

CARIBBEAN PRINCESS: Highly-rated and Getting Better

An Interview with James Deering, Passenger Services Director

By Richard H. Wagner

James Deering is a Passenger Services Director for Princess Cruises responsible for the hotel operation, which includes essentially all of the services that come into direct contact with passengers, on various Princess mega-cruise ships. When last we spoke with James, he was the Passenger Services Director ("PSD") of the much-loved Crown Princess. Since then, he has been PSD on Princess' newest ship, Emerald Princess. Most recently, he has been guiding Caribbean Princess as she takes over the itineraries formerly done by Crown Princess - - sailing out of San Juan in the winter and out of New York in the warmer months.

Caribbean Princess, Emerald Princess and Crown Princess are all variations upon the original Grand Princess design and are the three latest versions of that design but yet many passengers favor one over the others.* "One of the goals in every hotel in the world whether it is floating or not is consistency in the product. You want your guests or past passengers in our case to be able to expect certain things that they know they are going to get every time. That is why McDonald's is so popular because every time you go to McDonalds it smells and tastes exactly the same. Some people don't like that but that is one of the keys to their success. You are expecting something and you

get it. In the cruise business, we have to think about that too. So, there are many, many things which must be done and they must be done this way if at all possible. But, obviously, the tone of the vessel, which is another really important thing, has a lot to do with the captain, the passenger services director and how they interact and how they interact with the crew. If you have a hotel manager or a captain who is very distant or very cold, the ship tends to take on that persona. If you have some that are very friendly, the ship becomes more friendly than it normally is. That still maintains the consistency of the product but it could change the tone of the experience dramatically."

"Strangely too, every ship has its own character and we never really understand how a ship gets that character. It is just the way the ship started out and the way it first succeeded or didn't, what happened to it the first few weeks or months, or the first captain or the first passenger services director. It develops its own character which keeps going regardless of what happens afterwards. Sometimes this certain style or character or personality of a ship tends to fit some people better than others. I'll never understand it because even going between the Crown and the Emerald, which are identical vessels, they both have all the bells and whistles, they are both new, they have everything the same

but yet working on one and probably sailing on one is completely different from being on the other."

"This ship has quite a following. We have people who are coming back again, again and again to this ship. We have 17 ships or are about to have 17, 16 right now, and you would think that maybe the New Yorkers would want to go to the newest one or the fanciest one or the most advanced. But, there seems to be quite a market that really likes this ship."

Still, coming to one of the most demanding markets in the world and taking over from a very popular ship, Caribbean Princess could not just rest upon her past laurels. "There are many plans and ideas that come through [from Princess' main office] saying that this is the demographic that we have seen previously and so this is what worked last time on this other ship so let's aim in that direction again. There is a lot of thought that goes into it ahead of time. We can't cover all the bases because there are too many variables that we can't do anything about which will catch us by surprise but we plan for it as much as we can. We put people in who have done this before, hopefully as many people as possible." Take the lines as the Passenger Services Desk on the final day of the cruise. When a ship is operating out of New York, "it is far longer and needs more attention than it would anywhere else. We don't know why, it is just the way it is. Since we know that it is that way, let's get people up there who are ready for it and understand it."

"The entertainment line-up on the ship right now is very good and part of it has to do with the itinerary. New Yorkers are rather discriminating when it comes to entertainment. They want to see all the shows, as many as possible and we have the new ones for them now. Part of this is this Cruise Director Kelvin Joy, he was on the Crown with me last year in New York. He understands the market because he has done it before but he is pretty pro-active and that is mostly his doing. The ratings on this ship out of New York are much better than the Crown was last year for entertainment. But the Crown had the Piazza and we don't. But we still beat them. Kelvin is pretty proud of himself and he should be too, he has done a good job. Think how much better it will be when we do have the Piazza - - there will be even more entertainment going on."

In January 2009, Caribbean Princess is scheduled for a three-week dry docking during which many of the features such as the Piazza that are on the Crown, the Emerald, and which will be on Ruby Princess, which is due to join the fleet in November 2008. "Quite frankly, we are not still finished planning. We know more or less what we are going to be doing. Some of it is approved and in the pipeline; some of it is just still a work in progress that we are not quite sure about but we know it is going to be nice."

From his prior experience, Deering believes that the addition of the Piazza, a town square at the base



Passenger Services Director James Deering

of the ship's central atrium will be particularly popular. "When you go on the Emerald or the Crown, every hour there is somebody new coming on - - there are still walkers, walking statues, comedians, jugglers and clowns. It is just a show down there hour after hour."

In the Piazza, there will be the International Café, a venue with specialty coffees, pastries and other interesting foods throughout the day, a sushi bar, and a wine bar. Caribbean Princess will also be gaining The Sanctuary, an adults-only relaxation and spa area on the open decks, and the Crown Grill will replace existing steakhouse. In addition, the casino will be moved and several new family suites will be added that will have large windows rather than balconies. There will be other additions and a general sprucing-up even though the ship is only four years old. "The ship will have a really nice new feel and look about her and that will be great."