

NCL HOMEPORTS A SECOND CRUISE SHIP IN NEW YORK

THE DEPLOYMENT OF NORWEGIAN SPIRIT TO NEW YORK INDICATES THAT NCL'S GAMBLE ON WINTER CRUISES FROM NEW YORK IS PAYING OFF

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Since the end of the ocean liner era in the early 1970s, the berths of Manhattan's Passenger Ship Terminal have lain virtually abandoned during the winter months. However, this state-of-affairs may be drawing to a close. On 18 November, NCL Corporation assigned NORWEGIAN SPIRIT to year-round duty in New York. By so doing, NCL confirmed the success of the experiment it began in 2003 when NORWEGIAN DAWN started cruising out of New York year-round.

"I am pleased to welcome the NORWEGIAN SPIRIT to New York City," said Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. "The addition of NORWEGIAN SPIRIT helps foster the tremendous growth the cruise industry is experiencing in the City, where last year alone the industry supported more than 3,000 jobs and contributed more than \$600 million to the local economy. With New York City as her home port, I am confident NORWEGIAN SPIRIT will experience the same level of success as NORWEGIAN DAWN has sailing out of New York harbor."

"NCL's deployment of NORWEGIAN DAWN year round out of New York has helped make the city NCL's leading home port in the mainland United States," commented

Colin Veitch, President and CEO of NCL. "Demand has been remarkably strong, and our partners have been clamoring for an expansion. We are thrilled to be able to deliver, and look forward to offering a variety of Bermuda, Bahamas and Caribbean itineraries just a short cab ride away for New Yorkers."



NCL is the number three cruise ship operator following after industry leader Carnival Corp. and RCL Inc. To remain competitive, NCL has aggressively pursued opportunities that other cruise lines had for various reasons not attempted to exploit. For example, NCL recently found a way to overcome the legal barriers that had prevented the

major cruise lines from entering the Hawaii market in a meaningful way. (See *The LOG*, Summer 2005, at 24).

Winter cruises out of New York have a straight forward appeal. Snow-weary New Yorkers can drive to the Passenger Ship Terminal, board the ship, and without the hassles of air travel, be transported in luxury to the sunny Caribbean. Considering how many New Yorkers take a winter break in the islands, there clearly is a market that would be interested in such cruises.

But, there is a problem. Before you get to the Caribbean, you must sail through the Atlantic with its nor'easters and coastal blizzards. Since, until recently, the top speed of most cruise ships was 15 knots, this could mean two days of rolling and pitching before reaching calm waters. Moreover, many cruise ships designed for puttering around on tranquil seas were too fragile to brave the storms off Cape Hatteras.

Over time, cruise ships have become faster and stronger. As a result, passengers cruising down the Eastern Seaboard are likely only to experience one day of bad weather before reaching calmer seas. Also, the faster a ship is, the more likely it is to be able to sail around a storm. In addition, the Poseidon Adventure notwithstanding, a modern cruise ship is unlikely to founder. Indeed, NCL points out that NORWEGIAN SPIRIT survived a typhoon in September 2002 south of Hong Kong in which winds reached 137 mph and the sea was 47 feet high. Moreover, as John Hillin, USCG Sector NY Prevention Department Port Safety and Security Branch of the Inspections Division, notes "over the years there have been many new safety standards applied by International law specifically

geared toward protecting all ships and its crew."

This does not mean that bad weather is no longer an issue. Last April, while en route to New York, NORWEGIAN DAWN encountered a storm off of Georgia. Reportedly, the storm included a 70-foot wave that smashed windows, caused water damage to some 60 cabins, and resulted in injuries to four passengers. The ship diverted to Charleston, South Carolina for repairs and an inspection by the Coast Guard. However, as seen by the fact that this incident occurred in the Spring, bad weather is not a problem unique to winter cruising.

To ameliorate concerns over the weather issue, NCL offers a "Winter Weather Guarantee". NCL's website states: "The winter weather in the Northeastern United States is invariably cold, which is why a cruise to the warm weather is so appealing! Only rarely is it stormy. We do not expect our schedule into and out of New York to be adversely affected by winter weather. However, there is always the possibility of an occasional weather system causing strong winds and rough seas. In this case, NCL would intend to delay sailing until conditions allow for departure."

The success of the NORWEGIAN DAWN experiment apparently has led at least one other cruise line to sample the waters. Shortly after the 81,000 ton NORDAM is delivered to Holland America Line in February 2006, she will do a series of late winter Caribbean cruises out of New York. Various Holland America ships will be cruising out of New York at least through December 2006.

The Coast Guard's safety examinations do not vary according to the season or weather predictions. The

Coast Guard does have heavy weather contingency plans but those are not specific to cruise ships. Rather, the plans envision sending alerts to all vessels operating/wishing to operate in the Port and even closing the Port if conditions warrant. Furthermore, these plans are primarily used in connection with hurricanes rather than winter weather.

The Log had the opportunity to tour NORWEGIAN SPIRIT during the World Ship Society Port of New York Branch's 40th Anniversary luncheon on 19 November. She is approximately the same size as the QUEEN ELIZABETH 2 but looks nothing like a traditional passenger ship. Rather, she looks like a modern cruise ship with rows of balconies along the sides, a square stern, and a short bow. Like other NCL ships, the SPIRIT has a mural painted on the white hull - - porpoises and a sea goddess riding through the waves.

The SPIRIT was built at the Meyer Werft shipyard in Papenburg, Germany, and was delivered to her owners in September 1998. During most of her career, she sailed for NCL's affiliate Star Cruises under the name SUPER STAR LEO, calling at ports in Asia and the Pacific. Even though she recently completed a refit to ready her for the American market, the interior décor still retains an Asian flavor.

We entered the ship on the lifeboat deck and were taken into a multi-story atrium with glass elevators ascending up numerous decks. Such architectural features seem to be a requirement on all modern cruise ships. A welcome surprise, however, was that the room was decorated in a tasteful subdued manner, rather than in Las Vegas glitz. Indeed, the ship's decoration throughout is restrained,

looking like that of a modern up-scale hotel. Everywhere was scrupulously clean.



NCL features "Anytime dining" where passengers can decide when and where to dine. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).

For many people, food is an important part of cruising. NCL prides itself on what it calls "Freestyle cruising" which means that passengers are not assigned to a specific table in a certain restaurant but are free to eat in any of the ship's eight restaurants. However, passengers are encouraged to make reservations for some of the restaurants and there is an additional charge for some of the specialty restaurants. While this arrangement allows passengers to have a variety of different dining experiences during the cruise, there are trade-offs. There are no officer-hosted tables on the SPIRIT and the traditional ocean voyage camaraderie with ones tablemates that often develops

when one dines with the same group of people during a voyage is lost. Of course, freestyle cruising does make it easier to avoid that obnoxious couple that sat with you on the first night of the cruise.

The World Ship Society luncheon was in one of the ship's main restaurants, the Garden Restaurant. It runs the width of the ship and along each side in a U-shape. Still, it does not give the impression of being a large room. The service was friendly although a communication problem resulted in a considerable delay in serving two of the people at our table with the soup course. The food was tasty and presented in an inventive manner which is all that can really be expected from a kitchen that is mass-producing meals for hundreds of people.

The buffet (i.e., cafeteria), most of the bars, and the specialty restaurants are arranged along corridors running the length of the ship submarine-style opposite floor to ceiling windows. A similar design was used for the food court on QUEEN MARY 2. Still, after all is said and done, a food court is a food court.

SPIRIT does have some nice public rooms. At the stern end, there is an impressive multi-story theater used for shows and lectures that seats over 900. Located high on the ship just over the bridge, the Galaxy of the Stars bar is spacious and offers a good view over the bow. Indeed, NCL has installed a traditional ship's wheel and computer displays showing the ship's course for those who want to imagine that they are driving.

The real bridge is a vast glass-enclosed space that encompasses the bridge wings. The controls are housed in several widely-separated consoles that

make the room look more like a post-modern office than a passenger ship's wheelhouse.

Four diesel engines can generate 79,968hp. Two fixed blade propellers give the SPIRIT a maximum speed of 24 knots.

The SPIRIT accommodates 1,966 passengers and features 18 suites and nearly 600 ocean-view staterooms, of which more than 65 percent offer private balconies. The staterooms appear to be clean and well-furnished although somewhat small by American standards. As noted earlier, SPIRIT began life in Asia where smaller hotel rooms are the norm.

SPIRIT has an international crew of 965, hailing from more than 50 countries. They seem young and eager to please. The officers are European, mostly from Scandinavia. The ship is registered in the Bahamas.



SPIRIT has a cockpit-style bridge. (Photo: R.H. Wagner)