



*Note from Editor: Cruise Week will be taking its usual July 4th break next week. Barring special news, our next edition will be July 14th. Happy Summer Holidays!*

## Crystal's Gala, NCL's Epic

Two big cruise industry events took place in England last week. On Monday, Crystal Symphony docked in Dover, concluding not only an exceptionally beautiful cruise around the British Isles but also Crystal's 20th Annual Gala. The second event took place just a couple of hours southeast of Dover, where Norwegian Epic limped into Southampton on Tuesday, its arrival delayed by several hours due to a faulty bearing.

Ralph Grizzle, Cruise Week's Europe editor, reports on the "take-aways" from both events.

### Bill Smith's Crystal Ball

At its Gala event aboard *Crystal Symphony*, Crystal revealed little significant news. Instead, it focused on continued challenges and how to overcome sales obstacles.

Bill Smith, Crystal's senior vice president sales & marketing, began his presentation by citing the results of a survey sent to more than 2,500 travel agents only a couple of weeks before the Gala. The objective of the survey was to determine why sales had slowed.

"Starting in November, business was great; it was blowing off the charts," Smith told Gala attendees. "During the first half of the year, Baltic cruises sold out--the first time that I've seen it sell out that far in advance. And with really good yields. The Mediterranean went really well, then all of a sudden, come April, the bottom just fell out, for the whole market, not just for Crystal."

More than 150 agents responded with reasons why their luxury clients were not booking with the same fervor as they had during the first half of the year: 34% cited their clients' concerns of economic uneasiness, 22% cited price, 19% cited disruption of flights due to volcanic ash, and 18% cited fear of flight cancellations.

With economic uneasiness being the primary factor, Crystal and cruise sellers attending the Gala told Cruise Week that sales are tracking with the Dow Jones Industrial Average. "Whenever the [stock] market is up, we know we're going to have a [good] booking day," Smith said. "When the market goes down, close the door. It absolutely tracks right on top of [the stock market]."

The objective in such a market is to communicate value, so Crystal presented analyses comparing the luxury line to its competitors, though such stats seem to depend on who's brandishing them. For instance, Crystal showed Seabourn with a per diem of \$932, but there are Seabourn sailings out there at \$300 per person, per day.

Nonetheless, it's important that cruise sellers communicate specific components of the value message. "It's more than just the per diem, it's what's included in the value message," Smith told delegates, citing primarily Crystal's enrichment activities and the \$1,000 As You Wish onboard credit as Crystal-added values.

### **Bling Is Out, Experiences Are In**

One reason behind the booking slowdown and consumer caution is that people are re-evaluating what is im-

portant to them, according to Smith. "They're being more centered; they're more focused on life; they're living more in the moment; they're making their plans more spontaneously," he told Gala delegates. "Wealthy consumers are exiting the luxury ghetto. Bling is out. They're being much more cautious and much more conservative in what they're doing and what they're purchasing."

Again, that's where the ability to communicate the value message comes into play, and many cruise sellers are not succeeding in that regard, according to numbers cited by Smith. "Sixty-five percent of wealthy consumers think most salespeople don't know about the specific products or why the product is worth more," Smith said, citing various surveys. "Salespeople should be able to communicate product differences....72 percent of wealthy consumers feel they must become smarter shoppers because of the economy....55 percent of wealthy consumers say they will spend less lavishly....there's a lot of money out there. A lot of consumers have got money, but they're just holding on to it until you can convince them that it's okay. They're highly focused on the experience, not just product. It's about selling experiences."

### **Praise For Crystal Symphony**

Showcasing both product and experiences, the Gala gave Crystal an opportunity to present *Crystal Symphony's* \$25 million makeover, completed this past fall. The most striking changes are apparent on the top decks. "The remodel has changed this ship completely," Joan Short, of Worldwide Golf & Travel in Newport, California, told Cruise Week. "It's like a brand new ship."

The Seahorse and Neptune Pool Decks feature attractive white deck furniture accented with citrus-hued cushions and throw pillows and an extra-large Jacuzzi. The Lido Cafe area is simply stunning, with exceptionally attractive earth-tone tables and chairs and food stations in place of the standard buffet line. "Mainly what we wanted to achieve is that we prepare everything fresh and in front of the guest," Toni Neumeister, Crystal's vice president, food and beverage, told Cruise Week.

One thing that Crystal could not change was the size of its staterooms, small by luxury standards, but agents say they are able to overcome this obstacle by emphasizing service and enrichment. "We have clients who com-



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pare the square footage of Crystal's staterooms to the other cruise lines, but then when you start comparing the other Crystal amenities and options, nobody compares as far as guest lecturers, entertainment, and customer service," Kathleen Sutter, of Landings Travel in Sarasota, told Cruise Week.

## Something *Epic* in Southampton

As you might imagine, jumping ship from *Crystal Symphony*, with its 922-guest capacity, to *Norwegian Epic*, with a 4,100-guest capacity (double occupancy), was quite a shock for this reporter. As our motorcoach approached the Southampton docks, I found *Epic's* towering exterior to be odd, with a flat aft and a Lego-like forward section, unlike any ship I had ever seen.

Despite its odd design, *Norwegian Epic* represents what NCL hopes will be a turn around for the company, or, as executives put it during a press conference on *Epic*, the incarnation of "the new NCL."

Indeed, my question before boarding *Epic* was whether the ship would, in fact, redefine NCL. Despite the rah-rah rhetoric from company executives, NCL has had such aspirations dashed in the past. NCL has struggled with its brand identity for as long as I have been covering cruises (nearly two decades now).

At first glance, I had my doubts about *Epic*. Big and boxy on the outside, *Epic* turned out to be busy and noisy on the inside. Even with half of the full passenger complement—fewer than 2,500 press and travel agents—NCL's public areas were densely peopled, the bars and restaurants crowded. There was no place devoid of decibels.

Three successive thoughts help me temper my initial aural wariness about *Epic*. We had: 1) British travel agents on something like a holiday, 2) only two nights to party, and 3) (this one is important), open bar. Oh, and England was competing in the World Cup on a large-screen television. You get the picture.

I was several hours late boarding and was paraded directly to my stateroom to drop off my luggage and then I was off to the Argentine-inspired *Moderno Churrascaria*, which shares space with *Cagney's Steakhouse*. The presentation of meat carved at the table was well done, and the food was good.

After a quick dinner, our group proceeded to the Manhattan Room for entertainment by Madonna, Elvis, and Tina Turner look-alikes, accompanied by desserts. Again, great entertainment; tasty sweets.

Marching again, we headed to the upper decks to Spice H2O for a FABBA performance, where high-

energy performers entertained us with ABBA favorites. Around midnight, we stopped in at *Headliners*, where dueling piano players performed a mostly comedic act in "Howl at the Moon."

After four hours of nonstop entertainment, my ears were buzzing when I returned to my room after midnight.

I was unable to immediately assess whether I liked my stateroom or not. As has been widely publicized, *Epic's* staterooms are more curvy than boxy. The bathroom configuration turned out to be a point of controversy. Some loved it; some hated it. The toilet is in an enclosed capsule on one side as you enter the room, the shower is in an enclosed capsule on the other side, and the sink is close enough to the bed that I could have brushed my teeth with my head on my pillow.

The bed, though wide enough, missed accommodating the length of my body by about half a foot, and thus, I slept sideways. I appreciated the large, flat-screen television, the coffee-maker, and the roomy balcony. Also, in a nod to environmental conservation, the stateroom keycard must be inserted into a slot to activate the light switches in the room. Kudos, NCL, for that.

## More Vegas Than Cruise Ship

The next morning, NCL's publicist told me that tonight we would experience sensory overload. "I thought that was last night," I jokingly replied.

The onboard ambience is intended to be busy and buzzing, NCL execs say. With 20 bars and lounges and an equal number (or possibly more—it's difficult to keep count) of dining options, *Epic* clearly follows the *Oasis* model of cruise ship as entertainment extravaganza.

On a weeklong cruise on either ship, I think I would miss the close connection with the sea. *Epic* is more like Vegas than a cruise ship. However, it grew on me during the 36 hours I was onboard.

The Blue Man Group put on one of the best shows I've ever seen, at sea or otherwise. And there is nothing at sea like the *Cirque Dreams & Dinner*, which featured a Broadway-style show and acrobatics. *Cirque's* meat and potatoes dinner was a bit heavy, so I skipped it and hit the Wasabi sushi bar after the show.

NCL says that upscale cruisers would be happy in *Epic's* Courtyard villas, which were not complete before our brief inspection. Perhaps, but it wouldn't be my first choice as a luxury cruiser. Of course, I am one who is happier looking out at the sea than I am watching high-energy performances. With my children, however, there's no doubt that *Epic* would be a good common denominator.

Is this the ship that will launch the new NCL? I'm not sure. What is certain is that the new ship certainly represents an epic moment in NCL's 40-year history.