

INSIDE INTERVIEW:

THE TRAVELS OF A SUPER-CRUISER

A conversation with Mario Salcedo who has sailed as a passenger on more than 400 Royal Caribbean cruises.

by

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For many people, a cruise is a once in a life time experience. Others cruise regularly, perhaps a few times a year. However, for still others, cruising is an everyday experience.

One such super-cruiser is Mario Salcedo, who had done over 500 cruises, the majority of which have been on Royal Caribbean ships. This includes more than 80 cruises on Liberty of the Seas alone. He estimates that he has spent over 10 years at sea cruising. What is even more amazing is that he has done all of this in just 13 years.

Mario's career before cruising was in corporate finance. Based in his hometown Miami, Florida, Mario worked for a number of large companies including Federal Express. His area of responsibility was Latin America and the Caribbean. His job involved a great amount of travel to these countries during which he became aware of the attractive lifestyle the area offers to tourists. "There were all these beautiful people on the beach having a good time. The only problem was that I

was coming in with a suit and tie and a briefcase."

The more he traveled, the greater his ambition grew to become part of this attractive lifestyle. "Finally, at 47, I left my job. 'I've had a good career but now it is time to move on.' I left a lot of benefits and money on the table because at 47 you are not vested."

In order to "stay stimulated" he set up a small business in which he manages investment portfolios for a select group of clients. That business, however, was intended to be a sideline to his new career - - cruising.

Before he left the corporate world, Mario had never gone on a cruise. So in order to find out what cruising was all about, he booked six cruises back-to-back on six different ships belonging to six different cruise lines. "It gave me a sampling of what cruising was like. It confirmed what I had thought and I said 'I really, really want to do this for the rest of my life.'"

After his initial six cruises, Mario booked more cruises on various cruise lines. "I have pretty much done all the cruise lines including a lot of the smaller

ones like Crystal, Silver Seas, Seabourn, Regent, Windstar, Windjammer and all the majors." The only major lines absent from his catalog are Disney, P&O and Cunard.

Most of the cruises that he took were out of Florida. "I did a few in the Mediterranean, a few from the West Coast to Hawaii. I did Alaska. I did [Panama] Canal crossings but let's say 80 to 80 percent were from Florida to the Caribbean."

Between 1997 and 2000, Mario took approximately 110 cruises on cruise lines other than Royal Caribbean.

In late 1999, however, Royal Caribbean brought Voyager of the Seas into service and it changed Mario's life. "I had done Royal Caribbean - - I had done the Majesty, the Sovereign, the Monarch - - but when the Voyager of the Seas came out it took my breath away. That was the one ship of all the ships that I had done which made me say 'Wow, this is magnificent.'"

"What made the Voyager different from other ships? It was the largest cruise ship in the world when it came out. It had the Royal Promenade and the Royal Promenade was unbelievable. The pool area, the whole ship just blew me away. At that point, I said, 'I have found my place. I have found ships that fit my likings, my personality, my tastes, everything. From late 2000 to date, I have been loyal to Royal.'"

While Voyager of the Seas was the ship that initially captivated Mario, he has become most closely associated with Liberty of the Seas. Liberty, which entered service in 2007, is the second of Royal Caribbean's three Freedom class ships. Mario has sailed on all three but the Liberty is his favorite. "The crew onboard the Liberty of the Seas embraced me. They made me feel extra special so I gravitated from the Freedom to the Liberty. As I did more Libertys, they completely enveloped me. All the crew members basically treat me like family."

His loyalty to the Liberty has not kept him from trying Royal Caribbean's newest ships - - the giant Oasis of the Seas and her sister Allure of the Seas. "It just takes cruising to a whole different new dimension. [The Oasis-class is] a game changer. You go on one of those ships and if you are an experienced cruiser you are



Mario Salcedo

going to be wowed. There is no way not to be wowed just by stepping onto the Royal Promenade which is twice as wide as the ones [on the Freedom class ships]. Then all the things that it has - - the zip line, the Floriders, the Aqua Theater, and the Central Park. It just takes it to a whole different level."

As a result, Mario has taken over 400 cruises on Royal Caribbean ships. "I have sailed every ship in Royal Caribbean, every one of the 22 ships." On average, Mario has taken about 40 cruises a year. He has spent every day for the last two and a quarter years cruising, mostly on Liberty of the Seas.

Mario does have a home on land. He has an oceanfront condominium in Miami. "It is beautiful and I love it". He uses it to store his possessions and as his home office for his portfolio management business.

Each week when the ship he is on returns to Miami, Mario goes to his condominium early in the morning and spends the day working on his business. He also drops off laundry from the last cruise and picks up fresh laundry for the upcoming cruise. In the afternoon, he returns to the ship.

Mario has a maid who cleans the apartment and does the laundry. She also washes his car, which

he confesses "I never use. It just gathers dust."

Sometimes Mario does work for his portfolio management business while at sea. If there is work that he was unable to complete at his home office on turn-around day, he will bring it back to the ship. Also, if market conditions provide an opportunity, he will do trades for his clients over the internet. "I have traded millions of dollars of stocks from the ships. . . . Very seldom do I do it but I do do it occasionally"

Until recently, Liberty of the Seas was based in Miami. It was very convenient for Mario to have his favorite ship so close to home. However, in the Spring of 2011, she was redeployed to Barcelona, Spain and upon her return to the United States for the winter season, she will be based in Port Everglades.

"It's a big problem because the Liberty is going to be gone six months to Europe. So I have a six month gap that I have to fill. I do not want to leave Royal Caribbean. I want to stick with RCI. So what I am going to be doing is a little bit of Allure, a little bit of Oasis, a little bit of Freedom, a little bit of Majesty and Monarch. I am [also] going to be doing a couple of other European Mediterranean cruises. Then in October, I will fly to Barcelona and pick up the Liberty and bring her back. I am staying on the Liberty from November 12 every single week until April and then I am crossing [to Europe] with her and the cycle repeats itself."

Royal Caribbean has not officially dedicated a cabin for Mario's use. Inasmuch as he does not always cruise on the same ship, such an arrangement would hardly be practical. However, when he is cruising on one of the Voyager or Freedom class ships, Mario does prefer one of the aft junior suites. "I carry with me a magnetic sign which attaches to the door which says 'Mario's Suite'. Any one who walks by knows that I am there. It is my address."

Nor does he receive a special price from Royal Caribbean that is just for him. "I get the same deal as the top tier [of Royal's loyalty program] would get. I do not get any special pricing deals at all."

He books his cruises when he is onboard in the future cruise office. "You have the advantage of getting a \$100 onboard credit." But he does have a travel agent. As per Royal's policy, his travel agent gets a commission for the bookings he makes with the future cruise office. In return, "I make my travel agent responsible for the post booking support. I expect her to follow all of my 52 open bookings every week to make sure that if any of them have dropped in price, she will request the difference. That is the only thing she has to do for me."

Onboard, "I get super-duper Gold Anchor serv-

ice." Amongst other things, he is often invited to dine at the captain's table. He knows everyone and likes to use his contacts to help resolve issues that other guests may be having. He is so much a member of the ship's company that he joins the crew onstage to wave good-bye to the guests during the finale of the crew farewell performance at the end of each cruise.

Royal clearly appreciates his business. Mario has been invited on every pre-inaugural cruise, which are normally limited to press and travel agents, for each new ship since the debut of Freedom of the Seas. In addition, he was invited to speak at a conference of Royal's senior executives to provide "the voice of the customer." "They like to get my feedback."

Mario usually travels by himself. "I wouldn't say always but most of the time. I am a single man. I have not gotten married yet. But once in a while I do bring a companion with me."

When he is cruising, Mario does not remain isolated like a reclusive celebrity. "I think one of the big, big things about cruising is meeting people. I love to socialize. I go to the Concierge Lounge, the Diamond Lounge. I walk around. I go to the bars. I love to meet people."

"The crew members point me out to the guests and then I get a barrage of questions. The captain and the hotel director ask me 'how do you spend your time?' I tell them: 'Answering questions.' People ask me all sorts of questions. Where should we go in Cozumel? Should we go to Chops or Portofinos [the two specialty restaurants on Liberty]? I just get from A to Z. "

When he reaches the various ports of call in the Caribbean, Mario indulges his passion for scuba diving. According to Mario, diving and cruising go together like "rum and coke, especially in the Caribbean." So when he began his cruising career, Mario took the courses necessary to become a certified dive instructor just so he would thoroughly understand diving. "I've done about 2,000 dives in the last 13 years."

"When I go to Europe, I do not dive. I get to know the place."

"It has been a great ride. I made the right decision 13 years ago." His advice to any one thinking of sampling the cruising life: "You have to find the cruise line that fits your needs, your likings, your habits, your personality. I think that is the major thing when a new customer is looking for a cruise - - which one fits me better, which product offering. What do you like to do, what are your interests?"

To provide a frame of reference for Mario's achievement, the following is some information on some other super-cruisers.

One of the best known super-cruisers is Lorraine Arzt who cruised some 5,400 days (about 14 years) on Princess ships. In fact, she sailed with Princess so much that the line made her the godmother of Royal Princess (now P&O's Adonia) where she was resident for several years.

Also well-known is Bea Mueller who lived aboard Cunard's Queen Elizabeth 2 for nine years until the ship went out of service in 2008. She had sailed extensively on QE2 prior to taking up residence there. Living shoreside now, she still occasionally takes a cruise.

Ms. Mueller was following in the footsteps of Clara L. MacBeth, who lived on Cunard's Caronia (the "Green Goddess") for nearly 15 years in the middle of the 20th Century.

Still cruising regularly is Holland America Line's Louise Meis. "Mama Lou," as she is called by the crews, has done over 5,000 days at sea. She sails 10 months each year. Amongst other things, she reportedly likes to bring bicycles, computers and other useful items along, which she gives to families in the various ports of call.

Moving up the ranks rapidly is Bill Filomena, who sold his house in 2008 and has been moving from ship to ship ever since. He reportedly did 41 cruises in 2009. In 2010, he sailed on all 23 ships in the Carnival Cruise Lines fleet. For variety, he occasionally cruises with Holland America.



Liberty of the Seas