

INSIDE VIEW:

MOLDING THE FUTURE

A Conversation with Gary Walker, Cruise Director, Celebrity Equinox

By

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Celebrity Equinox is part of a new wave moving through Celebrity Cruises. She is the second ship to enter service in Celebrity's Solstice class. Not only are these ships bigger than Celebrity's existing ships, they have innovative features including new entertainment venues and more dining options that inevitably will change the cruise experience.

Equinox's Cruise Director Gary Walker is no stranger to change. He has worked in the cruise industry for 19 years, not just for Celebrity but for Princess Cruises and Holland America Line. Indeed, he was with HAL when it introduced its Vista-class ships, which were significantly larger than that line's existing ships. Thus, he has a unique perspective from which to talk about Equinox.

"For Celebrity, it is a bigger ship than we have been used to but the way it has been designed really lends itself to more intimate areas - - the Cellar Masters, the Martini Bar, the Ensemble

Lounge. Even with 3,000 guests, you can walk around and find a lounge or a space where you are the only one. I always think it is like walking through a chic, cool boutique hotel in Las Vegas. With the creation of these new ships, we have really been able to mold where we would like to see ourselves in the future."

More Options in Entertainment and Programming

As Cruise Director, Walker is in charge of the onboard entertainment and activities. "I think what we are doing with our new programs and new areas, really allow guests to relax and enjoy the ship more."

With regard to entertainment, Equinox has venues not on prior Celebrity ships that make it possible to offer more varieties of entertainment. One example is the comedy club called Celebrity Central. "We have late night

comedy five to six nights a week with two comedians - - one comedian for the first half of the cruise, one for the second half. They fly in and out. It is very popular. The room holds 230 people and it is standing room only every night. It is an intimate fun atmosphere for comedy. That is something new and exclusive to our Solstice-class ships."

The flexibility afforded by the venues on the Solstice-class ships has allowed Celebrity to develop entertainment programs, which it has subsequently adapted to its other ships. An example is interactive production shows in which guests can participate along with the ship's entertainers. "We have a production that we do in the Sky Lounge [the ship's observation lounge] called 'Live at Sky.' It is a swing, jive, big band-based theme night that encompasses the big band, our singers and dancers, and the cruise director's team. Live at Sky was designed for the Sky Lounge."

For those who want less public entertainment, the ship has an advanced interactive television system. "With the interactive TV, you can book your shore excursions, order room service, [watch] on demand free movies as well as pay-per-view movies. [The system has] 50 plus movies on demand, 24/7. They are the same movies that you would see in the movie theater on the ship."

Equinox debuted Celebrity's new onboard programming concept Celebrity Life. Under this concept, programs are grouped into three areas reflecting what have traditionally been pillars of strength for Celebrity - - enrichment, spa and health-related activities and cuisine and wine. "We have gotten away from some of the more traditional shipboard games. We are really trying to go in the way of

enrichment with our new Celebrity Life program."



Cruise Director Gary Walker

The programs in these areas have been further developed and enhanced through various partnerships that Celebrity has formed. "People are enjoying that we are partnering with some big names out there - - Rosetta Stone for language classes, the Smithsonian Institute for our guest speakers program."

Celebrity is also enhancing the program through use of internal resources. An example would be the cooking demonstrations in the wine and cuisine area. "We utilize our executive chef, some of our sous chefs and our pastry chef. It really is like a cooking show on TV. Guests get involved. It is a humorous presentation as well. We do three of these a trip, the last one being our version of the 'Iron Chef.' Our executive chef hosts it. Two of his chefs

are given a set of ingredients and they have to create. The guests are the judges.”

“We still have some of what we call our ‘Celebrity Classics.’ We haven’t gone away from all tradition. There is a reason things become a tradition - - usually because people like them. So we have kept some of our regular events and activities, which people enjoy. People know that even though we have these new events - - new cooking shows, the Lawn Club, Corning Museum of Glass, language learning - - they can still depend on enjoying the more traditional bits as well.”

“Celebrity Life is a program which can stand alone regardless of the demographics. But our Celebrity Classics allow us to bring in some of our more traditional events depending on the crowd.”

Even with all of these innovations, Celebrity’s general style with regard to activities remains as it was in the past. “Our style has never really been an ‘in-your-face’ style. We are here if you would like to use us. There are plenty of areas just to enjoy being with your spouse, your family or friends.”

Who sails on Equinox

“The new class of ship is definitely attracting a lot of first time cruisers and guests who have tried other major lines and who think ‘let’s try something different.’ We need our repeat guests; we need loyalty. But it is also nice to have guests who are cruising for the first time or are trying us after having tried a few of the other major lines out there.”

“It is a very mixed group, which is great. [The guests are] always

predominantly U.S.-based but some cruises the total non-U.S. has gotten very close with the total U.S.”

“We have had a lot of German guests onboard - - 300 Germans onboard every cruise, bordering on 400 on some cruises. The ship was built in Germany and there has been a lot of press over in Germany and a lot of patriotism. I think it has been a great partnership between Celebrity and Meyer Werft shipyard and that has led to a lot of positive press.”

“We have a lot of British guests. I think Celebrity is beginning to ramp up its marketing over there, particularly now with the Eclipse [is going to be] based in Southampton [England] during the summer months. We are getting a lot of British people on Solstice and here based on that advertising [with people] going back and booking Eclipse for next summer.”

“What we have seen is our Solstice-class ships definitely attract a younger clientele, which lends itself to the way these ships have been designed - - a separate disco, a separate martini bar area, more of a nightclub feel upstairs [in the observation lounge] with a live band. These areas lend themselves to a more progressive, younger crowd.”

“Since Equinox has been over here in the Caribbean because of our itinerary of 10 and 11 day cruises, the majority of our crowd has been in the 55 plus age group. But 45 to 54 is the second largest age group we have been getting. In the summertime on Solstice and on Equinox in the Mediterranean, the age group was quite a bit younger. [During] the holiday season, that 55 age group isn’t the majority anymore. The 25 to 45 group is.”

With a younger crowd, comes more children. “This summer was very busy with kids - - 200, 300, 400 children

a cruise. The holiday cruises - - 500 plus. We have a big teen center and youth facility.- - a huge staff. The kids have a bigger staff to look after them than we have to look after the other 2,500 guests," Walker laughed. "The program they offer is from 9 a.m. to 1 a.m. for everyone from 3 to 17 years old. There are four different age groups, each with its own area with its own counselors to look after them."

Guest reaction

Equinox is clearly different but how to guests feel about those differences? "Our new guests and even those who have been with Celebrity a long time, our repeat guests, are also enjoying the differences. It shows that we have a progressive group of guests."

With the advent of the Solstice-class, Celebrity now has ships ranging in size from the small Celebrity Xpedition up to and through very large ships. While all of the ships have common elements giving them a Celebrity flavor, the different ships provide somewhat different cruising experiences. Walker sees these differences as being a plus because it gives customers more choices. "Now, instead of going to a different cruise line because you [want a different experience], guests can stay within Celebrity. Depending on the class of ship they sail on, they will experience not a different product because our [core] pillars are there on all the ships, but a different type of ship. [They can] pick the class of ship to suit what sort of vacation they want to have."