

Inside View

QUEEN VICTORIA COMES OF AGE

A conversation with Hotel Manager David Hamilton
and Entertainment Director Paul O'Loughlin

By Richard H. Wagner

Cunard Line's Queen Victoria will be five years old in December 2012. She is still a young ship but old enough now to have formed her own identity. Accordingly, I sat down with Hotel Manager David Hamilton and Entertainment Director Paul O'Loughlin to get their thoughts on the cruise experience on today's Queen Victoria.

Mr. Hamilton has been with Cunard for 35 years and has served on ships such as Caronia, Cunard Princess, Cunard Countess and the legendary Queen Elizabeth 2. He has served on Queen Victoria for much of her career and now alternates between Queen Victoria and the new Queen Elizabeth. His assessment of where Queen Victoria is now?

"It is settled. There is definitely a good feel amongst the crew, which permeates through to the passengers too. I think we are doing very well actually.

It is almost like a large family where everyone is interdependent but everyone knows what their part is, serving the guests directly or serving someone who is serving the guests. Everyone plays their part in the end product, which is the guest's vacation. We have a good balance, a really nice bunch of people."

"Essentially, it is a happy ship and that makes a huge difference. If the crew are happy providing the service and the vacation to people then it makes it a whole lot more pleasant experience. Caronia was a good ship. Through its fabric, it was always happy. It did not matter if it was in the North Cape or one of the other countries, it just went along the same and it was nice."

Mr. O'Loughlin was already a successful cruise director when he came to Cunard so he is in a position to compare the Queen Victoria experience with those of other lines. "If you pick up

a Cunard brochure and a brochure from any other cruise line, the first thing that first of all hits you is the formality, the tradition, the legacy, the history. I mean many cruise lines have wonderful histories but Cunard is the most famous shipping line in the world.”

“Our entertainment is much more classical in what it offers to guests. Onboard this ship or any of the ships in our fleet, you will have two full orchestras - - a theater orchestra and a Queens Room orchestra - -, a harpist and a string quartet. You don’t get that on any other ship in the world. Onboard a Cunard liner, there is much more dedication to offering a wide variety of music. And also too, we put a lot more into our lecturers and [the rest of] our Cunard Insights program because we do have a very discerning clientele who are not just here for the ports of call or to do pool games, that is not us. We are not a party cruise line and we never will be and don’t want to be. There are other companies that cover that part of life, but that is not us.”

Mr. Hamilton agreed. “We are serving the market of the more sophisticated season traveler who doesn’t want to be in the disco until five o’clock every morning and wonder where the morning went afterwards. It is the Cunard thing that people still like. We maintain the dress code, which a lot of people like. I still think that is worth hanging on to. There is very much a British flavor to what we are doing.”

Hamilton pointed out some of the features that distinguish Cunard ships from other ships including: large ballrooms, extensive libraries, good quality furnishings and fittings and enough space to absorb the number of

people the ship is carrying. However, it is not any one feature that makes Cunard different.

“I think the whole package should fit the more sophisticated traveler. There are plenty of other things that I’m not saying other ships don’t have but you put the whole thing together and it is ‘the product.’ It is the whole thing. Like everything in life, you can do it right and there is a right way to do it.”

“It is the follow through as well. We call ours: ‘White Star service’ and it really is there. Our people are doing it because they want to, they are doing it from the heart, not from the rule book or from the head. You are in our home and we care about what we are doing. The end result is that we really care that Mr. and Mrs. Smith are going to have a decent holiday. It is not ‘You didn’t like it, write in later’. It is the human aspect that is present on Cunard ships.”

Perhaps because Cunard is such a traditional line, some people have the idea that the Cunard ships are divided by classes as in the days of the Titanic. Mr. Hamilton explained that perception is just not accurate. “The days when there was segregation of the ship itself probably stopped around 1980. [Today,] everybody has the run of the whole ship. To some extent, everyone traveling on a ship has privileges. It is not a class thing. Yes, there are people onboard who have paid more and are receiving more - - the Grill restaurants, the one bar and the deck space.” In other words, just as guests who travel in the suites on other ships have privileges that other guests do not, the guests traveling in the suites on Cunard ships have an additional set of privileges beyond those of people

traveling in an inside stateroom have for example.

Cunard currently has three ships. Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth are very similar in design and do similar itineraries, cruising for much of the year out of Southampton, England. Queen Mary 2 is a unique design and is a much larger ship. She spends most of her time doing transatlantic crossings between New York and Southampton.

Mr. O'Loughlin has served as entertainment director on both Queen Mary 2 and Queen Victoria. "A lot of guests say to me, which ship is better or which do you prefer - - Queen Mary 2 or Queen Victoria? I think the best analogy for that is to say that it is like comparing cities, it is like comparing London to Venice. Queen Victoria is Venice and Queen Mary 2 is London or New York. They are both very different cities and it is very difficult to compare."

"Queen Mary 2 being the flagship and being designed as a transatlantic liner is very, very grand - - high deck-heads, very grand public rooms. You get the feeling of grandness, history and legacy. Queen Victoria is also a queen - - very plush in her design and in her public rooms. [But] she is smaller, 90,000 tons. She has a very intimate feeling. Intimacy is one thing that attracts a lot of guests to Queen Victoria."

"A lot of guests compare the atmosphere to that of QE2 in regards to the feeling of the ship. I have noticed since I have been here that a lot of guests come back time after time to Queen

Victoria and a lot of those guests are ex-QE2. They say that even though QE2 was the longest serving Cunarder in history and Queen Victoria is still a very young ship that they feel that the bond between crew and guests and the feeling of the ship compares to Queen Elizabeth 2, which I think is a great compliment. "

"The clientele on Queen Victoria is 90 to 95 percent British clientele so as far as entertainment goes you are presenting an entertainment program to one demographic. Whereas Queen Mary 2 is a much more international clientele with sometimes 40 or 50 percent Americans, sometimes 40 or 50 percent German, the shows and the style on Queen Mary 2 are different than on Queen Victoria because you are entertaining many more nationalities."

"Also, Queen Victoria's [itineraries are] more port intensive whereas Queen Mary 2 is an ocean liner, built for the sea, so she spends a lot more time at sea." This too affects the programming as the focus on Queen Mary 2 is on what is happening on the ship whereas on Queen Victoria the experience is divided between life onboard and in the ports.

In sum, the cruise experience on Queen Victoria is very much in the Cunard ocean liner tradition - - formal, sophisticated and for the discerning traveler. At the same time, she differs from fleetmate Queen Mary 2 in that she is less international but more intimate. However, as Mr. Hamilton noted, what really defines her personality is the happy spirit of her crew.