

An interview with Captain Albert Schoonderbeek of VEENDAM

By Richard H. Wagner

Capt. Albert J. Schoonderbeek BSc, MNI, was born in the eastern part of the Netherlands in a town called Ede. In 1976 he entered the oldest Maritime Academy in the world, "De Kweekschool voor de Zeevaart," in Amsterdam and did his seagoing apprenticeship in 1979. Upon graduation he found employment with Holland America Line, the only Dutch company that operated cruise ships and has been with the line ever since. In addition to being the master of the VEENDAM, Captain Schoonderbeek is an author of books and articles about the sea and passenger ships as well as the author of Captain Albert's Blog, which recounts VEENDAM's exploits on a daily basis. When he is not commanding a ship, Captain Schoonderbeek and his wife enjoy cruising on ships of other cruise lines. He and his wife live in England.

Then and Now: Changes In The Cruising Life

Inasmuch as Captain Schoonderbeek co-authored the official company history, published to mark 125 years of Holland America Line in 1998, an appropriate starting point for the conversation was how being a captain on a Holland America ship today differs from being a captain in the past.

"Everything is so streamlined that it is very hard to put your personality on the product anymore. Of course, in the old days, the captains could basically run the ships the way they saw fit as long as they arrived safely in New York and as long as they arrived safely in Southampton. So, that makes for characters."

"I started out in 1981 on the old STATENDAM and I thought: 'I want to become a captain of a cruise ship because this is nice. This guy plays around with

the boat a little bit and the rest of the day he talks with the passengers, sits in a bar and has a drink - - this is a great life.' I remember near the end when the ship went out of service. [The captain] had a telex from the office, which was still here in New York at 2 Penn Plaza. This [caused a] major panic. All the staff, all together in the Captain's cabin, there is a telex coming in from the office. I thought 'this is something, he got a telex from the office.' Now, you get several e-mails a day. Things have changed a little bit."

The changing times are also reflected in changes in the life style aboard cruise ships. "There is a tendency in the industry to go more casual. Holland America Line is fighting it hand over fist. When my wife and I cruise, I do like to dress up - - do it with a little bit of style."

However, Captain Schoonderbeek recognizes that there is a strong current flowing in the other direction. "I now come across people who are onboard a ship who are very well to do guests but in their daily lives never wear a jacket or tie because in their way of living it is unnecessary. So, when they come onboard a ship, they get the most expensive cabin onboard the ship but they still don't dress up because they have never done it."

In addition, there is the fallout from the increased restrictions on the weight of the baggage a passenger can bring on a commercial airplane. "Before, you could take like 60 kilos, now it is down to 40. What do these people do? A tuxedo - - most of them, are not light weight - - so are you going to pack a tuxedo and fly it all the way say to England or to Germany for the two nights of formals?"

"What also happens more and more frequently

is that guests dress up for dinner but the moment dinner is finished, they run back to the cabin, change and then go to the show. Typically, it is in these people's mind set that you dress for dinner. You go to expensive restaurants, yes, you dress a bit more nicely. Then, after, you go to the show like you go to the movies. You go in a tee-shirt again. It is just the way people think nowadays."

Along the same lines, Holland America is phasing out the traditional receiving line during the captain's welcome reception. "The captain's receiving line is becoming something that a lot of people see as more of a nuisance than as really interesting. We already don't [have a handshake] because of [the norovirus]. We have now the wave,

Holland America ships are without [the norovirus] but, if it would be onboard, I as the captain could be a major source of contamination because I'm shaking 1,200 hands. What we are going to do now is have the captain on the stage with a quick introduction of the four staff officers and the employee of the month and then we do a champagne toast. So, people can happily sit down. The first indications from the other ships where it has already been rolled out are quite positive. It takes from me a bit of the pleasure of meeting everybody but people like it. If people like it, very good."

Another change being introduced to the Holland America fleet is "As You Wish" dining. Traditionally, Holland America has had two seatings in the main dining room of its ships with passengers assigned to a specific time and table for dinner. However, now passengers will have a choice between the traditional approach of having a permanent table and an approach that offers more flexibility as to time. "It is being phased in step-by-step across the whole fleet. On the large ships, the Vista class, it is already operational and on the smaller ships, it is being phased in slowly but steadily. The reports that come back from the other ships is very, very positive because we still maintain our regular seating for those who want to. All our dining rooms have two levels. So, you have the As You Wish level and you still have the static level. So, there is something for everybody. It works very, very well."

Even with the introduction of the new dining arrangement, some of the traditions of passenger ship dining will be maintained. On VEENDAM, "we still have a deck table, and there is an engine table and there is a hotel table for each sitting. So, that means on a



Captain Schoonderbeek

rotation basis, one or two deck officer will attend first sitting and I'll attend second sitting. Any licensed officer can go and if we have a cadet who is a bit upstream so that he can answer a difficult question, then he goes as well, because people love it when a cadet hosts a table. Then, of course, there are the senior tables with the doctor and so and so."

Captain Schoonderbeek sees the officer-hosted tables as being more than a means of entertaining passengers. "If you are a young guy or a young girl from England or from Holland, it takes a while to understand Americans who you [as a ship's officer] will be working with for the rest of your life because the cultures are quite separate, quite different. The United States is a big country. When you come from Europe, you automatically think that everything looks like New York and acts like Dallas. Then, you come on board and you find that a lot of our clientele is from the Midwest. You find out that these people are totally different than the East Coast or from the West Coast. That is something you have to learn. And for that, going to the tables, apart from that it is quite good fun to do so, it is a very good training ground. We still do it and we will keep doing it."

The hotel department on cruise ships is usually the largest department and because its responsibilities encompasses the dining, the entertainment, the bars, the activities, the shore excursions and the accommodations, it is the department with the most contact with passengers. As cruise ships have become destinations in themselves, the importance of this department has grown. However, on all cruise ships, the person in over-

all charge of the enterprise is a deck officer. Captain Schoonderbeek explained why. "I don't know how to bake a cake and I don't know how to present it but I know when there are issues going on in the kitchen that need my attention. The hotel manager runs his own department like the Chief Officer runs the bridge and the Chief Engineer runs the Engine Room. The captain's [role] is more and more of a situation where you coordinate. You also look for patterns where there is something going wrong because the head of department isn't picking up or because he is so focused on his little world that he doesn't see it. You don't look for details, you look for patterns."

"If you grow through the ranks, you see those patterns because when you are a navigator, you are on the bridge. To learn to navigate, you learn at school. When you come on the ship you have your license and you can use the radar, you can tell the quartermaster how to steer. You build a routine and experience. What you have to learn is that mayhem that comes over the telephone. The telephone on a cruise ship never stops. When you pick up the phone, you have to think about what I am now going to say how is that going to cause a chain reaction eight decks down in the bowels somewhere. That's what you learn when you go through the ranks. Then, when you make captain, you can control the situation because that is the advantage of being a navigator. A navigator always looks for issues - - it is safe navigation. You look for how to avoid a collision."

In the Hotel Department, they look for the positive thing, they want to provide service. The same with the engineers, they look at fixing things. That is what engineers are all about - -maintaining engines, fixing engines, doing things. It comes down to somebody from the Deck Department who becomes captain to see it in the bigger picture and to coordinate that."

Still, a deck officer aspiring to be captain should learn about the other departments on the ship. "What would be useful is that they spend some time in the hotel department just walking around and doing things. But, [the job already forces them to do so] because the deck department is the guys who are doing drills. Then, automatically you get involved with all the hotel people, how they think and how they operate and what are issues for them. A third officer who has just come fresh from school will get involved in traffic control - - those are the ladies in the staircase who guide the guests to the lifeboats. They come from first of all, the shops and the casino because of the language skills, the photographers, musicians - - these are basically land lubbers who don't have a clue about sailing. But, they have a job at sea so there we have a young third officer who has to train them in lifesaving capabilities. At the same time,

he has to understand how these people think. There you get a crash course in alternative thinking because a musician who come aboard to play a flute does not think about safety, does not think about how a cruise ship runs. He just wants to do his gig and then go for a drink and amuse himself. They learn by going through the ranks."

VEENDAM and the Holland America Fleet

"Holland America has a very high repeater rate. This last cruise [an autumn Canadian cruise] we had 65 percent. On the transatlantic that I did in April with this ship, we had 92 percent who had made at least three cruises with Holland America Line."

"It is something that they like the product, the crew, the ships - - they simply feel at home. The way we do it is totally different way of operating than let's say Carnival. On our ships, the guests do what the guests want to do and there is a program and product that support their interests. So automatically, they can get in their own comfort zone because they simply get out of the product what they particularly like. It is different than a Carnival where you are really cruise driven by the program on board. [Carnival] is a great product, nothing wrong with that, but it is totally different. So, when our guests have done this, they end up going back to [Holland America] because they know even if they go from the VEENDAM to the NOORDAM, they know it will be the same. They will get the same sort of crew and the same sort of officers and the same sort of atmosphere onboard."

Different guests do, however, prefer one class of Holland America ships over the other classes. "It mainly has to do with the design of the ships. When these ships [the S class] came out, there was one issue that people didn't like and that is it is a long way to walk from the aft staircase to the forward staircase. So, when we started building the R class - - ROTTERDAM, AMSTERDAM, VOLENDAM and ZANDAM -- we put a center staircase. There are people, especially the less ambulant who really like that extra block of lifts or elevators in the middle. And there are people, especially the younger ones in the age group 40 - 50, who prefer the Vista class because there are more amenities."

Are there differences between the ships within the Holland America classes? "The VEENDAM is a little bit different than the other three S classes anyway because we were built a little bit later and the interior is a little darker. It is a tinge darker wood than was used in the other three. So, the ship is slightly different. Also, this was the first ship of Holland America Line where the Carnival influence was nearly gone. When we built

the S class, Carnival had part of the ships' interior design by Joe Farcas from Carnival. It took them three ships to figure out that Joe Farcas is a brilliant designer but not for Holland America Line. Therefore, this ship is slightly different."

Do these differences serve to give the ships different personalities? "Every ship has its own personality a little bit. The old ROTTERDAM was a ship like the QE2 that had a very distinct personality. When people stepped on board, they started to behave in accordance with the way the ship was running. Here, they come on board and they come into a beautiful hotel that happens to be a ship. So, the personalities are a lot less because there is not too much quirkiness about ships anymore."

"When I started with Holland America Line, we had people who would only sail on one ship because they felt at home over there. The old STATENDAM was totally different than the old ROTTERDAM. And the old VEENDAM and VOLENDAM that sailed for years from New York, they were totally different again. Nowadays, if you walk from the VEENDAM onboard let's say the NOORDAM, okay, the interior is different, it runs a bit different but it is still the same Holland America Line feeling without anything specially where you say 'Hey, I miss this because on the VEENDAM, this was so much different.' That isn't there anymore."

Will Holland America follow the industry trend and build bigger ships? "[The ships of] Holland America Line are not too small, not too big. We are not going any bigger. The Vista class is as big as we will ever go because it doesn't go with our product. But for the other ships that are offering what I call the fair and neutral product, okay, well, bigger is better because you offer more. So, the ships will continue to grow for the mass market companies. I think for other companies, Holland America Line, Cunard, it will hover around 90,000 tons. Cunard now has the one big one [QUEEN MARY 2] but that is a one off for the transatlantic. The QUEEN VICTORIA coming out now, is an adapted Vista-class version. I think that is about as big as they can go because otherwise they cannot do world cruises."

"We will see how it works with the [Royal Caribbean] Genesis [class] coming out at 250,000 tons. That is going to be interesting how that is going to work. There is only so far I think you can go [because of] the flow of the guests. [Royal Caribbean's Freedom class demonstrates] you can have a flow of 4,000 people. I don't know if it is going to work if you double the size of the ship, will get a flow of 6,000 people. How big does your Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream have to go inside the ship to make it workable? I don't know, we'll have to see."

"Is there a limit [on the size of ships]? There are plans out there to build ships of half a million tons which are floating resorts. I think they will be coming

but maybe not destination driven. But a traditional cruise ships set up of doing a port every day or every other day, I think there is a limit to how big a ship can go because you cannot simply get the guests ashore anymore in a comfortable way. It will be interesting to see. [Bit] if you had said 25 years ago that Holland America would have a 90,000 ton ship, nobody would have believed it because the old ROTTERDAM of 38,000 tons, that was a big ship!"

VEENDAM is 55,451 tons but due to the industry trend toward bigger ships, she is now considered a small to medium-sized cruise ship. Still, Captain Schoonderbeek believes there will continue to be a market for such ships. "For smaller ships, more niche markets are coming. Like Royal Caribbean is doing with Azamara cruises - - niche markets, more special things."

"It is just with a ship this size you are limited in what you can offer. If you have a ship the size of the QUEEN MARY 2 where you have volume, you can put everything in there that people can think about."

"[Still,] most of our guests, if they do long cruises, come to the smaller ships because it is more intimate. It becomes more like a country club atmosphere and the guests themselves are adding to the product. I don't think that a world cruise on the EXPLORER OF THE



SEAS would ever work. On these size ships, it works very, very well."

There is a great deal of variety in VEENDAM's cruise schedule. For part of the year, she is in Europe, part in the northeastern United States and Canada, part in the Caribbean and part of the year she is cruising the world. As a result, the ship must transit a wide variety of seas including the sometimes difficult North Atlantic. "I was a little bit apprehensive about the crossing myself because she is not the old ROTTERDAM with the long bow that goes through [the waves]. The old ROTTERDAM was the most perfect sea ship that you could have. In bad weather you went faster because the bow rode better. The old NIEU AMSTERDAM or NOORDAM that came over here were horrible ocean liners because they would go into the waves. But, [VEENDAM] rode extremely well. These ships somehow sit on the wave and then glide over it. It is very, very pleasant. You really have to have 15 or 20 foot waves with a short amplitude [before] it gets nasty. Otherwise, I was quite pleased with it when it went across to Europe."

VEENDAM's varied itinerary also requires her to get in and out of some difficult ports. "The VEENDAM is very, very maneuverable. I have got a lot of power and in most ports, I can do everything myself. Even in ports like [New York], the question is 'do I have room to drift?' Do I have a plan B, then we will try it. [In New York], the tug boats are my plan B because there is nothing else."

"It mainly has to do with the wind moving in combination with the current. The problem here with New York is that you come up river, you have the ship under control and you have the ship under control while you are in the slip because it is an enclosed environment. The danger is the moment you go from the river into the slip because one moment you have wind and current, the next moment, you have nothing. You don't control the ship anymore. You need all the power that you have to do so. If you have that in combination with only about 60 feet clearance while you make your turn [due to another ship sharing the slip], there is not enough to say I can just go for it."

In some less developed ports, there is no place for cruise ships to dock but that does not pose an obstacle for VEENDAM. "Holland America cruise ships can anchor everywhere. We have these tender operations that we have down pat. Ships like the CARNIVAL VICTORY or the big ones from Royal Caribbean, they don't have any tenders and also their capacity is way too big to operate a tender service. So, these big guys are only coming [to ports] where there is a nice dock available with a nice town."

This has spurred many communities to invest in cruise ship terminals and/or suitable piers for cruise ships. "Slowly and steadily local businesses and local politicians are finding out that the cruise business is good money. It is a clean business, it is an easy business. The [ships] come in at eight o'clock in the morning and they leave again at six and there are no worries for a town. And these people come ashore to spend a lot of money. On average, the average passenger spends \$150 just for going ashore. Then, they roughly spend another \$150 on a tour. So, \$300 times 1,200 guests just comes in by making sure cruise ships can park and there is an easy approach. It is good money and they are slowly getting there."

VEENDAM entered service in 1996 but Holland America has ensured that she remains state-of-the-art. "Last year, we went through what we call the Signature of Excellence drydock. All the existing ships went through such a three week refurbishment period adding new things, new gadgets and everything. This ship got \$43 million."

"We put a children's place on board, which we didn't have. We don't have that many children normally except during Spring Break, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Then, we have a lot of big families come on board where the grandfather brings the whole gang. We have 200 kids and we lock them away in that place there and they have a great time and the parents can enjoy themselves. It works very well but we did not have it so we have put it on [the] top [deck] now."

"The spa and everything related to it gets more and more popular so we doubled the amount of space that we had."

"People are going away from little small rooms for things and are more interactive, so we ripped out one side of the ship and that is now a combination of music, books, library and internet - - very, very popular."

"We used to have the cinema for church service in the morning and for movies in the afternoon. The rest of the time it was empty. So, we built a kitchen in there and now our executive chef gives cooking classes. Every cruise we have people who are dying to get home and take a recipe with them. During a cooking class, they get the high hat, they get the apron and they get a little teaching about how to make that specific dish. It is very, very popular." "We revamped the soft stuff - - the pillows etc. Everything gets renewed and improved upon. You just follow the trend all the time as best you can."