

LIFE'S A CRUISE

Bigger and better ships make a huge splash

By Mark Redvers



THEY ARE FLOATING HOTELS built on a scale and size never seen before. Today's cruise liners resemble the extravagant buildings of the Las Vegas strip, luxurious giants that can accommodate more than 3,000 people.

On board, the range of entertainment options is staggering, with a choice of restaurants, offering increasingly adventurous culinary choices, swimming pools, golf driving ranges, cinemas, casinos, cabaret shows and special-interest lectures from world-renowned authors, scientists and sportsmen.

The ever-larger size of cruise ships has brought with it particular challenges for port operators. For a start, they have to find ways of berthing, or at least mooring, monster vessels such as the Queen Mary 2, which is the length of 41 London double-decker buses; the other challenge is to move thousands of guests swiftly from ship to shore, ensuring that they spend as much time – and money – as possible during their spell on dry land.

It is claimed the USD800 million (HKD6.24 billion) Queen

Mary 2, or QM2, is the most luxurious and stable ocean liner ever built, designed so a trip across the notoriously rough Atlantic Ocean is no bumpier than rowing a boat across the local lake. Cunard recently added another luxury ship to its portfolio, the Queen Victoria, as it retired the grand old lady of the seas, the Queen Elizabeth 2, or QE2, from active service.

In today's cruising world, the decks are stacked higher and higher to allow more features and, in turn, more passengers. Royal Caribbean Cruises, which already has 2,000-passenger ships such as Rhapsody of the Seas and Legend of the Seas, recently debuted its Freedom class of cruise ships which can accommodate more than 3,600 people; on-board attractions include an ice skating rink and a full-size boxing ring. And next year will see the launch of the world's largest cruise ship, Oasis of the Seas, which will be able to carry 5,400 passengers!

Many of the new vessels – eight cruise ships were due to launch in 2008 – are bound for Caribbean waters, their tar-



get passengers mostly Americans. A favourite stopover is the Bahamas, where Freeport Harbour, part of the Hutchison Port Holdings Group (HPH), is well placed to benefit from the increased traffic and is able to dock even the largest of vessels such as the QM2 and the new Freedom class.

“As our port is strategically located, we think we can benefit significantly from the many vessels that will continue to enter the region,” says Sherry Rodgers, PA/Corporate Affairs Manager for Freeport Harbour Company. “We are also on ships’ itineraries which are making four-day sailings out of Florida, and vessels that call from the north of the US eastern seaboard from ports such as New York and Baltimore, sailing for at least seven days.”

The three-berth Lucayan Harbour Cruise Facility has plenty to occupy passengers, including a 26,000 sq ft complex that in-

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cludes retail, dining and entertainment options, as well as the Bahamian Straw Market. Passengers can shop for local arts and crafts and dine on ethnic cuisine in the immediate vicinity, or go further afield by renting a scooter or car.

Every month sees an average of 12 cruise ships docking, usually for a stay of around eight hours. In addition, Freeport Harbour has 30 calls by ferries every month, taking the annual total of passengers to 588,000.

“Grand Bahama Island is strategically located close to Florida and therefore vessels which homeport in one of the many cities

Something for everyone: From hunting for bargains to local culture, there’s plenty to keep cruise passengers entertained in the Bahamas, Mexico and Panama.

of Florida visit our island either on their cruise departure or just before their return into port,” adds Ms Rodgers. “The port itself is beautifully landscaped and provides a very relaxing atmosphere for passengers. They also have the option of tours that include kayaking, dolphin-watching, snorkelling, coastal cruises around the island or going out on glass-bottom boats.”

Proximity to the United States also benefits ports on the Pacific coast. Ships leaving California can head down the coast from US cities and within a short time dock at destinations in Mexico and Panama that offer passengers a totally different cultural experience.

“The Port of Ensenada is conveniently located close to two major hub airports in the cities of Los Angeles and San Diego, therefore the passengers can travel from almost any part from the US to take a short cruise trip to Mexico,” says Rogelio Valenzuela, Marketing Manager at Ensenada Cruiseport Village,

traverse from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans instead of going down the coast, around Cape Horn and back up again.

Impressive engineering feat though it is, the Panama Canal is way too narrow to accommodate the colossal new cruise ships. Instead, the giant ships dock at facilities such as the Cristobal Cruise Terminal Pier 6, which has regular visits from 11 of the world’s major cruise lines.

“We are proud to have received approximately 1.8 million visitors and nearly 800 vessels since Pier 6 began operations,” says Lisa Ballesteros, Cruise Terminal Manager for the Panama Ports Company. “The cruise terminal, strategically located at the Caribbean entrance of the Panama Canal, is a favourite of the cruise market with two berths dedicated to cruise operations capable of handling the largest cruise vessels in the world. Since her maiden voyage in 2005, Cunard’s Queen Mary 2 is a frequent visitor.”



just 60 miles from the US border. “Cruise passengers can visit the main wine region of Mexico which is just 40 minutes away, visit a blow hole, or enjoy the high quality Mexican cuisine found in Ensenada.

“There is also the option of heading into the desert by quad bike, going on horse riding trips as well as many other sightseeing itineraries. The most special characteristic of Ensenada is that it is close to the United States. Ensenada allows a chance to experience a Mexican city, with its particular type of wine and cuisine and the local old cultures.”

Around four ships a week arrive on the shorter-trip itineraries and plans are being drawn up to expand and enhance the facilities at both the port and the cruise terminal.

On the other side of the Central American land mass lies the eastern entrance to one of the world’s most famous canals. The Panama Canal changed the face of shipping, allowing vessels to

Never a dull moment: Dancers in Panama, the Strawmarket in the Bahamas, docking in Panama and a Mexican Miriachi band.

Visitors disembarking for the day can choose a variety of daily tours, from visiting the Panama Canal to the Panama Canal Railway experience. Among the attractions within the Cristobal complex is an arts and crafts centre featuring some 300 craftsmen who sell their products directly to visitors. There are also 20 duty free stores, a concierge service and cultural exhibits.

These kinds of top-notch facilities are becoming essential for ports to lure modern cruise ships. Passengers are treated regally on board and have come to expect the same kind of luxury and efficiency when they walk down the gangway for their shore visit.

Most people opt for cruises that last from a weekend to a couple of weeks; a small minority are so hooked on the high-sea

life that they sign up for round-the-world cruises that can last for four months. Whatever the destination, the food on board is guaranteed to be sensational, with guests chefs a regular feature on the bigger cruise ships.

The improved fare has been accompanied by new on-board accommodation options – the word “cabin” hardly does justice to some penthouse suites that come with personal butler service, private verandas, open bars and a jacuzzi. The core of the market, though, is likely to remain people who book because they want to combine luxury with a spot of mild adventure. For example, staple itineraries for ships leaving the Harwich International Port in Britain feature the Norwegian fjords and the Baltic, a chance for passengers to experience radically different scenery outside, while forgoing none of the comforts of home below deck.

The much-loved QE2 recently made its final call to Harwich, marking the end of a long association with the east-coast port. The QE2, which will become a floating hotel and entertainment centre berthed in Dubai, made its last



journey some 40 years after being launched.

The world had never before seen a cruise ship quite so slick, sleek and fast. It was the trans-Atlantic vessel of choice for generations of pop singers and movie stars, the most elegant and indulgent way to go from Europe to New York City. Among those who have sailed on her are the late Princess Diana, the Emperor of Japan, George W Bush, Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela and Mick Jagger.

Britain, of course, has a reputation as a seafaring nation; its earlier adventurers such as Walter Raleigh, Francis Drake and James Cook, sailed far and wide into unchartered waters. British engineers also built the most famous ocean liner of all time, albeit one that came to grief when it hit an iceberg and sank. Thankfully, navigational aids and hull strengths have improved radically since the Titanic era, not to mention the on-board fare and port facilities. Today, not only are cruise ships safer, bigger, and better, people on board and on land work hand in hand to make these seafarers adventures’ unforgettable experiences.



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