

A CONVERSATION WITH JORGE LYNCH

An interview with the Hotel Director of Royal Caribbean's *Explorer of the Seas*

By Richard H. Wagner

Jorge Lynch is the Hotel Director on Royal Caribbean International's *Explorer of the Seas*. After studying hotel administration, Mr. Lynch worked as Guest Relations Manager at the five star Resort and Conference Center in San Jose in his native Costa Rica. He rose through positions of increasing responsibility at shoreside hotels, and in 1998, Lynch shifted to Royal Caribbean starting as an Assistant Purser on *Empress of the Seas*. "I worked in every single one of the positions in that area, then I moved on to Food and Beverage, and then from there to Associate Hotel Director." He has also worked on almost all the classes of ships at Royal Caribbean.

"The cruising industry it is still in diapers. We have so much potential, so many people [who have not tried cruising]. I think when it comes to customer service, when it comes to value, the activities that you get on board the ship, the food that you get aboard the ship, this is the best place for you to have a cruise vacation or a vacation in general. You come on a cruise for five, six, seven, eight, nine days, you will have somebody to service your room, you don't have to worry about paying additional hundred dollar meals, you don't have to drive to watch a show - - very good production shows on board the ships. You have the option to go to different countries in one vacation, enjoy the different ports of call - - it is a unique experience. It is a one of a kind vacation."

"The quality of the product that we offer I think is very good. I really do think it is very good and not just because I work for Royal Caribbean. People who cruise, will talk. If you do something wrong, they

will talk. If you do something right, they will talk. Luckily for us, we have more people who think that what we have done is right than wrong and the word spreads. That is how we get a lot of new cruisers, first time cruisers."

In addition, the percentage of repeat passengers "on this ship is very high. Right now, it is about 30 percent. On the *Monarch of the Seas*, it was three percent, four percent, just to give you an idea. The shorter the cruise is, the less percentage of repeat guests. The longer the cruise is, the higher the percentage of repeat guests. This [five-night] cruise we have 947 repeat guests. Plus, we have almost 300 plus diamond members and 14 diamond plus members. Diamond plus is people who have cruised on Royal Caribbean more than 25 times."

Royal Caribbean is in the process of reaching out to tap the potential of new cruise markets. Its ships are being deployed to Europe, Asia and South America. *Mariner of the Seas*, one of *Explorer's* sister ships, is being deployed to the West Coast, thus becoming the largest ship serving in the Pacific on a regular basis. "You have to expand because the Caribbean is becoming saturated. Our ships are bigger so they can't fit everywhere. [The number of ports RCI can use is limited by] the size of the ships. So, we have to start sourcing out. Not going to normal, common ports that cruise ships used to go to five or ten years ago. I think that is the reason why we went over to Europe and Asia and to South America."

However, such expansion requires more than just doing the same thing in different ports. "What we

try to do is cater to the market that we are in. So, going to Europe, you are going to see more European ships with more European entertainment, more European types of food. We have a full department now and their sole purpose is to ensure that we take care of the needs of the Europeans, the Asians and the other people. We are really becoming an international fleet."

To illustrate, when Royal Caribbean first deployed a ship to England, "we were there but did not fully understand the market. Now, it is a completely different story. Last year, *Navigator of the Seas* did extremely well to the point where we decided to add two more ships to Europe and that is why we are doing what we are doing there. There are plans to leave two Voyager class ships over there year round."

The Hotel Department on *Explorer* accounts for the largest number of crew members, most of who have some contact with the passengers. Since how these people perform directly affects the passengers' cruise experience, motivating them to provide good service is essential if a cruise line is going to succeed. "I believe if you have a happy crew, the crew will perform and you'll have happy guests. If they produce, if they provide an excellent service, then in the tradition, the guests will return it and say thank you."

"If we as managers give the crew the tools to do their job, if we as managers give them the opportunity to voice their concerns and address their concerns, if we give them a very good environment, a living environment for them to enjoy not only a work environment but their off time, then (1) the crew is happy, (2) there are no concerns and people and people are liberated."

"I believe strongly that the crew should have the same quality of life or close to the same quality of life they have at home on board a ship. The same facilities you have as a guest, they have as the crew. Just as you have it upstairs, they have it downstairs. They have a disco, they have a bar, a library, an Internet café, they have two dining rooms, they have pools - - they have it all."

"We source them from different countries. We have people from 69 different nationalities on the ship. We try to source the best employees that we can. It is a huge task. Right now, we are sourcing from Asia, we are sourcing from the Philippines, South Africa, Indonesia, Canada, Central America and the Caribbean."

"We train on board the ship. Every new employee goes through a training process for 16 days. They are trained in everything. Not only their job but also safety, security, crowd control, emergency duties - - it is all being trained on the ship."

The crew on *Explorer* appears to be very motivated to serve. Indeed, in the main dining room the waiters seems as anxious to please the guests who come to breakfast and lunch as they do the guests they see every night at dinner. However, since breakfast and



Above: Hotel Director Jorge Lynch.
Below: A display in Explorer's Gala Buffet..





A portion of the hotel staff appears on stage to bid farewell on the last night of a cruise.

lunch are open seating, a given waiter is unlikely to ever see again the guests he serves at those meals much less receive a tip from them. "At the end of the day, it is one team. That is how we look at it. Yes, the person who you are serving at night will not be the same person that you are serving at breakfast and lunch. However, if you provide a negative experience for that person [at breakfast], that negative experience [is going to affect] his view of the cruise vacation and that negative experience can affect someone who is providing a high quality experience at dinner. Your colleague is going to suffer based upon what you do here at breakfast. We need to be one team. We should make sure that the same quality of service that we provide for dinner is the same one we provide for lunch and breakfast. Because what happens is if you are happy for breakfast and you are happy for dinner and you are happy with your stateroom attendant, you are happy with the cruise. If on top of that, the entertainment is high quality entertainment, we have you. It has to be a full circle operation that works perfectly."

"When you have ten good ones and one bad one, that bad one tends to come out and then that bad one has a choice - - either get with the program or get out of the program completely. For everything to work the way we want it, everything has to be in sync. If you have one crew person within that chain who is not in sync, it will jeopardize other things, it jeopardizes everything. That is something we ask every crew member to understand."

"We focus a lot on friendliness. Guests feel that they can talk to anyone and they will get information. We tell the crew to say good morning, good afternoon and good night - - just be friendly. That takes you a long way."

Notions of how to behave differ between the many nationalities that comprise *Explorer's* crew and may differ from those of the passengers. For example, in the Philippines, "you don't smile, you bow. Bowing is a sign of respect. But then you come to the American culture - - they are not used to bowing, they prefer you to say good morning or good evening. So, we create standards and we work towards everyone believing in our standards."

"We have something we call "GOLD" - - Greet and smile,

Own the problem, Look the part, and Deliver well. If you ask any crew member what our standards are, he or she are going to say GOLD. From the moment you join the ship, we sort of brainwash you. Everything that you do, everything that you say, everything around your work, even in your off time is GOLD. It becomes a pattern and you believe in it."

"Once they start believing in it, it becomes easier. The beauty of it is if you have 700 crew telling you good morning, even if you are not used to saying good morning, at some point you yourself will start saying good morning because 700 other crew have said it to you. You may pass one or two days just passing by without saying anything but on the third day, you will reply, on the fourth day, you will reply, the fifth day it will become natural, on the sixth day you're starting to say good morning to someone who never says it and the same thing happens to that other person. The first, second day they might not. The third day, they will. The fourth day, they will and the fifth day it becomes natural. It is amazing how it works but it does work."