

*INSIDE VIEW:*

# THE NORWEGIAN PEARL EXPERIENCE

## A CONVERSATION WITH DENIS PRGUDA HOTEL DIRECTOR OF NORWEGIAN PEARL

by

**Richard H. Wagner**

**D**enis Prguda is the Hotel Director on Norwegian Cruise Line's (NCL's) Norwegian Pearl. As such, he is responsible for most of the aspects of the onboard operation that shape the guests' cruise experience -- the dining, the accommodations, the entertainment, the shore excursions etc. Accordingly, I sat down with Mr. Prguda to get his views about the Norwegian Pearl experience.

"When it comes to Norwegian Pearl, we have great reviews on Cruise Critic and in the feedback from the guests when it comes to service and value for money. What I get from guests on a daily basis is very positive."

Mr. Prguda credits as "one of the [ship's] strengths." the fact that the experience on Norwegian Pearl is grounded in NCL's Freestyle Cruising concept. This concept is based on the idea that the cruise is the guest's vacation and thus

the guest should be the one to decide when and what to do. Its best known for doing away with the traditional cruise ship system of assigned tables and dining times and instead offering a variety of dining venues that guests can go to whenever they so desire.

In recent years, the other major cruise lines have been introducing flexible dining options. For the most part, these lines have done this by taking a section of the ship's main dining room and allowing the passengers who have selected the flexible dining option to dine in that section whenever they choose. Thus, they contend that they have what Freestyle Cruising offers.

Mr. Prguda disagrees. "To be 100 percent into Freestyle like we are doing, you have to build the ships [with Freestyle in mind]. You have to have enough seats in the restaurants [to accommodate the demand for each restaurant] and you have

to have the restaurants and bars at different points in the vessel in order to have [good passenger] flow so [the guests] don't feel any congestion anywhere."

"Plus, the crew members - to do Freestyle, you have to have 15 to 20 percent more crew than on other cruise lines. Cost-wise, I would say it is a little more expensive to do the Freestyle than traditional."

"It is a completely different experience for the guests. It is getting on the ship. It is getting off the ship. It is all the different amenities. It is not just the dining. It is the whole experience from the time you come onboard until the time you leave the vessel."

"From an entertainment point of view, we are pretty strong and ahead of the other competitors. There is always something going on. If the shows [in the theater] are 7:30 and 9:30, you always have something between the two shows. There is always something at 8:30 or 10:30 when the main shows are finished. For example, in the Spinnaker Lounge, the cruise director has all the theme nights - - newlywed game, Dancing with the Pearl Stars, 70s night. There is a lot to do."

"We offer variety in the staterooms from 4,300 square feet [down]" Thus, in addition to balcony staterooms and economical inside cabins, guests can choose some of the most luxurious accommodations afloat.

"There are five Courtyard Villas plus two Deluxe Owner's Suites. They have a private area with a private pool, a little fitness area, two steam rooms, private sundeck, private dining as well for breakfast, lunch and dinner. There is a special section in the theater for the VIPs as well so they can go there before the show. It is different amenities - - concierge service, butler service, priority check-in, priority check-out, priority reservations - - you name it. Those cabins sell before anything else."

#### *The Software Asset*

**A**s noted earlier, Norwegian Pearl has a reputation for good service. Mr. Prguda attributes Pearl's service to both the size and the



*Hotel Director Denis Prguda*

quality of the crew. There are approximately "1,100 crew members aboard. So the ratio of crew to guests is about 2.5" at full capacity, which is better than most large mass market ships.

"I see the crew as an asset and investment as well. Anyone can build the ships, which are the hardware. The crew is the software, which is the key to the company's success."

"The company has been very good to the crew members, very supportive. Every single crew member when they go home gets a return ticket and a job letter saying that they will come back on a certain date in such and such a ship. So when they go on vacation, they have a guarantee that they will have a job."

#### *A Varied Year*

**N**orwegian Pearl's year is divided between cruising the Caribbean in the winter and cruising to Alaska in the summer.



"From the standpoint of operation, the Caribbean is completely different. Most of the guests are outside. It is all about sun, shopping and so forth."

"Alaska is all about sightseeing. Many more guests use our shore excursions for various tours in Alaska. We go into Glacier Bay and spend an amazing day inside with the two glaciers; we tour Victoria in Canada, Skagway and Ketchikan."

"The clientele is different. Alaska has changed. When I started out in 1993, the average age was 65 or 67. It has changed now to an average age of about 50. Lots of families are coming to Alaska in the last few years."

During the Caribbean season, the passengers are "people running away from the cold. [The demographics] depend upon the breaks and holidays. Three weeks ago, we had lots of people from Europe because they had a break there. [This cruise], we have 2,600 guests and 900 are Canadians. In March, we are expecting the Spring Breakers. On March 13, we will have about 600 under-aged passengers. Then, on March 27, we will have about 800."

"All of these figures we get from the Miami office in advance in order to prepare the ship. [Different demographics mean] different eating habits, so we prepare in advance. Show-wise, if,

for example, we need to bring in teen bands, this is what we do."

"You have to plan ahead. Most of our [supplies] come from Miami. [In the Caribbean,] we order two weeks in advance. [In Alaska,] we have to go four weeks in advance - - everything goes through Miami and comes to Seattle. It takes lots of planning."

"Then the re-positioning cruise, which takes three weeks from Seattle to Miami - - going through the Panama Canal, the Mexican Riviera, Honduras, touching in Columbia - - is an amazing experience. What I have noticed about those cruises is that you get mainly experienced cruisers - - guests who have been cruising for years and years and know what to expect. It slows down. People take their time."