

NOW ENTERING THE RING

THE NEW YORK WINTER CRUISE MARKET HEATS UP AS HOLLAND AMERICA CHALLENGES NCL WITH ITS NEWEST LUXURY CRUISE SHIP

By Richard H. Wagner

(Originally published in *The Log*, Navy League of the United States, New York Council, Spring 2006)

There were patches of ice by the aft pool when MS NOORDAM, Holland America Line's (HAL) newest ship, arrived at the Passenger Ship Terminal for the first time on President's Day. This was only appropriate because unlike numerous other cruise ships that have paid a maiden courtesy call in New York on their way from the builder's yard to taking up residence in sunnier climes, NOORDAM was here not just for her dedication but to enter the market for winter cruising out of New York. For the last few years, this market has been all but owned by Norwegian Cruise Lines (NCL) with other lines only making occasional appearances during the period January through March. The market has proved lucrative enough that NCL recently assigned a second ship to year-round cruising out of New York. (See, *The Log*, Winter 2005 at 7). But now, New Yorkers will have a choice with NOORDAM offering 10 and 11-day cruises to the Caribbean during February and March and then returning in the fall to resume regular sailings from Gotham to the sunshine.

From a technological point of view, NOORDAM appears similar to

NCL's principal New York offering, the NORWEGIAN DAWN. Both ships have azipod propulsion systems and a similar maximum speed (24 knots for the HAL ship and 25 knots for NCL). NOORDAM is 935 ft. long with a 105-foot beam whereas the DAWN is 965 ft. long with a 105-foot beam. However, as reflected in the ship's gross tonnage figures, NCL packs more revenue producing area into essentially the same physical space than HAL (92,250 grt. vs. 81,769 grt.). As a result, when one is sailing on the DAWN on a sold-to-capacity cruise one can encounter 2,223 fellow passengers whereas on the NOORDAM, one would only be sharing the ship with 1,917 other passengers. Indeed, the NOORDAM's passenger capacity is less than the smaller of NCL's offerings, the NORWEGIAN SPIRIT.

The difference in passenger capacity is emphasized by HAL as an indication of what differentiates HAL from its competitors. "Simply put, our ships carry fewer guests in higher style," commented Tracey Kelly, HAL's CTC Vice President, Sales, during THE LOG's visit to the ship during her maiden call in New York. Whereas

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NCL sells informal "free-style" cruising, HAL regards itself as offering "the last word in premium cruising." According to Kelly, "You can feel a sort of dignity that recalls the glamour of timeless ocean travel."

HAL began sailing to the Port of New York even before there was a HAL. In 1872, the ROTTERDAM of Plate, Reuchlin & Company made a 15-day crossing from the Netherlands to Hoboken. However, that company ran into financial trouble and was reorganized as the Netherlands-America Steamship Company the following year. Because it was headquartered in Rotterdam and provided service to the Americas, it became known as the Holland America Line. The new company did much better than its predecessor and, by the turn of the century, it had a fleet of passenger and cargo ships that were providing service not only on the Atlantic but also between the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies.

During the 20th Century, HAL entered the front ranks of the transatlantic passenger trade with ships such as the luxurious STATENDAM of 1929 and the 36,000-ton art deco designed NIEU AMSTERDAM of 1938. At the same time, it continued its cargo trade and vacation cruises, which it had begun offering in 1895. Reflecting the fact that commercial jet liners had taken away most of the transatlantic business, HAL stopped offering regularly scheduled transatlantic crossings in 1971 in order to concentrate on cruises. In 1989, HAL became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Carnival Corporation. The company now has 13 ships (a 14th is on order for delivery in 2008) offering

nearly 500 sailings to all seven continents.

"We've been respected for so long because everyone of us keeps trying to honor our proud tradition of excellence," Kelly explained and indeed



NOORDAM at New York's Passenger Ship Terminal just before going into service in February 2006. (Photo: R. H. Wagner)

HAL's heritage is reflected in the NOORDAM in several ways. At the most basic level, the ship sails under the Dutch flag rather than a flag of convenience. Along the same lines, the officers are Dutch or British (the current captain is British). Echoing the days when the line served the Dutch possessions in the East Indies, 60 percent of the waiters and crew are Indonesian. (HAL points out that it requires its employees to speak English. It not only teaches standard English but also slang expressions and coaches employees on the cultural peculiarities that distinguish North Americans).

Tradition is also reflected in the dining onboard. As in the days of the transatlantic liners, dining centers upon the main dining room. A two-story room located aft, there are two seatings

in each tier, thus giving passengers a choice of four times for dinner. The line prides itself on its attentive service and its five course menus. Indeed, both the service and the cuisine were very good during THE LOG's visit onboard, which was impressive considering the room's 1,114 person capacity. There are also officer-hosted tables, which is an excellent traditional touch that helps to build a connection between the passengers and the ship.

Also as in the days of the transatlantic liners, there is an ala carte alternative restaurant, the Pinnacle Grill. Such restaurants were very popular on the old QUEEN MARY and QUEEN ELIZABETH, and is popular on the QM2 although the one on the QE2 proved a failure. For a fee of \$20 per meal and an advance reservation, passengers can dine in a more intimate room (148 person capacity) on "distinctive Bulgari china, elegant Riedel stemware and Frette linens" with two servers per table. It is a pleasant room opening onto the central atrium and extending over to the port side windows. The look is that of an upscale Manhattan restaurant. Reflecting the line's current connection to Alaskan cruising (8 of its 13 ships do Alaska cruises), its menu features Pacific Northwest cuisines such as Alaskan king salmon and northwest clam chowder, as well as premium cuts of beef.



The Pinnacle Grill is the NOORDAM's extra-tariff premium restaurant. (Photo: R.H. Wagner)

Despite the respect shown for tradition, NOORDAM also has what has become a standard feature in modern cruise ships - a cafeteria a.k.a. food court. While there is a fundamental inconsistency about having a self-serve food venue on a luxury ship, these food courts have proven so popular that they are omnipresent. The one on NOORDAM is a cut above the average. There are a number of stations each featuring a different cuisine, e.g. Asian, Italian. Not only is the food good but once you have your food, you can take it to a table area that looks as if someone actually thought about the surroundings. Thus, rather than having the feel of sitting in the food court of the local mall, one can enjoy the food in comfort in what looks like an upscale informal restaurant.

In fact, one of the most striking features of the public rooms in NOORDAM is that they look as if someone engaged in some thinking. A flaw on some modern ships is that one can stand at the bow end of the public room decks and have an almost unobstructed view of the stern end. The bars and other public rooms follow one

after another along a corridor submarine-style. Of course, when one is working with a confined, essentially-rectangular area such as the interior of a cruise ship, the rooms do have to follow one after the next. However, on NOORDAM, there are curves and subtle angles along the connecting corridor that break-up the feeling of being in a parade of rooms.

The interior of the ship was designed by a Dutch firm, VFD Interiors, headed by Frans Dingemans, who has designed and decorated the interiors of all the new HAL ships since the STATENDAM of 1993. The rooms have the feel of a post-modern hotel with high quality trim and fabrics. In addition, placed unobtrusively around the ship are some good pieces of art including paintings by maritime artist Stephen Card and as well as pieces of Asian statuary. "My experience in the architectural world is that when you make a very modern room you can easily add some antique items to give interest and a reference to the past. You can add modern art to a very conventional room as well. That really adds something to the experience in a room," Dingemans has said.

Two of the public rooms are particularly noteworthy because they reflect life in the early 21st century. First, the library is not merely a collection of books but rather incorporates an internet café ("powered by the New York Times") with computer portals and a coffee bar. Second, reflecting the popularity of cooking shows on television, HAL has built a demonstration kitchen with theater-style seating and large television screens for those passengers who want to think about food between meals. A series of

celebrity chefs is scheduled to give demonstrations on upcoming cruises.



The ship's staterooms reflect a contemporary international design. (Photo: R.H.Wagner).

Like the public rooms, the cabins look like a nicely-appointed, post-modern hotel. Eighty-five percent offer ocean views, with 67 percent of all staterooms sporting verandas. Unusually for a modern ship, a few single-occupancy cabins were included as one HAL official said "as an experiment." The cabins include enhancements such as flat-panel televisions and DVD players that are part of HAL's \$225-million "Signature of Excellence" initiative to improve the quality of its service fleet-wide.

On the outside, NOORDAM looks like a modern cruise ship rather than a traditional passenger ship. Indeed, the design is essentially a rectangle with a small curved bow area added at one end. There is relatively little open deck area. However, appropriately for a ship that will be traveling from cold weather to warm, the ship's main pool is located under a retractable glass dome. This feature has

proven very popular on the other ships of the class.

NOORDAM is the fourth and final Vista-class ship built for HAL by Italy's Fincantieri shipyard. Named (in Dutch) after the points of the compass, the other ships in the class are: ZUIDERDAM (2002), OOSTERDAM (2003), and WESTERDAM (2004). They are the largest, most advanced and luxurious vessels ever built for the line. NOORDAM differs from her predecessors in that she has approximately 30 more cabins and thus can accommodate 70 more passengers.

All of the Vista-class ships have traditional diesel-electric power plants as well as a gas-turbine unit to serve as a second power source. According to HAL, gas-turbine technology reduces visible emissions and can be used together with the diesel-electric system when cruising in particularly sensitive environments and while in port. In addition, the azipod propulsion system is estimated to reduce fuel consumption - - and thereby emissions - - by as much as 40 tons of fuel per week.

The \$400 million NOORDAM will be a formidable competitor in the New York cruise market. While she is not a destination ship, i.e., a ship that is so distinctive that one books a cruise on her just to be on her regardless of itinerary, she is nicely designed and there has been attention to detail. Perhaps just as importantly, the line exhibits a commitment to service, which, at the end of the day, is what differentiates a luxury ship from an ordinary one.