

INSIDE VIEW:

A Conversation with Captain Nick Bates of Cunard's Queen Mary 2

By

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Captain Nick Bates has been driving Cunard passenger ships for most of the last 35 years. As chief officer, staff captain and later captain of Queen Elizabeth 2, he played an important part in the QE2 story. In addition, he sailed on and/or commanded most of the other Cunard ships of the late 20th century. Most recently, he has commanded Cunard's flagship, the incomparable Queen Mary 2, bringing with him a unique style of command that delights guests.

Setting a goal

Although Captain Bates' ambition was to follow both his father and maternal grandfather to sea, he never envisioned becoming a Cunard captain when he enrolled in Nautical College in Belfast, Northern Ireland. "About half way through our first term, they asked: 'What companies do you want to join?' They gave us all brochures from the different shipping companies. I just thumbed through them

and I saw these grey-hulled things with black and red funnels. I thought: 'Australia, New Zealand, 12 passengers, that sounds really nice.' Nice, clean, well-kept ships. And so I went to the headmaster of the college in Belfast and I said: 'Port Line, that's the company, I want to go for.'

Port Line was a cargo subsidiary of Cunard and the headmaster was not encouraging saying: "Nobody from Belfast has ever gone into Port Line. It is one of the top three companies in the world. You'll never get into it. Go to Headlands [a local Belfast company]."

Bates was very discouraged by this news. He had no money so he hitchhiked to his rural hometown to think things over. He explained to his mother, "I wanted to go to this company called Port Line but they won't let me do it." She said 'Hang on; your dad was with Port Line.' So she wrote to the company." In response, she received a letter from a man who had sailed with Captain Bates' father saying that if her son was successful at the Nautical

College, Port Line would give him an interview.

This spurred Bates on and he became top of the class. At the same time, without saying anything about his mother's correspondence, he kept after the headmaster to allow him to apply to Port Line. Finally, the headmaster said that Bates could apply but only if he also applied to Headland.

When Bates had successfully completed his studies, Port Line was true to its word and gave Bates an interview. Still, the headmaster was not impressed. "You've got an interview that doesn't mean anything."

But when Port Line made Bates an offer of employment the headmaster's tune changed. "He just couldn't believe it. 'One of our lads.'"

Once with Port Line, Bates was sailing from Britain to Australia and New Zealand on cargo ships. These were long voyages with weeks spent in the sunny ports of Australia and New Zealand. Bates found it ideal work for a young man.

An unexpected turn

In 1975, Bates had just received his master's license, which entitled him to command ships. He was preparing to join a bulk cargo carrier in Japan when he received a phone call from someone in the passenger division of Cunard. One of the officers on Queen Elizabeth 2 was ill and since it was a requirement that all of the navigational officers on the Cunard passenger ships have a master's license, they needed a young officer with a master's certificate to fly out and join QE2 in Barbados. The caller asked if Bates would be interested in a two-month contract on QE2.

"I said: 'No, I don't want to do that. I had never thought I was suited for passenger ships. I thought it would be too stuffy and a bit too formal. I was used to going around the decks in a pair of shorts and no shirt, climbing up the rigging, doing things kids do and enjoying life.'"



Captain Nick Bates

The man from Cunard asked Bates to think about it overnight and Bates said that he would. He went down to the local pub where someone was singing "I'm going to Barbados" So, Bates thought why not, it is only for two months and decided to go to QE2.

Not everything about his new job was immediately to his liking, however. "I was second on a watch - - the junior man. I had been used to giving orders so I didn't like that very much."

However, he was awed by QE2's abilities. "The ship was just extraordinary. I remember being on watch and the first officer was in the back doing some work. I saw a ship up

ahead and I thought I'll wander in and tell him: 'There is a ship up ahead, we'll pass clear.' He said: 'Just keep an eye on it.' But when I went back again and I looked for the ship, I couldn't see it. We had gone past it. I wasn't used to a ship that was going 29 knots. It was extraordinary seeing something that could go that fast."

Bates was also impressed with "everything that went with it [including] the history of Cunard Line. I was proud to be part of it and that has continued all the way through. [my career] I think anybody that has been involved with QE2 has a real pride in it. But not just QE2 - - Cunard."

Rising through the officer ranks, Bates was first officer, chief officer, staff captain and eventually captain of QE2 "QE2, I loved that. She was a legend and a legend in her own time. 40 years is quite something and I'm very proud that I had my chance to serve on her. To start off as second officer and to end up as captain is kind of nice."

Cruising with Cunard

Before becoming master of QE2, however, Bates commanded several other Cunard ships. This was in the days when the Cunard fleet was far from homogenous and not all the ships carried the atmosphere of the flagship. Included in the fleet were two mass market cruise ships, Cunard Countess and Cunard Princess. Captain Bates' first command was the Countess.

"At the time, she was a really nice ship. Now, if you looked at her, she could be used as a lifeboat for [QM2]. She was 534 feet long - - half the length of this one. But she was a hugely popular ship around the Caribbean because she was almost one of the first

to be doing the Caribbean cruises on a regular basis. All the islanders got to know us and we got to know them and it still stands us well today."

In the late 1990s, Cunard leased two other mass market cruise ships and Captain Bates was given command of the Crown Dynasty cruising around Alaska. "She is a lovely ship. She has been one of my favorites because she was lovely to maneuver. She had quite modern technology as compared to the Princess and Countess, which had somewhat underpowered bow thrusters. Her bow thrusters were up to the task. She had twin rudders, which makes for maneuverability. Princess and Countess only had one rudder so you had to work harder to dock them and drive them. She is still going as the Braemar."

At the other end of the spectrum, Cunard also had at the time, two ultra-luxury yachts called Sea Goddess I and II. "I did a year on the Sea Goddesses. Nice small ships going around the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, going places where other ships couldn't get into. With 115 passengers, you got to know them all very quickly. It was a lot of fun."

Cunard also owned two ships that had been originally built for Norwegian American Line. For most of their Cunard careers, they maintained their Norwegian style and officers. However, when Cunard was purchased by Carnival Corporation, the one remaining ship was transformed into the Caronia. "Of course, it was Carnival that kept Cunard going. If it hadn't been for Carnival, we probably would not have survived."

Caronia was given a style similar to that of QE2. "She was very similar with the afternoon tea with the white

gloves, the lectures, the more formal dining arrangements. I met my wife on there so it has a memory.”

As for her maneuverability, “she is the classic. [In nautical school] they train you on a twin screw ship with a single rudder with one bow thruster and when you do exams, they say how would you do this, how would you do that? And there is a textbook answer and it was based on the Caronia. It did what you expected it to do.”

Time with another line.

After commanding QE2, in 2003, Cunard asked whether Captain Bates would like to spend some time with sister company Princess Cruises. “I think their idea was ‘he needs to get some modern ship experience and maybe if it works out, we’ll put him onto the Mary’. Again, I was a bit skeptical before I went. I thought this Princess business is going to go over quite different. But I loved it - - different style, different way of doing things. I loved the ships and the people.”

Captain Bates was given command of the Sapphire Princess, an 116,000 gross ton Grand class megacruise ship, with a 2,600 person passenger capacity. Later, Bates commanded Sapphire’s sister ship, Diamond Princess.

“I learned that it is okay to be different - - not everything that Cunard did was 100 percent right; not everything Princess did was 100 percent right. You came to appreciate what each has.”

“Companies are different. If every ship were like a Cunard ship or like a Princess ship or like a Carnival ship, it wouldn’t please everybody. You

have to give people a choice. There are plenty of choices out there.”

To illustrate, Cunard has positioned itself as presenting a more elegant and more formal ocean experience. Some people would prefer a more informal experience but that is not what Cunard is all about. There are other lines that have positioned themselves for those people.

“That’s why I say to the [junior officers] whenever they are doing a presentation and they are comparing this ship with [ships of other major lines]: ‘Don’t run them down. They are good ships. They are good at what they do. It is petty if you run someone else down.’”

“I think one thing Cunard has got better is the retention of the crew. Every time we change crew in a port, I go down and meet them all, just to say welcome back and welcome to the new guys and give them a little flavor of the ship and what it is about. On a Princess ship, whenever you do that and ask how many people have been on this ship before, out of 50, you may get two who have been there before. The rest have been on other Princess ships. On [QM2], you get 48 who have been here before and two that are new. That is the continuity. Of course, Princess has got many more ships so it is not easy to keep the same people. But I think the companies are beginning to realize that it is good to keep consistency within the fleet. People get comfortable and they make friends to work with and that makes a difference.”

Driving the flagship

Following his time at Princess, Captain Bates returned to Cunard to command Queen Mary 2. While the modern Princess ships were a

change from the ships Captain Bates had commanded before, QM2 was yet again another major change technologically. Her pod propulsion gives her great flexibility in maneuvering while her powerful engine plant gives her great speed. Her width, length, weight and draft give her unprecedented stability.

"It is a different technology. With the pods, everything is in reverse [to a ship with a traditional propeller and rudder system]. The conventional way of thinking is that you put the rudder over one way and the ship goes that way. Here, you put the pods over that way and it goes [the opposite] way."

"They have pretty well ironed out all the design faults of the previous ships. Some ships in the past did have little teething troubles with them. I just find it staggeringly good. I love it. You can go places now that you wouldn't dare go before."

"When I first looked at [the bridge controls], I said 'I'll never get the hang of that' but you do. It is like playing a piano - - all the different combinations that you have. Different captains will have different ways of controlling her. Some will use just the side thrusters, others will put both pods over - - all sorts of combinations. I like the technology. It also gives you a better feel for how the ship is doing."

A lively style of command

Captain Bates is not the stereotypic stuffy remote sea captain. Instead, he is very approachable and passengers who sail with Captain Bates are treated to lighthearted sea stories during his noonday announcements and at the various receptions. These are quite popular and are looked forward to by many guests. It

helps to develop a convivial atmosphere onboard. "If I am not enjoying myself then that is going to shine through to the guests. It gives them a bit of a chuckle so that is fine."

Telling these lighthearted stories to the passengers came about by chance. "Just being Irish, I have always loved stories, telling stories and I always have been particularly interested in the ones with a nautical flavor to them. So I just started collecting them. I was telling a few stories in my cabin on the Caronia one day and one of the cruise staff said: 'Why don't you tell a few stories to the passengers?' I said, 'they wouldn't be interested in that.' But they said: 'Oh, you'd be surprised.' So I tried one one day and received some good comments. I thought 'Okay, I'll try a few more' and it built up from there."

The popularity of the stories grew to such an extent that Captain Bates soon found himself an author. "People kept saying 'Can I get a copy of that story that you told.' I'd say: 'Well, I've just got my own copy' so, I just gave them a copy of that. Then, somebody said: 'Why don't you write a book' I said: 'Nah, nobody would be interested in that' but I did it anyway."

The book *With a Pinch of Salt*, was initially self-published by Captain Bates. However, it is now published by Seafarers Books in the United Kingdom and Sheridan House in the United States. "It has done remarkably well. It will never be a J.K. Rawlings but it has been fun." Captain Bates donates the profits from the book to charity.

Passengers familiar with Captain Bates' announcements are also familiar with Patrick O'Shaughnessy, a mysterious friend never seen onboard but to whom the Captain attributes the stories and humorous sayings. Although

a vehicle for humor, O'Shaughnessy is a fictional character that Bates has developed for a serious reason. It is important for a ship's captain to maintain an image of competency in order to maintain the respect of the passengers and crew. "You have to be careful with that one you know. If they think you are a joker, they'll think 'he doesn't know anything about driving the ship' or that somebody else drives it - - 'he doesn't really do it.' In actual fact, they forget that captain does it all. He does all the driving apart from when he lets the other guys do it."

Captain Bates has been able to successfully walk this fine line. On the bridge, there is no doubt about who is in command. He is all seriousness at the controls and in communicating to tugs, Coast Guard vessels and to officers located elsewhere in the ship over his handheld radio. Along the same lines, a

young officer told me: "Captain Bates never forgets anything. He sees something and writes it down in his book. Then, the next time he sees you, he asks you about it."

At the same time, Captain Bates is eager to develop his officers. "I personally want to let all the officers drive the ship so that when I go to sleep at night I know they are competent to handle the ship. Of course, I remember my days as a young navigator; I was dying to get hold of [the controls]. Some captains wouldn't let you touch them. It was quite frustrating."

"We have been quite lucky on this voyage. Everybody on the bridge has now had a chance to drive it in or out of port. They love that, that's their job. But it is more stress than doing it myself - - watching somebody else doing it and having to keep your mouth shut."

