

BRINGING OUT THE SPLENDOR

A conversation with Captain Giorgio Pagano and his senior officers about the building Carnival Splendor and bringing her into service.

by

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On 2 July 2008, Carnival Splendor embarked on her maiden voyage. However, that was not the beginning of her story. The largest ship built for Carnival Cruises Lines up to that date, she reportedly cost half a billion dollars to build. On a voyage on Carnival Splendor, I had the opportunity to speak with some of her officers about the building process.

Carnival Splendor was built at the Fincantieri shipyard in Sestri Ponente, a suburb of Genoa, Italy. In some respects, it is more accurate to say that the ship was assembled in Sestri Ponente. Modern cruise ships are put together in sections that are constructed elsewhere in the shipyard or, indeed, at another location altogether. For example, Splendor's trademark winged funnel was built in Trieste, Italy and then brought to Sestri Ponente. Similarly, Splendor's 1,503 staterooms were pre-fabricated and placed fully assembled into the ship. Her six diesel engines came from

Wartsila of Finland.

The initial assembly was done in a large drydock. Cranes lifted whole sections of the ship so that they could be fitted together with other enormous sections. Once the construction took the shape of a ship, the drydock was flooded and the vessel was "floated-out". Carnival Splendor reached this milestone on 3 August 2007. She was then moored to a quay to have her internal and technical outfitting completed.

Throughout the building process, Carnival executives performed inspections. As each system was completed, a Carnival professional inspected it to ensure that it was functional. Other Carnival managers were resident at the shipyard to oversee the work of Fincantieri and the various contractors involved in supplying components of the ship. Carnival likes to maintain tight control over shipbuilding.

Furthermore, "in the contract they have items marked: 'owner supply,'" points out Captain Giorgio Pagano, the first master of Carnival Splendor. "It is a huge amount of things, especially in housekeeping. It is up to us when to put them onboard. A lot of it comes from the States, some from Europe. It is brought onboard and put in place by our people. It is a huge operation - - 24 hours a day."

Much of this work is performed by the ship's crew, which begins to arrive at the shipyard long before the ship is handed over to the owner. "The first persons to come onboard a new ship are the captain and the staff captain. They are in the yard four months in advance to oversee the development of the building and everything else. Then slowly, the chief engineer comes in, the staff chief, and the hotel director come on as well. So, you don't just get the crew all at one time. You get the crew in batches," explains Hotel Director Guna Chellam

Assembling a crew and building it into a team is an especially important part of bringing out a new ship. "Carnival is famous for its hospitality and its friendliness. When you look at Carnival Splendor, we are sailing with 1,800 repeat guests every cruise - - that is [half] of the ship's total capacity. People come back, not because they want to see us or because they want to go to St. Thomas. They are here because they enjoy the service and the hospitality. It is the crew who make the people want to come back and back."

When bringing out a new ship, some cruise lines assemble a crew by taking large numbers of people who have had experience on the similar ships that are already in the line's fleet. The idea is that such experienced crew members know how things are done on that type of ship and thus the new ship will have an easier time getting up to speed when it enters service. However, Mr. Chellam points out that there is a problem with such an approach. "We don't do that because the other ships are going to suffer. Imagine if you took a large portion of the crew from the Carnival Freedom, that ship is going to suffer. We choose like ten from here, ten from the Carnival Pride,



The senior team on Carnival Splendor: (Left to right) Housekeeping Manager Carmo Gonsalves; Hotel Director Gunasekaran Chellam, Chief Engineer Luciano Tortorici; Capatin Giorgio Pagano (Master of Carnival Splendor); Staff Chief Engineer Francesco Quintavala; Food and Beverage Manager Francis Mekkattukulam.

maybe five or six or one from the others. We don't want the other ships to suffer. We want to make the guests feel like each Carnival ship is the same, not like one ship is better than the other ships"

"We don't hand choose the crew for new ships. Some are people who are coming back from vacation. Also, we take requests from the crews [of the existing ships]. A lot of people in those crews wanted to see Europe [where Splendor spent her first summer season]. Some wanted to be near their families in Estonia - - the ship was in Estonia every other week."

"A lot of the senior management here have experience doing new ships. For example, [Food and Beverage Manager Francis Mekkattukulam], did two new ships when he was an assistant and he brought out the ship when he was a bar manager on the Carnival Liberty. So he knows the concept of a new ship, he knows the philosophy and what is going on on a new ship."

In addition, at the same time the crew members are bringing the furnishings onboard and getting the ship ready for sea, "there is rigorous training that goes on from the beginning in a brand new ship."

While Carnival seeks to provide a similar

product across all of the ships in its fleet, the training on a new ship cannot be so rigid that the crew cannot respond to changing circumstances. This was especially important for Carnival Splendor inasmuch as her first year itinerary included cruises in Northern Europe, the Mediterranean, across the Atlantic, in the Caribbean, around South America and finally cruises from the West Coast of America. Such a varied itinerary involves different types of passengers with different nationalities, tastes and habits. "We adapt ourselves to the needs of the guests. We make changes to cater to their needs," explains Mr. Mekkattuklam of Splendor's Food and Beverage Department.



The need to be adaptable is also there with regard to shipboard entertainment. Gustav "Goose" Neumann, the Cruise Director notes: "A lot of the creation of the programming and activities is done onboard. We manipulate the program as the cruise is going. If we see guests really gravitate towards something, we mutate and try and figure out how do we make this something special. If we have a lot of bridge players, card players, we'll do something special for them. If we have guests who love scrabble, we can have a big scrabble tournament. If we see that we have a big karaoke crowd, we can switch that to another [larger] venue."

Work on Carnival Splendor went smoothly. "This was one of the best ships, I think. No challenges," comments Chief Engineer Luciano Tortorici. This is not surprising. While Splendor represents a new class for Carnival Cruise Lines, she is actually a near sister to Costa Concordia and Costa Serena of Costa Cruises. Moreover, the design is actually an evolution of the design used for Carnival Destiny. When a shipbuilder has had the benefit of building other ships of the same class, the work tends to go faster and more smoothly than when the yard is building a prototype.

Splendor performed successfully on her final set of sea trials in April 2008 in the Tyrrhenian Sea off the coast of Sicily. This was a sort of road test where the builder and the new owner see whether the ship performs up to the specifications

in the contract. After that, it was back to Sestri Ponente for finishing.

The ship was ready to be turned over to Carnival on 30 June 2008. "Actually, I would say it was ready to sail even a few days earlier," remembers Captain Pagano. "Structurally, it was a very good ship. It came out very well. We are very happy."

