

BIG AND BIGGER:

COMPARING QM2 AND FREEDOM OF THE SEAS

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FREEDOM OF THE SEAS' recent assumption of the title of world's largest passenger ship invites a comparison between her and the previous holder of the title, QUEEN MARY 2. Of course, Royal Caribbean International's FREEDOM is a cruise ship, whereas Cunard's QM2 is an ocean liner, and a number of differences flow from that distinction. So too do differences flow from the fact that the two ships are targeted at different markets. However, as I discovered during a day aboard FREEDOM when she was in New York for her christening ceremonies in May, the two ships are not altogether different.

First, there is the question of size. QM2 is 151,400 grt. while FREEDOM is 154,407 grt. Thus, the two ships have similar revenue producing area. At 1,132 feet, QM2 is longer than FREEDOM, which has a length of 1,112 feet. The beams of the two ships at the waterline are similar with FREEDOM's being 127 feet versus QM2's 135 feet. However, as one climbs higher, FREEDOM's blossoms out to 187 feet across the bridge whereas QM2 is only 164 feet wide at the bridge. QM2's somewhat more aerodynamic shape reflects the fact that she was designed to cross the North Atlantic at high speed, whereas FREEDOM was designed with warm weather Caribbean cruises in mind.

Speaking of speed, QM2 claims a top speed of more than 30 knots. During sea trials, FREEDOM made 23 knots, which is not bad for a cruise ship. Although pleased at his ship's accomplishment, FREEDOM's captain, Carlos Perdicini, told me, "We don't need that much. We don't make our itineraries to require 23 knots."

Both ships rely on pods for propulsion. "They actually have four pods, we have three. But it is the same concept." Perdicini said. Whereas QM2 has two fixed pods and two rotating Azipods, FREEDOM has one fixed pod. Three bow thrusters help to maneuver QM2 while four are used on FREEDOM, but then, FREEDOM will be spending a greater percentage of her working life squeezing in and out of ports.



*QM2 at the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal.
(Photo: R.H. Wagner)*

Both ships are powered by six engines, but whereas QM2 uses four diesel engines and two gas turbines, FREEDOM's engines are all diesels. Again this reflects their different roles - - QM2's gas turbines are used primarily to give her the extra power needed to do the 30 plus knots needed to do fast crossings.

The bridges on both ships are vast. However, while the bridge on QM2 is arrayed like a high tech version of a traditional bridge, the watch officers on FREEDOM's bridge sit in two high backed

leather chairs in front of a console with various display screens showing the ship's position, speed and other technical data. They can control the ship's speed and course from a set of controls located between the two chairs or by using small joy sticks and buttons built into the armrests of the chairs. Because everything has been so centralized, there is a large amount of empty space on FREEDOM's bridge, so much so that with its floor to ceiling windows high above the water, it would make an excellent venue for a champagne reception if only regulations would permit. Interestingly, while Cunard has installed a window to allow passengers to watch the action on QM2's bridge, on FREEDOM the bridge is entirely private.



Captain Carlos Perdicini of FREEDOM OF THE SEAS. (Photo: R.H. Wagner)

From a technological viewpoint the two ships are thus different, but not as different as one might think when one says that one is a liner and the other a cruise ship. “[FREEDOM] is a cruise ship. She was built to do seven-day cruises. Does that mean we can only do seven-day cruises? No, we can do fourteen days, 21 days, we can do crossings. We did not want to build

a ship to do only one type of cruise. We need to be flexible, we need to be open, because the market changes all the time. We have 20 ships now within the Royal Caribbean fleet and we are growing, so tomorrow we might have a ship going back and forth.”

As Captain Perdicini pointed out, “the companies serve different markets, two different styles. We have our own people, our own market and we build our ships according to that. We try to provide what they think we can do for them.” Indeed, both ships reflect their target markets.

RCI serves both the “contemporary” and “premium” cruise markets. In other words, RCI seeks to provide an informal but somewhat upscale cruising experience. In contrast, Cunard attempts to recreate the elegance of the “golden age of ocean travel.” Although not as formal as even just a few years ago, Cunard caters to a sophisticated clientele. Along the same lines, while Cunard acknowledges that some families include children and teens, RCI reaches out for such families.

The different approaches to cruising are reflected in the two ships' public areas. Running along the center of FREEDOM is a multi-story shopping mall done in Las Vegas shock and awe. In the evenings, RCI stages a street circus in this area. The comparable space on QM2 resembles the lobby of a Four Seasons hotel and after sunset is populated with people in evening wear. Whereas Cunard features its ocean-going planetarium and Oxford University lecture series, RCI trumpets that FREEDOM has a full size boxing ring and an onboard surfing facility. A large portion of FREEDOM is devoted to children, including a large water park with various jet sprays, while QM2 has a room with some arcade games.

While some of the public rooms on the two ships are as different as night and day, this is not universally so. The main dining rooms are both built around three-story atriums and are both decorated in an elegant and tasteful manner. There is also

little difference between QM2's Lido and the casual dining area on FREEDOM. Indeed, the location of the casual dining area on FREEDOM at the stern and the design of the seating area would appear to make it a less chaotic venue than that on QM2, which is crowded into the corridors along the sides of the ship. Along the same lines, while FREEDOM's alternative dining includes a Ben and Jerry's and a pizzeria, there is also the Grill Room, which appears competitive with QM2's Todd English restaurant.

The similarities continue in the private spaces. Although both lines point out the various unique luxury appointments they have included in the cabins, at the end of the day the accommodations in both are like those of a modern contemporary hotel.

In order to present a more luxurious experience, Cunard limits capacity to 2,620 passengers. FREEDOM will be much more mass market. The first few cruises will be limited to 3,600 but, as the ship becomes comfortable with handling such large numbers of people, capacity will be increased gradually to 4,400. QM2 has 1,253 officers and crew, resulting in a passenger-crew ratio of two to one. FREEDOM has a crew of approximately 1,500 giving it a passenger-to-crew ratio of about 3 to 1 at maximum capacity. Both ships have international crews. QM2's officers are primarily British whereas FREEDOM's hail from a variety of countries. Captain Perdicini is from Argentina.

Both lines recognize the importance of maintaining their base. Captain Perdicini described how in addition to the general cocktail party, repeat passengers also receive invitations to more informal gatherings from officers that they have known from previous cruises. He noted that one couple has traveled over 100 times on RCI and, as a result, he has known them since he was a second officer. Since I've traveled on some 75 voyages on Cunard ships, Captain Perdicini's description sounded very familiar. At the end of the day, it is not all of the various bells and whistles built into a

ship that makes or breaks a cruise. As the captain noted, "the people make the difference."



Above: The main dining room on FREEDOM OF THE SEAS. Below: The Britannia Restaurant on QM2. (Photos: R.H. Wagner).

