which has a much nicer look to it. The guests always say what a beautiful ship this is. Especially our Mariners who have been on many of our ships, feel that this ship is prettier than the other ships that we have in the fleet."

Nieuw Amsterdam is a slightly enlarged version of the Vista class ships that began with the Zuiderdam in 2002. The extra space enables Nieuw Amsterdam to have some features that the Vista ships do not have. "We have the Silk Den [Bar] and the Tamarind

Restaurant. We have cabanas on Deck 11 forward behind the Crow's Nest and also in the Lido Pool area midships so you can have your own private little area."

The cruise experience on the Nieuw Amsterdam is the premium cruise experience offered throughout the Holland America fleet. I asked Mr. Zeller what differentiated the HAL cruise experience from more mass market cruise experiences.

"One of the biggest things is the staff versus guest ratio. Its about 1 to 2.3. That means much better service."

"Our strongest point is our crew. We have two main nationalities in our service staff - Indonesian and Filipino. The Indonesian staff are in the dining rooms and house keeping. Then the Filipino staff is in the beverage and galley operations. Unlike other cruise lines which have 60 or 70 different nationalities, we have our two main nationalities coming from countries where service is always at a very high level."

In order to be hired for a Holland America ship, applicants "need to have experience in restaurants or hotels. They [also] need to have a certain proficiency in English."

After an applicant has been hired, he or she must first attend a Holland America training school before joining a ship. The school for the Indonesian staff is in Jakarta. "They go through a six week training course where they will learn the Holland America Line way of serving a meal or making up a room. We actually have mock rooms there of different types of state-rooms that we have onboard so they see already what type of rooms we have. They have the menus that we have on the ships so they can get familiar with the foods and what the foods look like."

"In Manila, we have the Filipino training school for our beverage staff and our galley staff. There is a restaurant where they actually prepare the menus that we serve onboard. So our staff gets trained by our own schools."

"Because we have those two main nationalities, you see that the level of service is very consistent throughout the fleet [at] a very high level. What I hear from guests who go to other cruise lines and then come back to Holland America Line is that the level of serv-



Hotel Manager Mark Zeller

ice is not always as great as they experience here. The crew makes us premium."

There is also a different focus to the activities and entertainment onboard an HAL ship. "We do things that intellectually challenge people. The Digital Workshop where we provide free training in Microsoft Windows [for example]. We are not doing rock climbing or surfing on the back deck. It is more intellectually orientated. Of course we do fun activities as well. We have Wii games, golf chipping, pool games - - those kind of things as well."

In addition, HAL prides itself on attention to detail, presenting small touches of luxury. Recently, all of the HAL ships went "through the Signature of Excellence [program] where the quality of the towels, the quality of the mattresses that we have [were upgraded]."

Moreover, many of these small luxuries are included in the cruise fare. "We have free ice cream throughout the day, freshly squeezed orange juice - - it is those little things that make us premium, more upscale compared to Carnival, Costa, Royal Caribbean."