

# THE NEW TITLE HOLDER

## THE WORLD'S LARGEST CRUISE SHIP MAKES HER MAIDEN CALL IN NEW YORK

by **Richard H. Wagner** (originally published in *The Log*, Navy League of the United States, New York Council, Summer 2006).

**O**n 10 May, FREEDOM OF THE SEAS entered New York harbor for the first time. In succeeding days, she was the location for the "Today Show" and various other events, tying-up at the Cape Liberty Cruise Port in Bayonne, New Jersey, and at the Passenger Ship Terminal in Manhattan. Dwarfing the 50,764 gross ton NORWEGIAN DAWN, which was in the next slip when the ship was in New York, FREEDOM OF THE SEAS is now the world's largest passenger ship, taking that title from Cunard's QUEEN MARY 2. Captain Carlos Perdicini, formerly of the Argentine Navy, who stood by FREEDOM while she was being built in Finland, discussed his ship with *The Log*.

FREEDOM's statistics are impressive. She is approximately 154,407 gross tons, 1,112 feet long, and has a beam of 127 feet at the waterline. Thus, she is longer than and has about the same beam as USS RONALD REAGAN (CVN 76). Like an aircraft carrier, she towers 208 feet above the water.

The owner of FREEDOM OF THE SEAS is Royal Caribbean International, one of two cruise ship lines of Royal Caribbean Ltd.. The number two cruise ship company, RCL's two "brands," Royal Caribbean

International and Celebrity Cruises, currently operate 28 ships in competition with industry leader Carnival Corporation, which operates 81 ships through 12 brands. Captain Perdicini noted that his line is not content to sit still. "I have been with this company 16 years and we have gone far, far. We needed to do that. When I joined this company [Royal Caribbean International] I was a second officer and back then, we had only six ships. Now, we have 20. We should continue. We have two more ships of this same class within the next couple of years. Then, we have a new class called Genesis in three years time. So, we are not going to stay here. We are going to continue to add ships to our fleet."

Known for building big ships, Royal Caribbean's new ships will be as big or bigger than FREEDOM OF THE SEAS. In addition to two Freedom-class ships, Royal Caribbean has placed an order for a 6,900 passenger ship, which will be the lead ship in its Genesis class. Even larger ships may well follow. Captain Pedericini recalled that when he was an officer on NORDIC EMPRESS, a not inconsiderable size ship of 48,533 tons, and he heard that his company was building the VOYAGER OF THE SEAS, 138,000 tons, "we had a lot of questions back then. Are we going to

manage to do that and maintain the same standards, the safety standards and all

our procedures? And the answer was 'Yes' because of the technology we have. But, I don't really know when

and where we are

going to end. But, it seems we are not going smaller. We are going bigger. That is the way the market goes, I think. [Other] major corporations [i.e. Carnival Corp] also are building big ships. Not as big as this is but still, 110,000 gross tons [i.e. CROWN PRINCESS] is a big ship. So, I don't think we are going to go smaller. But, when we are going to stop or where, I don't know."

The rationale for building large cruise ships is straight forward. Just as the airlines achieved economies of scale when they introduced the jumbo jets, the cruise lines can reduce overhead by having more passengers per ship. It is less costly to operate a 4,000 passenger ship, for example, than two 2,000 passenger ships. Thus, as long as the technology exists to build bigger ships and local authorities are willing to build port facilities to accommodate them, it makes economic sense to build bigger. Also, the large ships have the space to allow the line to install features such as

the full size boxing ring and onboard surfing facility on FREEDOM. Such

features can only be used by a small percentage of the passengers but they make the ship

more interesting



*FREEDOM OF THE SEAS* shortly before entering service in 2006. (Photo: Royal Caribbean International).

and thus generate publicity.

Having so many passengers on a single ship does pose problems, however. For example, how do you embark and disembark thousands of passengers in comfort and within a reasonable time? Royal Caribbean is taking an incremental approach to such questions, building upon past experience. "[FREEDOM OF THE SEAS is] going to be based in Miami. We have had four Voyager-class ships based in Miami for the last five years. We have learned from that experience and we know we can handle 3,600 guests off and on every time we are in Miami. Within three and a half hours, 3,600 people are off the ship [along with] 12,000 pieces of luggage. Then, we have a couple of hours to get ready for the next group. We then start embarkation which takes four hours. We are going to begin with the FREEDOM having, for a certain period of time, 3,600 guests only because we

know we can manage that. Every week, we will add approximately 100 people. Because the difference between the Voyager-class and the Freedom-class would be about 600 to 800 people, within one month to two months time we will be up there to [FREEDOM's maximum capacity of] 4,300 to 4,400 guests."



*Captain Carlos Perdicini of FREEDOM OF THE SEAS. (Photo: Richard H. Wagner).*

Captain Perdicini pointed out that there will be more people on FREEDOM OF THE SEAS than live in some of the ports that she will be visiting. Consequently, a large number of people "are required to make things happen." At the head of the 1,500-member crew is the captain who acts like the head of a good size corporation. Reporting directly to him are: the staff captain, who heads the deck department, the hotel manager who is responsible for the passenger services, and the chief engineer, who is in charge of the ship's engines and operating systems. Below the department heads are managers and officers who are in charge of such things

as security, environmental compliance, the ship's computer systems, the ship's onboard finances, safety, marketing, and maintenance, as well as the other duties normally performed by a ship's officers or by the managers of a large hotel. Accordingly, if he or she aspires to advancement, a deck officer must know "not only how to drive a ship but also how to manage a team. . . , We do a lot of training and coaching because you become the leader of a large team. You have to handle people [so] management skills are a large part of our training process."

With modern communications, a ship is no longer isolated at sea. "We have quite a few of what we call 'shore side employees' - - former captains, chief engineers, hotel people. They support the ships from the shore side. Those people have experience and a good understanding of what we need, of what we do every day onboard."

### **Driving the Hotel**

**T**he bridge on FREEDOM OF THE SEAS is a spacious area 187 feet across with floor to ceiling windows on three sides. What is immediately striking about it is how little there is in it. Situated in the middle of a vast expanse of blue carpeting are two leather chairs separated by a console. In front of the chairs is another console with a series of computer screens. Immediately in front of this console and directly in front of the windows is a small helmsman's position with a child-sized wheel. Except for the docking controls situated on each of the enclosed bridge wings, that is all the operating equipment on the bridge. Captain Perdicini joked that one could

play soccer in all of the open space on the bridge.

During a normal day at sea, the two leather chairs are occupied by two watch officers, the first officer and a second officer. Coming in and out of port, these positions are occupied by the captain and the pilot. Similarly, during times of more severe weather or of greater traffic, the watch officers must yield their chairs to the captain and the staff captain.

These chairs are not simply recliners designed to prevent the ship's officers from getting sore feet. Rather, in the armrests of each chair is a joystick and a series of controls that allow the officers to maneuver the ship. On the console in front of the chairs and within arms reach are electronic charts, a GPS positioning system display, communications equipment, autopilot, and controls for the engines. The ship's computers allow the officers to shift seamlessly from autopilot to manual to satellite-guided operation. "There is a lot of sophistication. But, the human beings need to be here. We train our officers to be prepared because things may happen. What we do is we train everybody to know what to do in the event of an emergency, such as a loss of power. Then, we go back to basics. The computers provide information but the final decisions are by human beings. Also, computers make mistakes. So, what we end up doing is monitoring the systems. The fact that we have two officers, allows us, for example, in something so basic but so important, to know where we are at a certain period of time. One officer can take a position by using one particular way to do it, by one means. The other can double check it by a completely different means."

FREEDOM OF THE SEAS is propelled by six diesel engines feeding power to a fixed pod (i.e., a conventional propeller shaft arrangement) and two Azipods. As on QUEEN MARY 2, the pods pull the ship through the water just as an airplane propeller pulls a plane through the sky. This is more efficient than pushing the ship through the water because the blades are turning in undisturbed water, which allows the full force of the blade to go to propulsion. During her sea trials, FREEDOM achieved 23 knots. "We don't need that much. We don't make our itineraries to require 23 knots."

The Azipods, which can rotate 360 degrees, along with four bow thrusters, also give the ship great maneuverability. As a result, FREEDOM does not need tugs even when docking in places where there is a substantial current such as at Cozemel, Mexico or at the Passenger Ship Terminal.

### **Life Onboard**

Royal Caribbean International targets the "contemporary" cruise markets. What this means is that its ships are more informal than lines such as Holland America, Cunard, or even its sister brand, Celebrity Cruises. However, because the line also seeks to serve the "premium" market, it does not dispense with luxury altogether.

This dual approach can be seen in the décor of FREEDOM OF THE SEAS. Some of the rooms such as the 445-foot long, multi-story Royal Promenade - - a shopping mall which runs down the center of the ship - - were designed to be as spectacular as a Las Vegas casino. In sharp contrast, the three story main dining room is elegant

and sedate. The alternative dining establishments range from a Ben and Jerry's ice cream shop to a wood paneled grill room taken from an English gentlemen's club.



*The excitement of FREEDOM's spectacular central atrium (above) stands in marked contrast to the serenity of the hot tubs that are cantilevered high over the sides of the ship (below). (Photos: R. H. Wagner).*



The same dichotomy is found outside the public rooms. The cabins are sleekly contemporary with luxurious touches such as flat panel televisions and deluxe beds. In the stairways, there is

art work but it is large photographs rather than the oil paintings found on NOORDAM or QUEEN MARY 2. According to Royal Caribbean, the art collection on FREEDOM is valued at over \$7 million but it is a whimsical modern art as typified by the sculptures of F-18 and F-16 fighters soaring toward the skies at the top of the central stairway leading to the Royal Promenade.

FREEDOM OF THE SEAS was designed with Caribbean cruising in mind. As a result, the upper deck is devoted to warm weather activities. Indeed, the top deck appeared to have enough deck chairs to accommodate the entire passenger list at maximum capacity. In amongst the deck chairs are three large pool areas. One area, designed with children in mind, has a number of brightly colored sculptures and water spraying in different directions. The next is a more traditional pool area. The final area is part of an adult's only "oasis".

While most other lines tolerate families with children, Royal Caribbean International has made an effort to reach out to such families. In addition to the aforementioned pool area, there is a large area for children and teens with arcade games and loud music. There are also suites designed for multi-generational family get-aways. The rock climbing wall, the surfing simulator, the boxing ring, the sports pool, and the ice skating rink, all underscore the effort to reach out to a younger, more active market than has been traditionally associated with cruising. Indeed, there is even a wedding chapel onboard.

Dining on FREEDOM is done in the traditional manner with each passenger being assigned to a table and a seating. However, there are several

alternative venues, some of which charge an additional fee. The food in the main dining room was tasty and inventive. Similarly, there was a wide variety of pizza in Sorrento's pizzeria that was perfectly satisfactory.

Like most cruise ships these days, FREEDOM OF THE SEAS has an international crew. During *The Log's* visit, everyone was courteous and eager to please. To Captain Perdicini, this is the key to success: "The element that actually makes people return to Royal Caribbean is the people."



*Perhaps the best known of FREEDOM's amenities is the Flowrider, which allows passengers to surf while cruising. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).*

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