

AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUELINE HODGSON HOTEL MANAGER, QUEEN VICTORIA

By Richard H. Wagner

Jacqueline Hodgson is the Hotel Manager on Cunard's Queen Victoria, which went into service in December 2007. The new ship is Cunard's first modern attempt to transplant the traditional atmosphere of its ocean liners into a ship that will be primarily doing cruise itineraries. Ms. Hodgson is well-qualified to play a senior role in this expansion of the Cunard fleet since she has 30 years experience at sea including 16 continuous years on Queen Elizabeth 2 and time as Hotel Manager on Queen Mary 2. In addition, a four year secondment to Princess Cruises has given her experience with cruising outside of Cunard. She joined Queen Victoria in April 2008.

Queen Victoria was conceived as a complement to Queen Mary 2. The relatively smaller, shallower-draft Queen Victoria is able to visit ports that the Queen Mary 2 is not able to enter. The faster and stronger Queen Mary 2 is better able to handle the rigors of the North Atlantic and make transatlantic crossings within a reasonable time. While both have an overall Cunard atmosphere, the difference between their underlying concepts gives the ships their own distinct atmospheres. "We are delivering a different product under the same umbrella. I think it is an entirely different ambiance. The set things would be extremely comfortable cabins, the standard of service, the standard of food, the standard of entertainment. But each ship is unique in its own style and [is] doing different routings. We are doing far more cruising. [Also], looking at the passenger flows through the ship, you do feel the difference between 150,000 tons and 90,000 tons and 2,500 guests and just under 2000. So, you will see a different flow and that creates its own ambiance. But with the standards that Cunard is extremely well

known for, passengers have a comfort zone, if you like, when they book - - they know what to expect but within a slightly different environment and a different feeling of ship."

"Cunard has a tremendous reputation and we are well known for certain things. We do set our service standards very high. That is one of the things that epitomizes Cunard from the other brands. We try and go on interesting voyages [with] interesting ports of call. [Cunard is about] being with like-minded passengers who are looking for that sense of adventure while being in a very comfortable and luxurious surrounding and being well-taken care of - - a very enjoyable voyage with lots of excitement, lots of activities and an extremely high standard of service."

"Formality is one of our mainstays, if you like. The majority of our passengers certainly welcome it. There are very few places shoreside now where you can dress in your formal evening attire and not have to worry about taxis and locking up the house and outdoor wear. It is one of the last bastions of formality, of ladies in very elegant evening dresses and men in tuxedos and so on. Typically, we would have four formal nights on a 12 to 14 day voyage and more depending upon the length of the voyage such as the world cruise. We are very well known for our formal nights and I'd like to think that we do them extremely well with our style of cocktail parties, with our style of menus, tying the evening activities with those formal evenings."

Another Cunard hallmark carried over to Queen Victoria is a very strong enrichment program. "We like to bring on a very wide selection of lecturers. Very often, we have lecturers during just part of a voy-

age, they leave and we have another [set of] lecturers coming in." Since Queen Victoria's voyages involve numerous port calls, there are often lectures related to the ports the ship will be visiting. For example, on a Norwegian cruise, "they will tell us all about as we are going into Gerstanger fjord everything there is to see and some background to it, some historical facts and figures. I'm not saying that we do that for every single port of call but we do try and enrich our passengers, our guests' experience through the voyage by adding that on."

In addition to lectures, the Queen Victoria experience includes such cosmopolitan features as classical music recitals, theater boxes as in a West End theater, and even fencing lessons. "I think it shows a more adult theme. We do attract a mature guest - - someone who is looking for a bit more sophistication."

Queen Victoria does, however, have facilities and programs for children. "We see the number of young persons under 18 increase as we go through the summer holidays but we haven't seen yet the three, four or five hundred children that you would see on a cruise line. It normally is the families during a limited time of the year."

Cunard prides itself on its traditions extending back to the founding of the company in the 1840s. Consistent with this, dining on Queen Victoria follows the traditional passenger ship system of each guest having a dedicated place and time for dinner. There are no plans to follow the industry trend towards a more resort-like approach. "It doesn't really suit Cunard. It doesn't really suit what we stand for. I think all of the lines look for something that differentiates them from the others and I think our guests are telling us they are very happy with what we have. We do have a flexible Lido dining, which is a 24-hour dining experience and then, of course, we have the various options with Todd English [the extra-tariff alternative restaurant], the alternative dining in the evenings within the Lido. I think we have a wide range of choice and I do not particularly think it would be the way for Cunard to go. Cunard is well-known for the concept that we have here."

A guest's stateroom category determines whether he or she dines in one of the two Grill Restaurants or in the main dining room, the Britannia Restaurant. However, this does not mean that the ship



Hotel Manager Jacqueline Hodgson.

is a two-class ship as in the days of the Titanic. Some people may "have that perception because we are well-known for our traditions, our links, our legacy [going back to the founding of] the company in 1840. But nowadays, we have our distinctive Grills and our Grill dining but that is a small percentage of the ship. Except for those restaurants, one individual lounge and a very small sun deck, everything else is completely open to all guests. So, there are very few restrictions on Cunard ships these days. The Britannia is where 1,600 of our [approximately 2,000] guests are actually allocated a table - - the vast majority of our passengers, 80 percent really."

Queen Victoria was designed with the British cruising market in mind. During her maiden season, she was based in Southampton, England for most of the year and next year, apart from her world cruise, she will be sailing out of Southampton exclusively. "You will always have more British guests on a ship that is based in Southampton simply because of the flying aspects and so on. Looking back across the past three months, approximately 75 percent [of the passengers were] British. Within the other 25 percent, a real mix of

Americans, then quite a few Europeans and, in fact, we attract quite a few Australians. Our product easily crosses across all of these different nationalities that we have traveling with us."

"We are still developing our style, our ambiance. It is there in the heart of it, it is there in the superb elegant fittings of the Queens Room and the Royal Court Theater, obviously in the suites and so on and that is a given but it is my belief that teams take time to develop like families do shoreside. You see them going through different stages of their lives and we are at that development stage, if you like. We are settling in very nicely. We are getting some excellent feedback from our guests. They really do like the warmth and character."

As a part of the ship's senior management and the head of its largest department, Ms. Hodgson plays a key role in developing these teams. "The first thing is very much to respect the team that you are working with and to endeavor to earn their respect - - that has got to come. So, you endeavor to interact with them as much as you can. It is my firm belief and my management style that I give them as much information as I can do. With the more they know, the more support there is for them, the greater confidence they have and the more able they are to do their jobs. Also, [one must have] a very strong communications line with all supervisory divisions and the heads of the departments. You are constantly asking questions and taking decisions, passing that on, communicating, ensuring that everyone fully understands what our guests' expectations are. You don't develop it overnight, it takes quite some time."

"When you are having new crew members coming in as all companies do - - you have quite a turn over, constantly sending people on leave and bringing new crew members in - - then [a senior manager has] to ensure that they are welcomed into the family and made to feel very comfortable because after all, the more comfortable they feel, the better able they are to provide the highest level of service."

"On Queen Mary 2, we had upwards of 70 percent new crew [when the ship went into service] and it was particularly challenging to try and get them to understand the Cunard product. Whereas here, it was far better, there was a far, far, lower percentage of brand



new crew - - somewhere in the region of 20 to 25 percent. So, it was far easier to put them into almost a Buddy-system and to ensure that they more quickly understood the product."

Queen Victoria is also developing through the feedback that Cunard receives from its guests. "The concept that we came out with has worked very well. But, having said that, we always listen to all of our guests' comments. We read every single comment card. Our guests have certainly made comments about the [lack of draw space] in the cabins and the company has been very proactive in looking at that. We have gone out to quote, we have all the answers in and very soon, I can't tell you which day it is going to start, we will have an ongoing program of putting draws into Britannia grade cabins. We know where they are going. It will be in keeping with the current cabin furniture. I think that will certainly enhance the storage facilities of our guests because our guests have said that this is not what we have come to expect of Cunard. So, we are certainly always reviewing what guests are telling us and wherever possible we follow through and try and show that we are being very active in responding to them."

"Whether it is QE2, Queen Mary 2 or Queen Victoria, our aim is to consistently exceed our guests' expectations. So, we are always reviewing where we are, where we are going to be and what methods we have to talk about, discuss and monitor in order to get there. That is, sort of always challenging yourself or at least I am in my role of heading up the hotel."