

An interview with Ray Rouse Cruise Director of QUEEN MARY 2

By Richard H. Wagner

Ray Rouse is constantly on the go. Passengers see him when they turn on their in-cabin televisions in the morning, describing the days events and interviewing performers and celebrities who are onboard. They see him introducing lecturers and at other activities during the day. He is at the receptions in the evening and then introduces the production show in the theater and the gala ball in the Queens Room ballroom. In between, he might be hosting a table in the Britannia Restaurant with a group of VIPs. He appears to be everywhere.

But, this is only the public face of the job of being cruise director on the world's largest ocean liner. The cruise director is in charge of all the entertainment and activity programs and at the fore of the public relations efforts onboard. He supervises a staff of 120. He must oversee and manage the live entertainment, movies, music, enrichment programs, sports, and activities. He oversees communication with the guests including the publication of the daily program and the programming for the interactive television. In addition, he is a member of the ship's executive committee of six officers who decide the running of QUEEN MARY 2. "It consists of about 12 to 14 hours of work a day, seven days a week for 15 or 16 weeks and then 10 weeks off. It is about 32 weeks a year," Rouse says with a self-deprecating laugh.

The Road to QM2

Because the cruise director has so much contact with the passengers and is responsible for so many things that determine whether the passengers enjoy the voyage, it is a crucial position on any passenger ship.

This is perhaps even more so on QUEEN MARY 2 because QUEEN MARY 2 is such a prestigious and high profile ship. Therefore, a veteran cruise director with a list of significant accomplishments on his resume was needed. Ray Rouse is such a person.

Unlike many people in the cruise industry, a life at sea was not Rouse's childhood ambition. However, "I can remember as a young boy going to the Isle of Wight with my parents for holidays in the late forties and through the fifties. We used to take sides trips over on boats to see the great liners in Southampton. I can remember seeing the QUEEN MARY and the QUEEN ELIZABETH, the UNITED STATES - - all those great liners of those days - - as a young boy and being awed by them. Whether that played any part of me getting into the industry, I don't know, but I can always remember as a clear picture of seeing those great liners and then standing on the beach at Ride or Cowes and watch them go by on their journeys across the Atlantic to New York."

A native of London, Rouse joined the Metropolitan Police. He served with the Special Patrol Group that was responsible for the protection of members of the Royal Family and the Prime Minister's residence at 10 Downing Street. These were tense times following the political assignations in America in the 1960s and the re-emergence of violence over Northern Ireland.

In order to relieve the tension, Rouse took up dancing as a hobby. "I had success in dance sport and I became the amateur champion of the United Kingdom. Then, I met my wife through dancing. We turned professional and we started dancing professionally, teaching, and doing cabaret. I left the police force,

my wife gave up her work and dancing became our career." In addition to winning numerous dance championships, the Rouses performed at a Gala Royal Ball at Buckingham Palace and appeared in The Beatles' movie "Magical Mystery Tour."

The Rouses' lives took a turn in 1973 when they were booked as a dance team on a small cruise ship, the VICTORIA of the Inces Line, for a month-long cruise around the Norwegian fjords. "We got the bug then and we then applied to several lines and got hired by Cunard Line. We served on the CUNARD ADVENTURER, the AMBASSADOR and the QE2 back in '73 and '74. Then, we joined Royal Viking Line as a dance team on the ROYAL VIKING SKY and SEA, served on them as a dance team, again doing cabaret and teaching lessons. [After that, we] joined Holland America Line and were on the ROTTERDAM's world cruises each year as a dance team."

While at Holland America, Rouse was promoted to cruise director. His wife, Lisa, became a social hostess. An indication of how much the industry and the cruise director position was evolved since then, the Rouses still performed as a dance team until Lisa retired in the early 1980s.

In 1981, the Rouses joined the young and growing Royal Caribbean Cruise Line. Ray was cruise director on two of RCCL's most popular early ships: NORDIC PRINCE and SONG OF NORWAY.

Rouse observed that the cruise industry was evolving. "The ships of the past were ocean liners, built for world voyages, longer voyages and that is what the industry was about. In the late sixties and early seventies, the industry changed. The ships became more modern, more streamlined, the cruises became shorter, and attracted the mass market. Ted Arison, [Kurt] Koster, Ed Stephan at Royal Caribbean, Pete Wilton at Royal Caribbean, the visionaries of that era who brought all those ships out at Norwegian Cruise Line, Carnival and Royal Caribbean, built these sleek ships, just for calm water cruising. They were cost effective."

By the early 1980s, the Miami-based cruise industry was taking-off and in order to maintain a competitive edge, Royal Caribbean took the unprecedented step of increasing the capacity of NORDIC PRINCE



Ray Rouse

and SONG OF NORWAY by cutting them in half and inserting additional sections. In increasing the capacity of their existing ships, RCCL was seeking to exploit the theory that the cost of operating a ship that carried a large number of passengers is less than operating several ships whose combined capacity was equal to that of the large ship. Experience validated their theory and the race to build bigger cruise ships began.

In 1982, RCCL followed this move by building the 31,000 ton SONG OF AMERICA with a passenger capacity of 1,400. While a small ship by today's standards, at the time, SONG OF AMERICA was almost double the size of RCCL's existing ships.

"SONG OF AMERICA came out, which was quite a turning point in '82. I brought that ship out." Among other things, Rouse supervised the development of the cruise program and entertainment for this ship, including hiring staff and setting onboard policies and procedures. In effect, he established a foundation not only for the type of cruises that SONG OF AMERICA would do but also for the increasingly larger ships that would follow.

"Then, in 1987, I was selected for the SOVEREIGN OF THE SEAS, which was [another] turning point, I think in this industry. It was a visionary type of ship. It was the first ship ever with the giant atrium, seven, eight stories high, it had big theaters, it had many dining options, clubs, large casino - - it was a turning point and then all ships, whatever company, came out after that were not modeled but certainly were styled similarly to the SOVEREIGN OF THE SEAS."

Indeed, SOVEREIGN, the first cruise ship to exceed QE2 in gross tonnage, was the first mega-cruise ship and Rouse would be in the front lines of this revolution. "I brought out about eight ships for Royal Caribbean through until the end of '99."

As Rouse sees it, the mega-cruise ships "are pretty much the destinations in themselves. They have attracted a younger age group. That is one of the biggest things I have seen in the industry with other companies. More families are cruising whereas you never had children - - very rarely -- on ships in the past. So, young people's facilities have become more important on ships today. They have become more adventurous, they have built rock climbing walls, skating rinks, ice skating, rollerblading tracks, golf courses, boxing rings, bowling alleys, they are all there now. So, they are destinations in themselves. And who knows where the next evolution period will take us."

Still, having played a key role in the development of mega-ship cruising, Rouse sees a danger. "[For] the mass market lines, companies that have 15 to 20 ships - - Carnival, Princess, Royal Caribbean, Costa, Norwegian - - I think the danger is, not that they will lose their identities but that the ships will lose their identities. People say: 'Oh, I went on a Carnival ship or I went on a Royal Caribbean ship' but they can't remember the name of the ship. They know it was with that company but they can't individualize the ship. Whereas when they go on the QUEEN MARY 2, they say they were on the QUEEN MARY 2, they don't say they went on a Cunard ship. That is one of the dangers of the industry is that they lose that individualistic type of thing that the QUEEN MARY 2 has and the QE2 have as well. I think they offer a great product - - it is a great cost effective vacation at sea for people - - but, that is the danger."

After leaving Royal Caribbean, Rouse served briefly with Costa Cruises, bring out the COSTA ATLANTICA in 2000. Then in 2002, Rouse received a call asking whether he would like to serve as the first cruise director for QUEEN MARY 2. "I, in 1998, was surprised but pleased when Carnival Corporation purchased Cunard Line. Even more surprised six to eight months later when Micky Arison announced the build-

ing of the QUEEN MARY 2. I was so happy. I remember sitting in my home in Florida, reading a paper and seeing the graphic of QUEEN MARY 2 and I said to my wife: 'This is marvelous, who would have ever thought they are going back to the days of the great liners,' not realizing that I would ever be involved in the job of being a cruise director of the greatest ocean liner ever built. I never even thought about it. It wasn't in my mind. It wasn't until about three years later that they gave me a call. I am very pleased to be here."

The QM2 Difference

Having started his career with Cunard, including time on the legendary QE2, and then having helped develop mega-ship cruising with Royal Caribbean and other lines, Rouse is well aware that there is a difference between a transatlantic liner and a big cruise ship. Consequently, the style of life onboard QM2 that he as cruise director has helped develop is different than the style of life onboard even cruise ships of similar size. Rouse points out that a passenger coming from one of the mass market lines would find life on QM2 different in several key ways.

"The first thing would definitely be the formality, the dress code would be the first item. The QUEEN MARY 2 is a very formal ship, even on short voyages, we will still have formal evenings whereas many companies wouldn't bother with a formal night. It would be [all] casual. And, a lot of companies are going very casual throughout their whole voyage. That won't happen here, not on the QUEEN MARY 2, not with Cunard Line. It will be formal. Our transatlantic voyage is basically, take away the first and last night, formal. That was the same as on our first world cruise this year. Most nights at sea were formal. That is the way it will be on the next world cruise too. We will never have a totally casual evening per se. It will either be formal, semi-formal, or elegant casual on all voyages now."

"Our facilities are geared toward a formal gala occasion. That is part of the gala, pomp and circumstance of traveling on the QUEEN MARY 2. And the customer who comes here, they expect it, the majority, and they demand it. We won't let our standards drop because we want to keep our customer base. I think that is one of the big differences."

"There is [also] a lot more culture here. When you are on a transatlantic voyage, you are at sea for five days and six nights, crossing the Atlantic. So, the programs offered are very educational, entertaining, interesting. Our Library and Book Shop has 9,000 copies of books - - the largest library at sea on any passenger ship."

"The Cunard Insights program, the lecture program, is very strong on academic subjects - - entertaining but enriching to the guests. [It] is very diversified. On every transatlantic crossing, we will have three or four lecturers and their subjects will be a mixture, a balance of subjects that are of interest to all the guests. We might have someone lecturing on science, for example, that might not be interesting [to a particular guest] but then, there will also will be someone lecturing on politics or sport or movies or some other subject that would be of interest so there is a choice and an option for the guest."

"The entertainment is geared to an international audience. The QUEEN MARY 2 is a very international ocean liner. It attracts many people from all over the world. Whereas comedy is a big part of entertainment, it does not necessarily go well with our international guest list because you could have people where English is not their premier language. Also, British comedy might not appeal sometimes to Americans and vice versa and that is always the difficulty with stand-up comedy. Musical comedy is a little different, visual comedy is a little different, mime can be different. But to be on the safe side, to attract the international audience, you need shows and entertainment of the character of production shows with plenty of dancing, singing, costumes, special effects, live music, vocalists, musical acts and visual acts. That is basically what the QUEEN MARY 2 is about, we get comedy occasionally but it is comedy mixed with music with juggling or magic or something like that."

In addition to the programming and entertainment, there are other factors that distinguish the QM2 experience from the experience on the large cruise ships. One is passenger space. To illustrate, QM2 is approximately the same size as Royal Caribbean's FREEDOM OF THE SEAS. However, whereas FREEDOM has a maximum passenger capacity of 4,375, QUEEN MARY 2, at maximum carries less than 3,000 passengers. "I find there is so much space on here even when we are full, 2,800 guests. As the Commodore [Bernard Warner] always says [to passengers]: 'I hope you are enjoying the space and the luxury' and that is what the QUEEN MARY 2 is about."

Another distinguishing factor is the dining. On QUEEN MARY 2, passengers are assigned to a dining room based upon their cabin category, with the suites assigned to the intimate Queens Grill or the Princess

Grill and the other categories to the Britannia Restaurant. "If you are going to have a Grill accommodation, the dining becomes an experience, a much longer experience normally too. There is a choice of menus in the Grills, in that experience. [There is] the White Star service. The Queens Grill is rated the top restaurant at sea on any ship."

"The grandeur of the Britannia Restaurant is what Cunard was all about - - the grandeur of the great restaurants of the QUEEN MARY and the QUEEN ELIZABETH. There is that tremendous space and wonderment of this dining hall. It might seem cavernous but the decoration and the music, the service and the blending of everything just makes that what I think a great opulence."

A final distinction is fame. "Wherever the QUEEN MARY 2 goes it always attracts extra attention more than any ship just because it is the QUEEN MARY 2. It is one of a kind that is why. Whenever the ship goes into a port with other ships, people are always out on deck from the other ships taking pictures of the QUEEN MARY 2. If you were to ask anybody in the world, name a ship, I think 90 percent would say QE2 or QM2."

"I have been on about 25 ships in my career. I am very proud of my career and particularly this ship, the QUEEN MARY 2, because I think it is the greatest ocean liner ever built and the best ship out there today. It makes me work harder. There are constant challenges and issues to deal with. I strive to exceed the guests' expectations as I would on any ship. But, there is that extra pride of being on here because it is the QUEEN MARY 2. I think that drives you on. I think that gives you that impetus, that excitement."

