

INSIDE VIEW:

THREE FOR THREE

A conversation with Celebrity Eclipse
Hotel Director Simon Weir

by

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Celebrity Eclipse is the third ship in Celebrity Cruises' Solstice class of ships. The class began with Celebrity Solstice in 2008, which won praise from both critics and passengers for its design, attention to detail and for incorporating a premium cruise experience into a large ship. Celebrity Equinox, the second ship in the class, was similarly well-received.

No matter how well designed, a ship will not deliver a good cruise experience unless it has the right people managing and operating it. The man Celebrity Cruises has turned to breath life into the hotel operation of each of the Solstice-class ships is Simon Weir. I had the opportunity to talk with Mr. Weir about his latest ship

"I think for a start it is great to see that the third in line is as detailed, if not more detailed, than the previous two. Sometimes [in a series of ships] a little of the imagination has gone that was in the first. [With Eclipse], the character is still a modern, cool, authentic, friendly-ship."

"It has a very good spirit. It has a spirit which makes everyone feel comfortable on her. There is such high-end furniture, such luxury. With that it creates this

atmosphere whereby it is accessible luxury. The ladies feel special and the gents feel they are taking their ladies to something that they feel cool in. It is a very nice harmony and it is interesting because it was five designers who were not competing, they were producing their best quality work for the same parent goal and that goal was to have the most beautiful cruise ship out in the field."

Not just the same thing

While Eclipse is patterned after Solstice and is in general very similar, Celebrity was not content to rest upon its laurels and so she is not a mere clone of the first ship in the series. "In my eyes, Solstice was almost like a perfect ship. [Nonetheless,] they have tried to better each one as we go through the series. I see journalists who have come on each of the three and each time we 'wow' them. Would we 'wow' them if we just repeated the first? I don't know, it is such an incredible product, maybe. This company is out to refine, define and create something that is so special every time."

Eclipse differs from Solstice more so than Equinox does. In addition to the desire for continuous

improvement, this flows from the fact that Celebrity had more time to develop ideas for improving the product. Equinox entered service approximately eight months after Solstice whereas Eclipse entered service some 17 months after Solstice. "They changed Solstice to Equinox subtly and subtly both in décor and in operation. There were certain things that made it a little more tricky, a little more difficult to produce what we wanted to do in the time that we had. Then on this ship, the third down the line, much more operational changes [could be made] because there was a longer period between the Solstice and [Eclipse] rather than that very short period between Solstice and Equinox, which was a record for getting the second ship done."

The changes in the ship can be grouped into three categories. First, there were changes in the décor of the ship. On Eclipse, the colors were selected with the fact that many guests will be British or European in mind, producing a feeling of restrained luxury that a number of guests and writers have indicated that they prefer over the earlier ships. However, while there has been change "there has been certainly no reduction in costs. [Eclipse has] the same top level furniture and the detail in every angle [remains] remarkable."

Second, there were behind-the-scenes changes that make it "much, much more user friendly." For example, there were changes made to the main galley "that make things more fast moving." These changes, unseen by the guests, were the result of experience gained from the operation of the earlier two ships and benefit the guests in the form of greater efficiency in the ship's operation.

Third, Celebrity made some subtle structural changes to enhance the guests' onboard experience in ways they may not consciously notice. One of these involved the floor-to-ceiling glass walls of the Oceanview Café, the ship's buffet restaurant, which is located near the top of all three ships. "When you sit down on the other vessels, although it is a panoramic view, your exact line of sight has a window frame in it. [On Eclipse, Celebrity] changed the design so that you don't have to raise your back three inches to see over the frame. It was quite a massive change for such a small detail. But they did it".

Fourth, the most readily-apparent change was the substitution of a new specialty restaurant Qsine for



Simon Weir,

the Silk Harvest pan-Asian restaurant that is on Solstice and Equinox. "Qsine is a change in idea - - was that done because Silk Harvest wasn't successful? To the contrary, it was one of the most successful restaurants we had. But I think the character needs to be put in place for the third ship. For it to be identical is redundant. Is Qsine better than Silk Harvest? It is just different. It is still the highest quality of what we try and do in the culinary field."

Qsine re-thinks both the menu items and how the food is presented. There are Kobe beef sliders and sushi lollipops, Apple I-pad menus, sharing of menu items and even the replacement of dishes with boxes, shelves and other non-traditional means of serving food. "It is really good that a ship can try and revolutionize an experience and we are talking about revolutionizing the



Celebrity Eclipse

experience of eating. We try and find new ways of impressing people, [and here it is] impressing foodies. You will without doubt come out of that restaurant full and full of some of the most amazing tastes in a process which pretty much has never been seen before. That is what we ask people to understand before they enter the restaurant. Don't have a pre-set idea at that place. It's a way of being in the innovative part of cuisine at sea. It is a lot of fun and it is a lot of great food. I think this is a fun thing for the people who wish to participate. Its art in itself but you get a nice full belly."

"So I think a lot of thought went into Eclipse when they could have with the success of Solstice said 'same thing.' We have another two [ships in the series] to come and with those other two to come, it would be really strange if we didn't keep with this creative thought process within a very successful structure."

Appealing to the British

Celebrity has positioned Eclipse to develop the British cruise market. To that end, she is sailing from Southampton, England during the warmer months and is being marketed in the U.K. and Ireland. However, Celebrity is not transforming its cruising style to be that of a traditional U.K. cruise ship. "I think it is very important to keep our product in line with what the other [Celebrity] ships are doing out there but within that there is room for flexibility. We are being thoughtful. How can we accommodate British guests? We can make

them feel very at home in the vessel. If that means tea kettles [in the staterooms] so that they can make their own tea at the time they wish, why not? If that means going upstairs to the Oceanview Café and getting very familiar foods, let's go for it. Yet, how do we make it so they come to us and feel that this is a better option? We keep what is the successful international approach that Celebrity has always had and we make sure as we always do that all our guests are satisfied. We want them to come on and go: 'Wow, I have never experienced that before, I like that.'"

"We no longer compete with what used to be our competitors. We now compare with the great hotels of the world. And with that in mind, you are also sailing to far away places with no need to go through the difficulties and challenges of crossing borders with a very strong team of people who run the insides of the vessel. We have an incredible, incredible service reputation that is flourishing in these new environments, these new Solstice class ships."

While Eclipse is the first Celebrity ship to be stationed in the U.K., sister company Royal Caribbean International has had ships stationed in Southampton for several years. As a result, Royal Caribbean is better known in the UK than Celebrity. Some people hearing that the two companies have a common ownership may assume that the two companies deliver the same cruise experience. However, the two companies' style is quite distinct. "There is a thread that goes through them both. You are going to have a great experience.

That is both of the two sister companies' goal. Now, there is the family aspect whereby Royal Caribbean really put on an amazing experience for the youngsters. We don't have rock climbing walls. Our focus is perhaps a finer experience. In a way the whole ship is a fun place to be. It is not stodgy even though it is luxurious and it can only be described as that, it is a luxury ship. But here, there is a lot of intelligent fun to have - - a little more Discovery and a little less MTV."

Cruising out of the U.K. often involves cruising in cool weather. As a result, cruise lines that primarily sail in the Caribbean have had to adjust their focus away from the pool deck to the inside of the ship when they started sailing from the U.K. However, at Celebrity the cruise style emphasizes service, enrichment and pampering and so no change in style is needed. To the contrary, "I think we are at an advantage because when people look inwards rather than outwards we have a better chance to shine. Our [ability] to cater for less outdoor-type experiences is where we actually are superior."

Bringing out a ship

The job of a hotel director for a new ship does not begin on the day that the cruise line takes delivery of the ship. In the case of Eclipse, Weir spent two months at the shipyard in Pappenburg, Germany working with the designers and the shipyard operators. He then moved to Eemshaven in the Netherlands, where the ship received her final fitting-out before Celebrity took delivery, "building the team and seeing the ship loaded." Next, completely unexpectedly, before her naming ceremony, Eclipse was sent on a mission to rescue thousands of British tourists who were stranded in Spain when their airline flights were cancelled due to the volcanic eruption in Iceland. This involved unexpected challenges as the ship adjusted to accommodate its unexpected guests. The rescue was followed by the challenges of the naming ceremony and a pre-inaugural promotional cruise. "I have been here now 10 weeks and I started the first cruise a week ago. [Still,] I feel like I have been on a week of my contract. I find the thing that makes me tired, the thing that makes me want to go on vacation is when it becomes monotonous."

Bringing out a Solstice-class ship requires top quality crew members. "The worst thing that could happen to this ship would be for this ship to actually surpass the crew. [For example] although this is a lovely theater, the show is the cast and that cast has to be excellent. The cast has to have something a little extra."

Similarly, the managers need to be beyond the ordinary. "To run this style of ship, you have to have your operational skills, you need your experience and

you need your techniques. But this ship, unlike cruise ships in the past, has a lot of flair and it needs to be matched by the style of managers that we have running the 1,400 [crew members]. Flair is required and if I were to define flair: It is talent; it is understanding and it is focusing on areas that are detailed - - ambiance, atmosphere and design-type understanding and concepts. If you were comparing it to shoreside, you have to be a modern day, boutique-style operator rather than a more standard hotel such as the name brands. Boutique hotels, you need flair and we have to have that to manage the ship."

Accordingly, in bringing out each of the Solstice-class ships, Celebrity has turned to the same core group of people. "I think that has been a winning format. The people who have chosen to take on the first ship in a series, which are always the most challenging, are harden by that experience, have grown from that and it would be ridiculous, to tell you the truth, not to take that group of people and ask them to repeat and to refine. You have to be very clear-headed, you have to be able to take the pressure to be able to pull it off."

At some point the original team goes on leave and is replaced by new managers and crew members. That brings us to another aspect of Weir's job. "There has to be someone who garners what we have put in, the knowledge that we have had from starting up a ship where you are dealing with the designers and you know what they want and [from being] the people who carry that out. I have to also bring that into the next team."