

INSIDE VIEW:

EUROPEAN-STYLE CRUISING

**A conversation with Richard Sasso,
President and CEO of MSC Cruises USA**

by

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MSC Cruises is a cruise line on the move. Less than a decade ago it was a small subsidiary operation of the giant container ship company Mediterranean Shipping Company, providing affordable cruises to Europeans on a few second-hand ships. Today, it is one of Europe's leading cruise providers operating a fleet of eleven elegant ships, most of which were built within the last few years specifically for MSC. Moreover, MSC, an Italian company, is continuing to expand both its operations and its marketing outside of Europe.

Richard Sasso is leading MSC's expansion into North America. No stranger to building cruise lines, Sasso was President of Celebrity Cruises from 1995 to 2001, that line's formative period. Since 2004, he has turned his talents to the task of introducing Americans

and Canadians to MSC as President & CEO of MSC Cruises USA.

"We are the fastest growing cruise line in the world and have the youngest fleet. Our expansion over the past years has included South America, South Africa and North America. Soon we will also launch cruises in the Mid-east. There is more to come and more ships on order. Our Italian/International quality is the strength of our brand and North American guests are treated to great cruises no matter where they board one of our beautiful vessels."

While North America is the world's largest cruise market, it is also the home field for industry giants Carnival, Royal Caribbean and NCL. Still, Sasso believes MSC can compete successfully in this market because of the distinctive cruise experience it offers.

"We emphasize quality and pampering. We have the best entertainment at sea (we hire the best talent). We have the cleanest ships in the world (we routinely get 100 on United States Public Health Service inspections). We use the finest ingredients for our food services and our Italian halo adds a distinction of quality that allows us to offer the best cruise experience."

"Our ships are new and the ambiance is outstanding so when you add the pampering and customer service, our guests are enjoying every moment on board."

"Our main guest is experienced travelers (cruisers) and our on board entertainment is suited to appeal to the adult guest who appreciates fine music, food and variety of activity."

"We do offer kids free under 12 on all cruises so we also attract families and serve them well while on board with expanded children programs for all age groups."

Another area of strength is dining. "We spend lots of time and energy designing our food and menus so that every guest can enjoy their favorites. The quality of the ingredients and the master preparation helps make each menu item a mouth watering experience. The choices are almost unlimited and the variety is simply extraordinary."

Unlike its competitors, MSC has not introduced a flexible dining option. "We do offer alternatives and 24 hour room service but the main dining is still done in the classic fashion. We believe this is the best approach to offering a memorable experience but the choices are still appropriate depending on personal preferences. Our staff looks forward to treating the guests to a very personal experience and the classic dining still allows that to happen."

A cruise on an MSC ship is a European experience and thus the style is somewhat different than what North Americans may have experienced on the other major lines. However, Sasso does not see this difference as being intimidating but rather as a significant plus for MSC. "We offer the best of both worlds - - a product that is geared to the tastes of our guests from all parts of the world and offered with the halo of Italian /European style. If you are going to travel outside the United States then why not treat yourself to a true international experience with all the comforts of home?"

"Our programs in Europe and in the Med attract international guests - - 80 percent from Europe and 15 percent from North America. When the ships sail in North America, the guests are 85 percent North American and 15 percent international."

In recognition of this mix of nationalities, MSC



Richard Sasso

strives to accommodate both English-speaking and non-English speaking guests. The staff is multi-lingual. The menu and the daily program are in several languages as are the on board announcements. (The number of announcements is limited so as not to be distracting). In addition, "our entertainment and food on board is geared to all tastes and lifestyle. The shows are geared to be visual masterpieces of art and the food is prepared and menus designed to meet this taste of all ranges."

MSC's expansion has been made possible by a multi-billion Euro investment in new ships. Since 2003, MSC has built or acquired ten new ships with another ship on order and due to join the fleet in 2012. These include the 59,000 gross ton Lircia class, the 92,000 gross ton Musica class and the 133,000 gross ton Fantasia class.

"A ship size for every taste. I don't believe that these sizes create any limitations or service shortcom-



MSC Poesia

ings. The very large ships with over 3,000 guests may cause some personal experience issues but we have been able to manage the evolution with great success and maintain our standards of quality along the way. In fact we continue to focus on product enhancements and our introduction of the Yacht Club to the Fantasia class is such an example. [It is a] ship within a ship - - exclusive, private, luxurious and integrated to the vast array of amenities that the larger ships have to offer. [It is] the best execution of the ship within a ship concept."

"We build our vessels with the finest materials in the world. We man the ship with the best staff at sea. We maintain the cleanliness [so as] to be recognized now as the cleanest ships in the world. It is hard to beat that combination."

"We are a privately owned company and our reputation is most important to us. The guest comes first and being private allows us to focus on the guest and not the stock price."

MSC is not stopping here but rather plans to continue to grow. "Our private ownership is the second largest container shipping company in the world. We are a successful cruise and cargo organization and we have the resources to expand. Our current cruise offices around the world number 46 so we are close to the markets around the world and can anticipate what the future trends and destinations will be. We will continue to build the best ships in the world and expand to new destinations as we grow. We are a household name in cruising in Europe and intend to expand that recognition around the world with special attention to North America."