

A QUESTION OF CLASS

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Multi-class passenger ships are a thing of the past, or so I have been told. In these more egalitarian days, passengers will not tolerate having whole sections of the ship restricted to a privileged few and having one group of passengers treated differently from the others, the critics say. While the days of metal barricades fencing off first class from steerage ala James Cameron's *Titanic* may be over, there are signs that the industry is moving towards a new, albeit different, class system.

Critics of multi-class ships often focus their ire on Cunard. Oddly enough, the word "class" appears absent from Cunard's brochures. It is true that on Cunard ships which restaurant a passenger dines in is dictated by his or her cabin category and one lounge and a portion of the open decks on each ship is restricted to passengers traveling in the ship's suites. However, it is not the class system of old. All of the passengers share the same swimming pools and sports facilities, attend the same entertainment and participate in the same program of activities. A passenger in the least expensive cabin category can venture through 90 percent of the public spaces on the ship.

"It is the same as any hotel," comments Dirk Brand, formerly the Hotel Manager on *QUEEN MARY 2* and now the Passenger Services Director on *RUBY PRINCESS*. "Any hotel in the world, at least the big chains, has an executive level with a lounge with free drinks, with different services. Every airline has economy, business and first class. Nobody questions that. I think somebody who books a top suite has the privilege to have a little extra and to enjoy their privacy. People who spend more money than others might like to have a little more space and more privacy. Everybody can choose what they want. It is the same as everybody can choose what car they buy and what house they build."

Accordingly, the major cruise lines have begun implementing systems that provide extra services to guests in the more expensive cabins and which limit access to parts of the ship to those guests. Royal Caribbean, for example, offers passengers in its suites preferred seating and reservations in its restaurants, exclusive in-stateroom "culinary treats," and upgraded furniture. On the Freedom-class ships, a portion of the Viking Crown Lounge that was a public bar on earlier classes is now a concierge lounge.

Norwegian Cruise Line takes it a step further. On *NORWEGIAN GEM*, NCL's most recent ship, guests staying in the Courtyard Villa suites have access to an exclusive concierge lounge as well as a private courtyard

area with pool, hot tub and sundeck. They also have their own small fitness area. On the forthcoming *NORWEGIAN EPIC*, there will be a two deck area exclusively for guests staying in the suites. These staterooms will have access to a private pool, two whirlpools, saunas, a sun deck, a fitness facility, private indoor/outdoor dining, a bar and a concierge lounge

Meanwhile on Princess Cruises, no part of the ship is reserved exclusively for guests staying in the suites. However, those guests receive priority check-in at embarkation, priority on the tenders, priority at disembarkation, tour preferences, and mini-bar set-ups. "Obviously, you pay for all of those amenities [in the price of the room], the same as any land-based hotel, the same as any major cruise line," notes *EMERALD PRINCESS*'s Passenger Services Director Tony Becker. On the *CROWN PRINCESS*, *RUBY PRINCESS* and *EMERALD PRINCESS*, guests staying in the suites also have the exclusive right to indulge in gourmet breakfasts in the Sabbatini specialty restaurant. "It gets them away from the craziness of the buffet, which coming in at seven in the morning can be pretty busy. They can come up [to Sabbatini's] and have a few danish and croissants or have a full breakfast. It is nice, quiet and tranquil."

On a slightly different tact, *CELEBRITY SOLSTICE* has Aqua Class for passengers who are interested in having a cruise that is like a spa retreat. "It is like a little ship within a ship. They have their own restaurants, they have certain amenities, there is an association with the spa," explains Simon Weir, Hotel Director on *SOLSTICE*. Along the same lines, Holland America's *EURODAM* and *CARNIVAL SPLENDOR* both have "spa cabins" grouped together in their own sections of those ships that allow guests special access to their spas.

Where is it going? One ship's officer speculated that in the future there might be areas set aside based upon the style of cruising that various groups prefer. With cruise ships getting ever larger, the cruise lines have to appeal to everyone. Yet, the comment cards reveal, for example, that many passengers want more formality while many want more informality. Since both cannot co-exist in the same place and be happy, he suggests that ships could be divided into separate formal and informal areas.

Still, this does not harken a return to metal barricades. As Mr. Weir noted, one of the unique qualities of cruising is that it provides a convenient opportunity to meet different types of people. "They form lifelong friendships or just have a very pleasant, interesting time. You never see it anywhere else, ever, just ships." Thus, rather than a return to complete segregation, the trend should be seen more as a move toward giving passengers focused options for spending part of their time onboard.