

ROYAL CARIBBEAN'S BRITISH INVASION

***Independence of the Seas succeeds
in the UK offering American-style cruising.***

by Richard H. Wagner

In April 2009, Royal Caribbean International announced that it would be deploying INDEPENDENCE OF THE SEAS to the United Kingdom on a year-round basis starting in 2010. The decision to so commit the line's newest and largest ship - - indeed, currently the largest passenger ship in the world - - reflects the growing significance of Britain as a cruise market and Royal Caribbean's success in that market. However, the success of Royal Caribbean, an American-based line providing a style of cruising developed for the American market, in a country known for tradition and restraint comes as something of a surprise to many.

An expanding market

The market for cruise vacations is expanding rapidly in Europe. According to the European Cruise Council, the number of Europeans taking a cruise vacation grew to 4.4 million in 2008, a 66 percent increase in just five years. As did Americans in the 1970s, Europeans are realizing that cruising is not the exclusive province of the rich but rather with its all-inclusive combination of room, board, entertainment and transportation, a cruise vacation is a very economical option.

Accounting for the largest part of the growth in European cruising is the United Kingdom. Some 1.5 million Britons went to sea last year. However, the cruise lines have noticed that a cruise vacation represents only one in 16 packaged holidays in the UK. This means that there is a lot of potential for growth.

In order to meet this demand, more and more

cruise ships are being homeported in the UK for part of the year. This includes not only traditional British lines such as P&O Cruises and Cunard Line, both of which have deployed large new ships to home waters in the last year, but also companies such as Norwegian Cruise Lines and Princess Cruises. Indeed, Princess has two of its 110,000 gross ton Grand-class cruise ships based in the UK for extended periods in 2009.

Miami-based Royal Caribbean has provided cruises from Britain for a number of years. Until recently, however, these cruises were marketed to Americans who would fly to the UK and then join the ship for a cruise to the Mediterranean. In 2005, the line decided to try a different approach and market cruises on the 70,000 gross ton LEGEND OF THE SEAS to the British market. The ship was soon sailing with 99 percent British passengers and was voted best large cruise ship in Britain.

Excited by this response, Royal Caribbean decided to deploy one of its Voyager-class mega-cruise ships, NAVIGATOR OF THE SEAS, to Britain for the 2006 summer season. At 138,000 gross tons, NAVIGATOR can accommodate more than 3,100 passengers - - almost twice LEGEND's passenger capacity. Thus, in terms of number of berths, Royal Caribbean was doubling its presence in this growing market.

This was not an entirely risk-free strategy. NAVIGATOR is not simply a bigger version of LEGEND. Built in 1995, LEGEND is a conventional cruise ship with restaurants, swimming pools, bars, lounges and other amenities one would expect to find on a modern cruise ship. NAVIGATOR, built in 2002, has all of those features but running down her centerline is a



INDEPENDENCE OF THE SEAS, currently the world's largest passenger ship, has been embraced by the British. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).

multi-deck concourse, the Royal Promenade, which resembles a city street. It is lined with shops, cafes and bars. There is even a classic car parked in front of one of bars. In addition, the ship has an ice skating rink and on the aft side of the funnel, there is a rock-climbing wall. In short, NAVIGATOR is much different than what the British had embraced with LEGEND.

Any concern, however, that the British would not take to NAVIGATOR proved unfounded. Indeed, her success prompted Royal Caribbean to make an even bolder move. It would further increase its presence in the British market by substituting the even larger INDEPENDENCE OF THE SEAS for NAVIGATOR for INDEPENDENCE's maiden summer season in 2008.

A Very Big Ship

INDEPENDENCE OF THE SEAS is the third of Royal Caribbean's Freedom-class cruise ships. (See *The Log* Summer 2006 at p.9). At approximately 160,000 gross tons, she along with her two sisters, is the largest passenger ship in the world in terms of gross tonnage. She has six diesel engines which can supply 75,000 kilowatts of power to electric motors that are housed in two azipods and one

fixed pod, which in turn drive the ship. Her service speed is 21.6 knots. (Of course, the power generated by the diesels is also used for other things such as providing hotel services). The combination of azipods and four powerful bow thrusters makes her quite maneuverable so that she rarely needs the assistance of tugs when docking.

Essentially a longer version of the Voyager-class, INDEPENDENCE has all of the features of NAVIGATOR. However, INDEPENDENCE also has several additional features including a surfing simulator, a full-size boxing ring, whirlpools cantilevered out over the ship's sides and the H2O Zone, a 5,380 square-foot water park for children with spray cannons, ground gushers and a waterfall. The Royal Promenade is longer with additional dining venues and shops. When the ship was under construction at the Aker shipyard in Finland, "the theater in the forward part of the ship was the biggest theater in Finland," notes Darren Budden, INDEPENDENCE's Hotel Director.

There is an emphasis on activity on a Royal Caribbean cruise. "You can do as little or as much as you like. It is not like it is compulsory attendance at every show and every activity. But if you did want to do something from when you wake up until you go to sleep, it is there," points out Cruise Director Allan Brooks.

"We offer tremendous different variety on the activities side, on the entertainment side as well as on the dining side," adds Budden. "So, when guests come and vacation with us, they have all of the amenities that a Freedom class ship offers by virtue of its facilities plus a lot of additional incremental things in the soft things like entertainment."

To illustrate, in the evenings, there are street parties or parades staged by the crew in the Royal Promenade complete with costumes, stilt walkers, floats, colored lights, smoke and music. In Johnny Rocket's, a 1950s American diner, all of the waiters periodically break into a line dance. The ice shows performed in the ice skating rink feature professional skaters in well-choreographed displays done to music and with stage lighting. Las Vegas style production shows, complete with aerial acrobats suspended from the ceiling, take place in the theater.

This is not to say that INDEPENDENCE is all bright lights, chrome and flash. She has a collection of more than 6,000 works of art. She also has lounges that are done in a sophisticated contemporary style where guests can sip champagne, converse with a piano player or listen to a jazz group. Furthermore, considering the number of people onboard, there are a surprising number of quiet places where one can be by oneself. "We have 4,400 people on the ship and sometimes I don't know where they are. There are 19 lounges on here, 16 decks. It just absorbs them," confesses Brooks.

It is a combination of facilities and activities that has been very successful in America, making Royal Caribbean the number two cruise line. But would it work in Britain?

Independence Comes to Britain

INDEPENDENCE entered service in May 2008 and spent until November of that year cruising out of Southampton, mostly to the Mediterranean and the Canary Islands. She then became the largest passenger ship ever to do a transatlantic crossing with paying passengers. Before returning to Southampton in April 2009, she spent the winter months cruising the Caribbean from Fort Lauderdale. Although the ship adhered to the Royal Caribbean's style of cruising throughout, some adjustments were made when she was in Britain.

"It is always a very big challenge for us to get used to the various markets because it is different to sail out from Southampton compared with Barcelona. We have to adjust things to the type of guest that we have onboard," explains Captain Arnolf Remo, the master of the INDEPENDENCE.

Mr. Budden elaborates: "We have some 85 to 90 percent UK guests when we sail out of Southampton. They have certain little likes and dislikes that we cater to because they are our primary audience. For example, we have our food served at a certain temperature in the United States. We will generally kick that up four or five degrees when we serve it in the UK because British guests like hotter food. So, our sauces are near boiling, we warm our plates prior to serving - - a lot of things to keep the food at a temperature the UK guests prefer. Other little things like in our [buffet] menu for breakfast, we will offer English bacon, not just the crispy North American type of bacon, beans, tomatoes, mushrooms - - all those things that are very important to that clientele. Similarly, we have tea kettles in each of the staterooms and that is very much a function of what our UK guests really wanted based upon feedback from several years in that marketplace. When they sail with us they are not necessarily looking for British cuisine, although we do have several sprinklings of that, but there are certain core comforts of home that people really do like to have even when they are vacationing. The core product is the same Royal Caribbean product with a few little tweaks, here and there to customize it."

The majority of INDEPENDENCE's officers and crew are veterans of other Royal Caribbean ships. However, most are not from the UK and many had not served British passengers prior to joining Independence. Consequently, the crew had to adapt to cultural differences.

"Europeans are totally different from Americans," noted Captain Remo. "Interaction between the crew [and the passengers] is different in Europe than



Resembling a city street with shops, bars, cafes and even a parked car in INDEPENDENCE's Royal Promenade (Photo: R.H. Wagner).

in America. In America, you need to talk them into things. If you don't do that, they feel you are rude. But, if you do that when you are in Europe, they feel you are rude."

Cultural differences also affect such things as the flow of passengers through the ship. Mr. Brooks pointed out that the shows in the ship's theater "were packed to the rim. [However, the British] were there about an hour before [each show] which is interesting compared to the US market. You would have a full theater 40 minutes before show time. We have a nine o'clock and an eleven o'clock show, so as the first show would be finishing at 10, we would have people coming in for the 11 o'clock show."

Another factor that require adjustments to be made is the weather. Even in summer, sailing out of Southampton is not the same as sailing out of Miami. "The closer you get to winter the more waves you get. The Bay of Biscay can be very rough but then everyone has to realize the weather is not like the Caribbean," commented Captain Remo. "It looks like the English accept that."

"Weather is a big factor," added Brooks. In colder climes, "the inside of the ship becomes more of the hot spot as opposed to the pool deck and the outer decks. In the Caribbean, [those decks] absorb most of the people on the sea days and when leaving port. [On British cruises] we have a lot more lectures, a lot more dancing, a lot more card playing - - those venues became a lot more popular."

Still even with all of the aforementioned adjustments to Royal Caribbean's cruising style, INDEPENDENCE OF THE SEAS remains much more of an American-style product than a British-style product. Why then has she been successful there?

"The reason I can absolutely understand it working is in some respects we bring a little bit of Las Vegas to the UK," explained Mr. Budden. "There are quite a number of traditional cruise products that operate in the UK and there are certainly some guests who would enjoy that more than they would our product because they are more traditional. Our product is different. Our product is about options, it is about wide-open spaces, it is about action and fun - - go skating, climb a rock wall, let your kids play in the H2O zone, you can go relax in a cantilevered pool that goes out over the sides of the ship, you can go and surf at sea. Very different, almost brash American, which people really enjoy because they don't really have other products that are like that. There are a lot of people over there who want the entertainment and action that comes with a ship that is designed like INDEPENDENCE OF THE SEAS. It has done very well and there is a lot of



INDEPENDENCE provides an array of sports facilities including a rock climbing wall on the aft side of the funnel. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).

excitement about it."

"To a certain degree, I think the INDEPENDENCE is embraced as a UK ship because we home base out of Southampton. We cater a little better to the British because we understand them a little better [due to the fact that] we spend more time with them. [For example], when you go into a bar in the UK and you order a lemonade, you are actually ordering a 7-Up or a Sprite, not what North Americans would consider to be a lemonade. Our bar staff, because of our experience in the UK knows to ask someone with an English accent 'do you want this or do you want this for your mix?' So, we get it right. If they go to any other North American-based ship and they order a lemonade and vodka for example, people are going to look at them and probably give them an actual lemonade and vodka which is not what they really want. We understand the vernacular. We also understand what they prefer from a dining experience with food temperatures, English bacon, beans for breakfast."

In short, the key to success is to offer something that the target market does not have at home but while still providing a touch of home.