

FREESTYLE FLEXIBILITY

An interview with NCL

Hotel Director Jacques Le Tallec

By Richard H. Wagner

Jacques Le Tallec is the Hotel Director on Norwegian Cruise Line's NORWEGIAN DAWN. Born in France, he "grew up in the catering business, my grandparents and parents were in the catering business." He studied hotel management in England. After graduating, he decided to go into the cruise industry in order to see the world. He has worked with Ocean Cruise Line, Pearl Cruises, Costa Cruises and since coming to NCL has served on the NORWEGIAN CROWN, NORWEGIAN WIND, NORWEGIAN DREAM, and the MARCO POLO as well as the DAWN. In addition to having fulfilled his dream of travel, he recommends a life on ships "because you meet people from all around the world and open your mind and after that you accept more things and you understand more."

The cruise experience on NORWEGIAN DAWN and on the NCL ships in general is based upon the concept of "Freestyle Cruising." Le Tallec explained what this concept entails. "It is your vacation. You come onboard and enjoy as much as you want, do whatever you want, whenever, wherever. You can choose where you want to eat, what you want to eat. You have a lot of choice. We don't have: at five thirty you need to be at the entrance of the Venetian [restaurant], wait for your table and you eat with the same person for the cruise. You can meet people, you eat with them if you choose. If you don't want to eat with them, you want just a table for two, you can have a table for two. If you want a table for four, you can have a table for four. If you want a table for six, you can have a table for six. Venetian, Impression, Aqua, [i.e., any of the various restaurants on DAWN] where you want. It is you, you decide."

"Freestyle for the families is great. You come on board with teenagers. You want to eat in the Bistro [DAWN's French-style specialty restaurant]. The teenagers don't want to spend an hour eating, they want to go to the buffet and have done with it. What is hap-

pening most of the time is the parents are saying 'okay, enjoy your time' and they book a table for two in the Bistro. They know that the kids have already had their meal and they know on board the ship, you always take care of everything so they do not have to think about it and they can have a romantic dinner."

Le Tallec also sees Freestyle as being attractive for people traveling alone. "It is easy to meet people. If you take the dining room, you are traveling alone, you tell the hostess, I would like to share a table. They know what is going on in the dining room and they know if there is a table for three persons and they ask if you would like to join them and most of the time people say 'yes.' Go to the Sushi bar, you are sitting at the bar and there are people at your side and automatically, you will talk with them. So there is always a way."

"Then, also with Freestyle, you go to the bar, there is always somebody at the bar. On a regular ship, when it is meal time it is also show time. So, if you are alone and you don't like your table, you will never meet anyone because people will be either in the dining room or in a show. Here, you go all around, there will always be something in a bar where you can meet somebody. You have more chance on a Freestyle ship to meet somebody than on a regular ship. But you need to work on it, don't expect those sort of things to come. If you don't help yourself, we cannot help you. We will try our best, but it needs to come from you also."

While it is hard to quarrel with the Freestyle concept in theory, what happens if more passengers want to dine in a given restaurant than there are tables in that restaurant? "We have more than 2,000 people [on board the DAWN] and, of course, if everybody wants to eat in the Bistro, we cannot accommodate them. But, we will offer them an alternative. We don't say and it is most important, 'Sorry, I can't.' We don't do that. 'Sorry, for tonight but I can help you with something else or if you want another time or this or that' but offer something to the guests, make them feel

we care."

"We always offer alternatives. You are onboard for a week. You come and say 'I want to eat in the Bistro tonight' and it is booked at the time you want. You want eight thirty. The hostess will offer: 'Sir, I have some room at seven thirty, if you want, or I have some room at nine or nine thirty.' You choose. If no, she will try and offer you another restaurant for tonight. 'If you want, okay, I can offer you that one, and let's see what we can do for you for another day.'"

"There is always a way. But, some guests are flexible, some guests are not flexible. If you are flexible, there are always ways to accommodate you. But some, no, it is: 'I want a table for 20 at this time in the Cagney's [DAWN'S steakhouse].' It will be almost impossible. If they tell us I have a table of 20 and I would like to eat in Cagney's, can you do something for us? Then, yes, we can work with them."

Another criticism that has been leveled against Freestyle-type dining is that it is impossible to have such traditional cruise ship features such as a captain's table or officer hosted tables with such a system because there is no set time for the officers and passengers to meet for dinner. Le Tallec dismisses such charges pointing out that there are officer tables on the DAWN. "We have a captain's table. I have one table, my assistant has one table, the captain has one and the officers sometimes they say I have met some people and go for dinner with them."

"When we know that there are some guests that we know from before, we invite them. It is not a huge table. I have been on companies where we have had huge captain's tables. We try to make it more private. With the guest, we go to one of the alternative restaurants. Like this, the guests feel also the difference because they are not one cabin amongst other cabins, they are invited privately. That makes a big difference."

"Open seating it is not easy because the guests are on vacation. Some they want to eat at five thirty, some they want to eat at six and some want to eat at nine. What is great with Freestyle is that you can choose. You do not have to come at five thirty. Especially, when we are in port, they are relaxed, they go ashore, they come back, have time for a drink and then they walk along and think maybe we will eat here tonight. So, when we have a table with them, we ask them: 'Where would you like to eat?' 'We have not tied Cagney's.' 'So, let's go to Cagney's at what time you want tonight' and then we adjust our schedule with their schedule because they are the ones on vacation. Here, people, it is their vacation. We deal with them, it is up to you - - the way they want.

NCL has used the Freestyle concept to distinguish itself from the other major cruise lines. However, Princess Cruises and Holland America Line have introduced similar flexible dining arrangements on their ships and Royal Caribbean is experimenting with such



*Above: Hotel Director Jacques Le Tallec.
Below: NORWEGIAN DAWN*





Above: Cagney's, the 1930s era steakhouse on NORWEGIAN DAWN
 Below: Tequilla, the Mexican-style specialty restaurant.



a system on FREEDOM OF THE SEAS. Still, Le Tallec sees NCL as having a competitive edge. "We built our ship as Freestyle. They are trying to convert their ships to Freestyle but they are not built Freestyle. Most of the time there is going to be one or two restaurants that they [have as Freestyle] and then they have regular seating in the other restaurant. That is a headache because people say 'I want to go but I can't go when I want because it is already booked.' But for us, everything is open so we have more flexibility than them. We have more than ten restaurants where guests can choose to eat and you offer them only two. So that is a difference." To this end, NCL has recently announced that two ships built before the introduction of the Freestyle concept will be leaving its fleet shortly.

In addition, "when we talk about Freestyle, it is not only with the food. It is also everything around because there is no need to offer Freestyle if when you finish [dining] there is nothing around the ship, like a show, or someone in the lounges." Accordingly, the times of the shows and other entertainment are spaced throughout the evening rather than in the traditional one show for guests in the early seating in the restaurant and one show later for the guests on the other seating.

Along the same lines, there are no set times for when a particular guest must leave the ship on disembarkation. "Just relax and have your breakfast and go. At a certain time, I have to tell you we have to go because Customs they will not wait. But, I'm not going to tell you at nine o'clock you have to go down. You decide."

On the DAWN, passengers are free to stay in their cabins until they decide to leave whereas most lines require passengers to leave their cabins by a certain time so that the stewards can prepare it for the passengers who will be embarking later that day on the next cruise. "The cabin stewards will know which cabins are free. If this cabin is free, start with that one. On the next cruise, it will be another one. We do not start with one and then one and one and one. Just be flexible. Some sections, maybe the guests [leave] later than other sections, so we have people who come to help you. It is most important with Freestyle and choices to make the crew understand it is a team spirit. We don't have team spirit, it is not going to work.

Everybody works with everybody. It is not: 'I am a waiter in the restaurant, [and so] I will not help in the bar if you need some help to clean a table or something.' It is all together and without that you cannot succeed."

Under the traditional more structured system, the passenger is served by one stewardess, one waiter, one busboy, throughout the voyage and at the end of the voyage the passenger normally tips the people that he or she has come to know. With Freestyle, many different crew members may serve a given passenger and the passenger may not form a relationship with any of them. Therefore, NCL adds a \$10 a day service charge to the passenger's onboard account which is pooled and distributed to the service staff. While this system ensures that Freestyle does not penalize the staff financially, how does NCL motivate the staff and create the team spirit needed for Freestyle to succeed?

"The most important is for the crew to feel good. If they like the ship, the crew will perform well." In addition, it is vital "to make them feel that without them we cannot succeed - - to tell them and to show them. Just always be approachable, visible and to tell them they are doing a great job."

"When I receive a letter from a guest, a good one, with a name, we have a board down in the crew area and I post it. I give a copy to the crew [member] and I post it also so that everybody can see. Motivation is very important and to let them know when they are

doing something good. I always tell the guests, write a letter and for the crew it will be a big, big plus to know that you enjoyed your cruise and they made a difference. [Some will see the letter and say to themselves]: 'Why did he get his name mentioned, why did he get something I did not?' They will then try because there is a competition amongst all of them. And we have also the system where we recognize on stage with the captain on a monthly basis 'Dress to Impress' [the crew member who] is always well groomed and tries to look nice. We have a lot of awards."

The Venetian is one of the main dining rooms on NORWEGIAN DAWN.

