

INSIDE INTERVIEW:

HAL'S SECRET

Captain Christopher Turner and Hotel Manager Edwin Brunink talk about why Zuiderdam is Holland America's top-rated ship.

by

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Zuiderdam is not the world's best known cruise ship. However, those who traveled on her in 2010 gave her the best overall ratings of the 15 ships in one of the world's most popular cruise lines, Holland America Line. Accordingly, I sat down with Captain Christopher Turner, Zuiderdam's master, and her Hotel Manager Edwin Brunink to discuss the reasons for their ship's success.

A Strong Brand

Both Captain Turner and Mr. Brunick agreed that the Zuiderdam's success rests upon the strong foundation provided by the Holland America brand. Therefore, I asked them to tell me what are Holland America's strengths.

Captain Turner immediately listed the Holland America crews as the most important factor. "To me as a seafarer, a ship is a ship. A ship is so much steel all put together. But the people who run the ship are the thing

that makes such a huge difference. I have sailed for several companies and without doubt HAL has the best crews - - personal relationships with the guests and with each other."

Mr. Brunick explained that a good crew translates into good service for the guests. "Our crew truly takes pride in providing excellent service."

The second factor cited by Captain Turner was where the HAL ships go. "We have a very wide range of itineraries. Of course, we target areas like Alaska where we are very strong indeed. We have more Glacier Bay permits than any other company."

"But then we have the worldwide itineraries as well. The United Kingdom is a very popular destination so we are putting more ports in around the UK. When I was captain of the Prinsendam, I twice did the Polar Ice Cap, which is certainly an unusual destination. I also did a 77-day cruise around Africa. So we have that range as well for people who want to spend a lot longer and do something out of the ordinary as well as the more

standard Caribbean itinerary as well. We are always looking at new itineraries."

Indeed, Mr. Brunick added: "We are expanding our cruises in Europe. Also, we are bringing another cruise ship to the Australia/New Zealand region."

Turning to the next factor, food "is a big part of a lot of people's cruise." Captain Turner said. "When you think of cruises, you might first think of destinations but very quickly on that list is food because it is a whole part of your cruise experience."

"We are known in the cruise industry for providing excellent food," the Hotel Manager continued. "We have some exciting new programs happening in that area including the new Culinary Council -- top-rated chefs from all over the world who run Michelin-star restaurants now work with our corporate executive chef Rudi Sodamin looking at our menus and introducing new dishes, their own signature dishes. In the Pinnacle Grill, we have the Le Cirque Evening. So I think in the food area, we go above and beyond and we stand out from quite a few of our competitors."

In fact, Holland America takes providing high quality meals so seriously that there are food tastings in the galley in which, Captain Turner noted, the ship's senior management participate. "Every dish is brought out and every dish is talked about. Two or three times a cruise I'll go down there. One purpose is that the cooks see that we are interested and the other is that it is a non-professional person just trying it." These tastings are done even though "it is the same menu each cruise because it is important to see what goes out. We make [any] corrections before the dishes go out to the dining room."

On the HAL ships, the food operation is not limited to providing meals. As Mr. Brunink pointed out HAL is also very serious when it comes to teaching about food. "We pride ourselves on our culinary program. We try not only to keep up but to be forerunners. We have the Culinary Arts Center, where we do all the demonstrations and cooking classes. We invite guest



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Captain Christopher Turner

chefs on our ships. We have all kinds of initiatives that Holland America Line is introducing and doing."

HAL is also known for its enrichment program. It not only brings guest lecturers aboard but the cruise director's staff includes specialists such as a travel guide to provide information about the destinations, a tech expert to teach about computers, and a party planner to host the culinary classes and provide tips on food, wine and entertaining.

"Today's guests expect a much more sophisticated product. People expect something a bit more. Those are the people that we tend to have as our demo-

graphic - - professional people. They do not want to go and just sit on a beach somewhere or sit out on deck; they want something more out of their cruise. Some people want information about the destinations they are going to see, they want a lot more out of their cruise holiday," Captain Turner explained.

The final factor listed by Captain Turner was that HAL delivers value for money. "We do offer an extremely good cruise experience, a high class cruise experience, for a very good value. There are the top end brands that maybe offer a little bit more - - and that is not always the case - - but they are more expensive. There are other brands that can put more people in the same size ship because the cabins are smaller and you do pay less there. But we try to offer a higher product for a very competitive value."

The Zuiderdam Difference

Zuiderdam may be HAL's best kept secret. She has been in service since 2002 and is probably best known for being the first of HAL's Vista-class ships. She has the same features as her sister ships. Yet, I found - - and apparently other guests have as well - - that she has a positive atmosphere that puts her ahead of her fleetmates.

"Last year we had the highest ratings overall in almost every area. In fact, last year, our average in each area for the year was above target in every single rating area. I don't think any ship has had that before." Captain Turner said proudly.

"The competition is stiff. Some ships do better in some areas and some ships do better in others. But to actually achieve for a whole year an average which exceeds every target is very unusual."

The ratings are based upon the comment cards that guests complete at the end of each voyage. "We are rated on a scale from one to nine, nine being the highest rating, one being the lowest. All areas [of the cruise experience] are rated. We have a certain target for each area, which we aim to exceed." Mr. Brunick explained.

It is important to look at the yearly average in order to assess a ship's performance. "You can do exactly the same thing on two different cruises and get different ratings. When I pick up the comment cards, the first one may say that 'Aruba was the best port on the whole itinerary, you should stay there twice as long.' I'll pick up the next one which will say that 'Aruba was the worst port, you should cancel it all together'. So we have to balance everyone's comments. You have to look for trends rather than at the individual [cruises]."

These cards also serve as a management tool. The ship's management can see from the ratings when a



Hotel Manager Edwin Brunink

particular area of the ship needs attention. In addition, the written comments on each card are read by the Captain, Hotel Manager and the Cruise Director. "That is where we really look for trends, significant items that stand out. They can be positive but also areas of concern. Of course, we follow up on that," Mr. Brunick elaborated.

Why does Zuiderdam get consistently good ratings in all areas? Captain Turner said without hesitation "I think we have the best crew in the fleet."

"We are very proactive in what we do - - myself, the Hotel Manager, the Chief Engineer, the staff officers on the ship. The very first thing we do when new crew join is we go down, introduce ourselves and we just have a chat. I always tell the crew that it is extremely important to me that they enjoy their contract here. 'If you are having a good time, you will make the guests have a good time. You don't say as you walk out from the galley to the dining room 'I must put a smile on my face.' You are already smiling because someone has told a joke and you come out and you are enjoying yourself and enjoying interacting with the guests."

"If they have a problem, we have a human resources manager onboard who is their first point of

contact but we always tell them, the Hotel Manager and myself, that we have an open door policy. If they need to see someone, they can come in and see us. We can't always guarantee to solve the problem but if they can sit there and tell us it is much better. I think from there that they actually feel that they have not just been put in here to fill a position and that they are going to be here for ten months and nobody cares."

After that initial contact, both the Captain and the Hotel Manager make a point of chatting with the crew members when they are walking around the ship. Mr. Brunick explained: "You show them that you care and that you are very approachable. There is none of 'My goodness, there is the captain or there is the hotel manager!' They feel comfortable."

In addition, "we also have a full social program and calendar for them - - all kinds of activities, crew tours, sports events, soccer matches. We have karaoke nights, we have movie nights, special dinners, gatherings. The human resources manager really stays on top of it and listens to the crew and what they would like. For food, for example, we listen to what are their preferences, what they would like to see and whenever possible we make adjustments."

The most significant physical difference between Zuiderdam and her sisters is the décor, which Captain Turner described as "brighter" than other HAL ships. "Every ship should look different. You feel comfortable because you know the ship when you come back [to HAL]. You know there is going to be a Crow's Nest and an Ocean Bar. But you can definitely recognize the Rotterdam from the Zuiderdam and the Zuiderdam from the Noordam."