

# A CONVERSATION WITH CAPTAIN ERIK

## An interview with Captain Erik Standal Master of Royal Caribbean's Explorer of the Seas

By Richard H. Wagner

**C**aptain Erik Standal is a soft-spoken native of Bergen, Norway. He is the master of Royal Caribbean International's Explorer of the Seas, the popular Voyager-class cruise ship that has been operating out of New York Harbor (Bayonne, New Jersey) since 2007. Announcements over the ship's public address system begin with a friendly and informal: "This is Captain Erik . . ." His relaxed, easy-going manner indicates comfort with command. At the same time, his youthful appearance gives no clue as to his substantial experience or to the perseverance it took to reach his position.

When he was at school, Captain Standal studied to become a skilled workman in ventilation systems and worked in that trade both before and after serving in Norwegian Army. However, "one day, I looked around me and I thought my world was very small and I really wanted to do something else."

He decided that he wanted to go to sea but changing from one profession to another was not easy. First, before enrolling in a maritime academy, he had to take a one year correspondence course in preparation. He also had to gain some experience at sea. "I spent a couple of years on the North Sea fisheries. You learn something about seamanship that you don't do out here. You learn things seamanship out here but in a different way. It is much more hands on because you are in a small ship on rough seas."

After three years at the maritime academy, Standal worked on the ferries that connect the Scandinavian countries. That gave him the experience needed to join Royal Caribbean in 1996. "I joined as a

quartermaster, making coffee, dusting on the bridge and doing the hand steering. From there, I went to Second Officer, First Officer, Chief Officer and Staff Captain."

"Explorer is the first ship I am the permanent captain on. I functioned as relief captain on the Voyager and on the Rhapsody." Standal believes that coming up through the ranks gave him the experience required to become captain. "Even if you have your captain's license, it doesn't mean you can be captain on a cruise ship. If a captain on a cargo ship came here, he wouldn't have the same understanding especially of the hotel operation. [Because it is such a vital part of the cruise business,] you have to have the interest in the hotel operation. When you are going up the ranks [on a cruise ship] you can get a pretty good understanding of that operation and if you do not have it, you will not become captain. Through these positions you have to work hand in hand with the hotel side of the operation. Everything you do has an effect on somebody else. It is like a very fine Swiss watch where everything has to fall into place. For example, going into Labadee where we transport our own ice cubes. One guy is supposed to put ice on the tender. If it is not there and you have to wait for him ten minutes, it will delay the whole operation. It will delay the guests going ashore because there is one less tender. This is part you have to understand of the hotel operation. Of course, you also have to learn the business side -- budgets and so on and how to manage people, how to drive the human force in the right direction."

Ideas about how to manage people have evolved and managing a crew on a service-oriented ship is not the same as it used to be. "You can't force people to be happy, you can't force them to smile. It has to come naturally and you can only do that by making people somehow enjoy what they are doing and being where they are. The old style with a stick is not welcome anymore in the culture we have now. The respect must be mutual regardless of whether you have no stripes on your shoulder or four and a half stripes on your shoulder. The management has the duty to correct problems and behavior issues with employees. If somebody is not doing what is expected or required in a position, you explain it in the best way and try to make them understand it. If you don't {make him or her understand}, the whole process is worthless. If you take someone in and make them sign a paper that says they have done something wrong and they don't understand it or accept it themselves, they will be back in very soon. You have to get people to agree and willing and not try to force them."

Still, even in a service oriented business, the traditional military-style hierarchy on ships remains necessary. "At sea, you need to have it in some ways. It is, of course, not as strict as the military, but the system functions in the same way. We are a small community and in a community you have some order to control certain people - - the fire department, the police station. Someone in society has to make the decisions. [On a ship]. you have the ranking system in order to make it clear who is making the decisions - - a certain degree of respect for the officers of the ship."

"If you work in a business shoreside, you are there for eight hours a day and then go home. Here, the people are together 24/7 365. If you took everyone from a [community] and put them in a city hall and said from now on you are going to live here for the next three months, I am sure that you would have to establish some extra new additional rules and so on to make it work. It is not to make life difficult for anyone. In fact, the crew appreciate having rules and regulations in general as long as they understand them. As long as they know what is expected and what is allowed and not allowed, that makes people comfortable."

The management system on a cruise ship must also recognize that crews today are composed of many nationalities and that there is considerable cultural diversity. "The books of rules and regulations can seem very big sometimes but we all come from different backgrounds and what is obvious to me is not obvious to the one working next to me. Like when I came to



Above: Captain Erik Standal.

Below: The Captain's table in Explorer's dining room.





*Captain Standal and his officers on the bridge.*

Royal Caribbean, I was handed this book in the office in Oslo when I started. [One thing it said] was that I would have to shower once a day. Do you really need to tell people that? It took me a short time to figure out that for me it is obvious but maybe not for everybody else."

Another reason for having rules, regulations and written policies "is standardization so when [a crew member] comes on one ship so we are able to operate similarly. Crew members like to know what is expected."

Standardization is also viewed as important in marketing cruises. If a person has a good time on one Royal Caribbean ship and knows that they all operate similarly, he or she is more likely to try another Royal Caribbean ship. Nonetheless, guests sometimes favor one ship over another. "For some reason, you always get comments from guests saying this ship is so much fun and this one is not so fun. There can be specific situations that can drive things. Maybe the crew is more happy on one itinerary than on another, maybe it is the management on board that has a slightly different style. Even if they follow the policies, it can be a different way of running things. [For example] we have an executive team on board Explorer that works very well together and is very open to discussing ideas. The crew can feel this and it reflects on their performance."

Along the same lines, differences can emerge out of the natural competitive streak in people. "Just as in society in general, people want to work for the best

company and the best ship."

### *Some thoughts on cruising*

"I think it would be very difficult to say that there is a typical passenger on Royal Caribbean. We see people of all ages, from all parts of society, and from different nationalities. So, I can't say that there is a typical group of people. What we offer today in cruising is so different than some years ago, there are so many things that you can do. It is no longer about sitting in a deck chair with a blanket over your knees reading a good book and watching the sunset. By all means, if you choose to do that, I salute you too because relaxing is absolutely part of cruising but there is so much more."

"I think it is a very good form of vacation. You look at the price and compare it with staying in a decent hotel [where] you have to buy in addition the food and all the other things. If you haven't been to the Caribbean and you go on a ship, you go to three, four, maybe five different places and spend a little bit of time there. You come back onboard, have a nice evening, shows, a good dinner and you wake up in a new place, a new island. If you find a favorite, a place you really like, then you can go back. If you go somewhere you have only read about in the brochures [to spend] a whole week, [you may find on] the second day it is not what you want and you want to go home."

"Some people just use us as a method of transportation. Okay, it takes more time but at least you did not have to go through the airport. Flying today is not very pleasant."

"There are many choices. Like I said, if you want to stay on board and sit in a deck chair and relax when everyone else goes ashore you can. That is exactly what you should do. You want to sit on a horse or on a beach, you can go do that. Then, you have the other ones who want to see as much as possible. They realize you can still have the evening onboard. What better form of vacation can you have?"