

**INSIDE VIEW:**

# PAMPERING WITH A PERSONAL TOUCH

## A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT TAGGART HOTEL DIRECTOR OF JEWEL OF THE SEAS

by

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Jewel of the Seas, along with her three Radiance class sister ships, occupies a unique position in the Royal Caribbean fleet. She is not as large as the line's behemoth Voyager and Freedom class ships, which can carry nearly 2,000 more passengers. She is also newer and larger than the line's Vision and Sovereign class ships but with the same or fewer passengers. However, the difference in size is not really what makes these ships stand out.

While Jewel maintains an overall Royal Caribbean flavor, it is not as focused on physical activity and high energy entertainment. Rather, her style is more about space, personal service and high quality features in an elegantly designed setting.

Accordingly, as Robert Taggart, Hotel Director of Jewel, pointed out, Jewel tends to attract her own unique set of passengers. "There seems to be a segment of the market that appreciates, for lack of a better term, a toned-down version of cruising where it is a little more intimate and not so much of a 'wow factor'. A more traditional cruising set -- people who don't need all the

bells and whistles of the big ships, *i.e.*, the ice rinks, the big promenade etc. People who genuinely like cruising and who want to relax. Perhaps that is an older set, people without any kids. Traditional -- people who want to enjoy cruising as it was and as it still is on these ships."

"These ships all came out of Germany and I think that the German shipyard has a good high quality standard. They are beautiful ships -- a source of pride. They are meant to be more elegant, again to appeal to a crowd that is looking for that rather than the wow factor of the big ships."

"When we get the comment [forms from the passengers] every week we see a lot about that about the crew, about the friendliness, about the relationships that are built [during the cruise]. You can give that personal touch even though this is a 90,000 ton ship [because] with the passenger count we have onboard [2,100 double occupancy] it is now considered a small ship. We can give that kind of small ship attention. I think that is the hallmark of what we do. Of course, we have the Royal Caribbean brand and experience, which is always a great thing."

"Coming here a year ago, I was very impressed not only the décor but that the level of maintenance was very, very good. In the old days, we used to take ships out of service for two weeks in dry dock and re-furbish them [every few years]. The problem with that process was that the last year before refurbishment a ship could look very tired. What we do now in lieu of that is that we have an onboard team of people who replenish, recycle and rebuild onboard. Everything you see is maintained by carpenters, upholsters, plumbers - - amazing guys. It is a process that we go through all year round. We don't just wait for the ship to get tired; we continuously improve it which is a better process for you."

"What has impressed me the most has been that the crew here seems to be a lot more engaged because they have to be. They are used to change, so change comes to them naturally." Indeed, change is inherent in Jewel's varied schedule which includes summers in Europe, autumn in New England and winter in the Caribbean. "With the itinerary changes, the entertainment changes, the food offerings and timings are also different."

"You have to plan it all, change your scheduling so that you have better coverage in the areas where people will be. Like baseball, we platoon our groups to go where they need to be."

"We gear [the cruise] toward the age group perhaps or even demographics. Like on the [autumn Canada/New England] cruises, we have dropped the dining hour to 5:30 from 6. That just reflects the crowd and people who come from this part of the world."

"The British tend to be a lot more formal. You use Mr. and Mrs. a lot more whereas in America if you get to know the [guests] well enough, you use their first names because that is what they ask for. They are almost like your friends. But that never really happens in the English market. Also, the English are not really used to the tipping system. If the gratuity is up front, they are a little bit offended about that whereas we don't think much about it in North America. So, there are a few things that come into play there."

Because Jewel's success depends upon her ability to offer personal service and on the crew's ability to adapt to change, crew morale and satisfaction is very important. "Taking care of your people ensures that your guests get taken care of. The focus that they have always kept in this company has been that - - [making you] feel like you were part of something that was positive and



*Hotel Director Robert Taggart*

which took care of its people."

To that end, the ship provides good accommodations for the crew with a maximum of two people per cabin and many single occupancy cabins. "That is a change. I have lived in cabins with eight guys. We did not even have plumbing in the cabin and that wasn't so many years ago. Quality of life is really good."

"The crew areas are massive. They have dining areas, bars, they have discos. Probably more important than anything else is that they have internet connections now. One of the biggest things we always had problems with on cruise ships was that communication was by letter or a pay phone. Now they have continual communication over the internet and they also have phone cards for cheaper communications. Communication with home helps to make the home sickness go away. Also, we have HR [Human Resources] teams onboard to take care of their needs in every aspect, not just the physical aspect. To keep them dialed-in and happy during their contracts. For us that is very important."

"When the tipping system is working well it is a great motivation. First off, we do hire people who want to do what they are doing and love what they are doing. That is more important to us than their skill sets. But, in the long run, [financial reward] is still the best method for the best kind of personal service."

Unlike many cruise lines, Royal Caribbean



does not place a charge covering the gratuities automatically on each guest's onboard account. "We think it is better to have a tipping process where people earn it by being excellent at what they do -- delivering the 'wow'.

A guest may elect, however, to have the gratuities placed on his or her account, in which case the guest receives a set of vouchers that they can hand to their waiters, cabin steward and head waiter on the last night of the cruise instead of cash. The crew member who receives the voucher is then paid by Royal Caribbean. Significantly, "that particular person gets [the money]. That is his or her gratuity and they know that you gave it to them. That personal contact and appreciation is still there. That is important."

"Having said that, we find that there are challenges in some parts of the world where tipping is not automatic." In those places, it might be better if the gratuity were added to the guest's account "to ensure that the crew members get the money that they deserve. We are sort of at the crossroads in many ways. That is part of the challenge for this ship."

"We have worked really hard to make sure that everything is above-board because money is an important factor in all lives. In the old days probably on all lines, [a crew member] had to pay [his or her supervisor] for a lot of things in order to get where you wanted to be and of course, that was an unfair system. We introduced the HR Division to the ships a few years ago and it [made] a huge dif-

ference for us because now you have an autonomous figure that represents a little bit better the crew and it also ensures that standards are in place. We also internally audit all the time to make sure that it is all above board. Dismissals are instant. It is hard enough to leave your home and come here and work for eight months but if you have to pay people just to stay in the game that is really unfair. [The elimination of that system] is one of the great things that I have seen through the years."

**M**r. Taggart identified two areas of the ship that he feels exemplify Jewel's personal touch style. The first is the ship's two specialty restaurants. Portofino's is an Italian specialty restaurant while the Chops Grille is a premium steak house. "It is definitely better quality and we are trying to sell the experience of high end dining [with] a personal touch. The whole ambiance is just a little quieter and a little easier. You have a little bit more space; it is more relaxed; it is nice."

The second area is the ship's spa. "It is more in line with what we do. If people want to relax the spa is attached to that. All of those high end pampering things that a ship like this can give people is the key thing."

"When you walk on a ship, you can feel a ship -- you can feel the atmosphere, the personnel and all that. We would like [it] to say 'Pamper and spoil yourself while you are onboard. Let us pamper you.'