

**AN INSIDE VIEW:**

# **HOTEL DIRECTOR STEWART HOWARD TALKS ABOUT CARNIVAL TRIUMPH**

by

**Richard H. Wagner**

**S**tewart Howard was born in Scotland but grew up in Manchester, England. After studying at hotel school, he worked in hotels in the The Netherlands and in Australia. Upon returning to England; he managed a wine bar. A friend suggested that he try working on ships and so he successfully applied for a management trainee position in the Food and Beverage Department on Carnival Sensation in 1993. Since then he has held management positions of increasing seniority not only in Food and Beverage but in Housekeeping (i.e. accommodations) and in training. He was promoted to Hotel Director in 2008.

The Hotel Director on a ship has responsibility for most of the aspects of a cruise that directly affect passengers - - food, accommodations, entertainment etc. Accordingly, I began by asking Mr. Howard, why someone should select Carnival Triumph for his or her vacation.

"It is a great ship. We have a fantastic team on here. What has been good about this ship is that a lot of people on the ship have been on the ship for a long time - - two, three, four years. We are very proud of the team that we have on here. I

look at the ratings of hospitality and friendliness compared to other [Carnival] ships and we are one of the best in the fleet. That is why I would tell them to come here because of the fantastic service that we can give."

"Carnival, I would say, as opposed to the other cruise lines, we offer great value for money. You look at what we are able to offer with the food and the services, I don't think you are going to get that anywhere else."

"We are trying to make sure that we do everything we can to keep the guests that we have happy, to make sure that they come back. To give you a good yardstick about how successful we are, is that some 50 percent of our guests have cruised with us before. So, we must be doing something right."

Triumph has been in service for ten years, yet still remains very popular. "Generally, every drydock, we upgrade the ship to keep it competitive. The ship was in drydock in September and we did a lot of upgrades. We built 14 balconies. Those cabins that already had balconies installed were all upgraded - - 350 balconies were upgrad-

ed. The carpets were done. The Jacuzzis in the gym were ripped out and replaced with a spinning room. [A giant outdoor LCD movie screen costing] \$1.7 million was added in the last drydock in September.

"Another thing that we did in the drydock was refurbish the [children's] playrooms. We introduced the Club O2 and the Circle C. Basically, it divides things up into different age groups where as before it just used to be under Camp Carnival."

The physical changes to the ship reflect changes in the market. As the cruising public has become more sophisticated, Carnival's style of cruising has changed. "We still do a lot of the marketing around that it is a fun vacation. But it is much more than that now. You look at the menus, you look at the destinations, you look at the shows - - there is a lot to choose from. We like to think that we do it a little more fast pace and we do have an element of fun in there with the entertainment that we offer. We are trying to be the industry leader in what we do."

"It has become more family orientated." Dividing the children's program into Camp Carnival, Circle C and Club O2 allows Triumph to "target teenagers, the younger kids and in between the teenagers and the younger kids. We have a different room, a different theme for each of those and different counselors specifically trained to look after and entertain those children. They have their own areas, they have their own schedules. It is a big part of our business now and we do a lot of our marketing is aimed at the families with kids. [At the same time] we try to manage [the children's program] so it has the least impact on people who have come away perhaps to get away from children."

Carnival has "a lot more homeports than we used to have. We pretty much have homeports all around the coasts of the USA now. We have just added Baltimore. Down in Florida, we have Tampa, Canaveral, Miami, Jacksonville, Forth Lauderdale, and then we have New Orleans, Galveston, Los Angles, and this ship did a cruise from Charleston and a cruise from Norfolk [in the course of repositioning from Miami to New York]. It helps us in a lot of ways. It means that people do not have to fly to take a cruise. They can just drive to one of the homeports."

"In the last few years with the new bigger ships that were built in Italy, we have started to do European cruises in the summer months. We did stop the European cruises for this past summer because of the economy. We pulled the ships over



*Hotel Director Stewart Howard.*

here and it was a very good decision. People were not flying to Europe to take vacations. The dollar was very weak so people were just staying put."

Because the market is constantly evolving, Carnival Triumph must continue to change. "We are going to go to the more relaxed dining style. We are scheduled to do it next year in 2010. It will be the upper level on the Paris. I'm sure there will be a demand for it because it gives people more freedom. It is more relaxed, people can eat when they want. If they want to go have a table for two, they can have a table for two. We have to be flexible to change. We have to try these things."

At the same time, Carnival strives to maintain traditions that are unique to cruising. For example, the Carnival ships maintain the tradition of having a Captain's table in the main dining rooms on formal nights. With the introduction of the flexible dining option, the ship will have "to re-configure some of the tables in the dining room. One of the things [this requires is to] move the captain's table from the London Dining Room to the



Paris Dining Room, so hopefully there are still plans to keep it. The only difficulty is that we can't offer it every cruise. It depends on the [passenger head] count and whether the maitre d' needs to use the table. That takes priority. If it is available, I usually send an e-mail to the captain and he decides who he is going to invite, whether he wants to use it at all. Sometimes he will say no, he just wants to eat downstairs. Usually, if it is available, he will take advantage of it."

After several years of doing seven-day Caribbean cruises from Miami, in 2009, Triumph re-positioned to do a series of four and five-day cruises from New York to Canada and New England. This resulted in a number of changes for the ship. "They are shorter cruises so everything is a lot more intense. Everything is much quicker, everything is much faster paced. When you are on a seven day, the middle of the cruise is always quite relaxing. All the guests get off the ship and the ship is empty which is great for getting maintenance done. But here, I can see that we are not going to have that opportunity."

"With the weather being colder, people are not lying out on the deck. It is more of a busy ship. People are in the casino, drinking in the bars, in the gift shops, up in the spa - - everywhere is busy."

"What I've been told about the New York crowd is that they are a little more demanding. They want everything now and plus you are going to get that because it is a shorter cruise as well. So, when I

have held my meetings, I have asked people to be a little bit more patient because there are going to be more demands than you would have on a South coast trip."

Considering that his experience includes both land-based hotels and cruise ships, I asked Mr. Howard to contrast the two. "Everything is much faster on a ship. We are just doing four days now. When we get into New York, we disembark over 3,000 guests. Clean the ship, turn it around. Within half an hour of the last guest getting off, the next 3,000 start to come on. Whereas in a hotel, it is more of a continual process so it is going to be at a slower pace."

"The one thing that I really noticed when I first came to ships was how much cleaner and how much we are held to higher standards of hygiene than a restaurant or a hotel. You walk in the galleys, you could eat the food off the floor. The United States Public Health and now that we are going up to Canada, the Canadian Public Health, we are always ready for these inspections and so the ships are very, very clean and that is another big difference."

"If you look at what you get for your money in a hotel and what you get on a ship, I don't think there is any comparison, which is especially important in this economic market."