

# CONSISTENCY, INNOVATION AND RESPECT

A conversation with Tony Becker,  
Passenger Services Director  
of Emerald Princess

by

Richard H. Wagner

**T**ony Becker is the Passenger Services Director or hotel manager of Emerald Princess. In essence, the native of Australia has responsibility for everything on the ship outside of sailing the ship and its engineering. This includes responsibility for the dining, entertainment, and accommodations. Consequently, the Passenger Services Director is involved with most of the aspects of a cruise that directly touch upon the guests. Therefore, he is in a unique position to discuss the vacation experience that guests can expect when sailing onboard Emerald Princess.

"Our tag line is 'Escape completely' - - escaping completely from whatever you are leaving behind at home as in just relax and enjoy. We are certainly not in your face with [rigorous physical] activities and promoting 'go to the pool now for pool games or pool Olympics' or 'let's go running around the deck.' That is definitely not what we are all about. We try and say 'less is more,' rather than having too many things happening. We really are about people enjoying the quality of the exceptional service that we provide and going on quality tours. There are the options for those

that are more adventurous, if they choose to do so the tours are there. But a lot of our guests would rather just come onboard, escape completely, enjoy the services that we provide, the amenities and the subtleties that we do very well as in the Movies Under The Stars, the Piazza entertainment, the pub lunch, the Vines - - all those things that are non-intrusive type activities. They are subtle, they are relaxing and they appeal to our guests."

Emerald Princess' restrained yet informal style of cruising attracts an upper middle class clientele, many of whom are experienced travelers. "We have a lot of repeat guests. A lot of people come and they are just quite happy to enjoy the ship and the facilities that we have. [On a port day]. 33 percent of our guests choose to take tours [arranged by Princess], some will go [ashore on their own] and another large percentage will just choose to stay onboard."

Reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of Emerald Princess' style is the fact that her passenger list is international even when she is cruising the Caribbean out of Florida, which she does in the winter months. "For the season, we are looking at

about 3,100 passengers every cruise, which is basically our occupancy for our lower berths so we are running a full ship. We are generally looking at anywhere between 1,700 and 1,800 US passengers every cruise. The Canadians are fairly consistent for the Caribbean segment being anywhere from 500 to 800 but generally around 750 to 800. The British fluctuate between 200 and 450, one cruise it is around 400, then 200 and 200. And there are a smidgen of various other nationalities - - a few Australians, a few Germans."

Becker sees consistency as being a key element in why the ship is able to sail full even in difficult economic times. "We are stepping up to the plate and making sure that we continue to maintain the quality of the product. The lobster night - - a lot of the cruise lines have dropped that - - we are continuing on with that. We look at it as we are what we are, we are who we are, even though these are tough times economically, [such things] are signature items. We don't feel it will benefit us long term by removing them now short term. We are going to survive through the tougher times but we are not going to diminish on the product that we are giving to our guests. I think by doing that we will keep our guests and hopefully we will get our first timers to realize that this is what we offer and that we have a superior product."

At the same time, innovation plays an important role in ensuring that the product does not stagnate and remains competitive. "We are always looking at doing different things. I think the Movies Under the Stars is something we came up with and everybody has jumped on that bandwagon. The Chef's Table has just won an award. Our Vice President of Food and Beverage came up with that idea. It is not in your face such as having a roller coaster on Deck 16 going around the ship. It is a soft type thing. I think for sure, innovative ideas are things you constantly come up with as opposed to gimmicky ideas. We have a new promotion in The Vines, a traditional German or Austrian thing, where the locals in the restaurant or the bar have a table set aside and they all meet there every night or every afternoon and just talk. So, it is like a get together. Another thing that Princess is doing - - the silent disembarkation - - is a great idea. We are consistently looking for things to do."

Perhaps the most important element in the ship's success, however, is the crew of Emerald Princess. On the comment cards that the guests fill out after each cruise, "crew attitude is always marked very, very high. It remains consistent even with inclement weather and missed ports. Happy



*Passenger Services Director Tony Becker.*

crew, happy guests. I know it has probably been said a hundred times but it just as simple as that. At the end of the day, this is a large piece of machinery, a floating hotel but the software is so critical. The hardware the company has given us and this is a beautiful piece of hardware but my job, the captain's job, the chief engineer's job is to make sure that the software works with no little glitches or firewalls blocking things. It is all about making sure the crew is happy because behavior breeds behavior. If they are happy, it is just going to disseminate itself through the guests."

"We need to make sure that we are looking after the crew. We treat them with respect. We treat them with courtesy. We accept and acknowledge the various nationalities and the various different beliefs and cultural things and at all times, we make sure that that all of the crew treat each other the same way."

To achieve this end, Princess has gone beyond human resources slogans and manifests its interest in the crew in tangible ways. "We have a crew galley. We have a crew gym. We have an internet café for the crew. We have a library for the crew. DVD rentals. We have the crew shop. We

have a crew club that organizes events. We have bicycles for the crew, which they can rent out and use them if they so wish. Organized functions, - - we have disco nights, we have theme nights, we had a balloon night the other night. We have Wifi in the crew areas so the crew can use their laptops. Shore excursions and tours - - if there are spots available, we will give them out for the crew. Soccer matches with other cruise ships, with other cruise lines, in-house three-on-three basketball competitions. Foosball machines in the crew bar. Table tennis. There are crew channels, separate channels on the television system that the passengers cannot see, with crew movies, Filipino movies, Indian movies, Italian movies. If any crew have something from their home country that they want to put on, we are all for it. So, there are a lot of things for them to do. There really is a lot. It is good like that.

"Whatever we can do - - food in the crew mess. Having Indian vegetarian dishes, having Filipino dishes. The other day we did a Thai curry for the crew, [not only] for the Thais but also for the other crew to realize: 'Wow that is something I never tried before I am going to try that.' We had a Brazilian dish and a Bulgarian dish the other night. All those little things may seem minimal but it makes the crew realize that we do care, we are reaching out and trying to do what we can to make them feel as comfortable as they can be in a very demanding operation and a demanding environment."

This includes better accommodations. It was not so long ago that cruise ships had communal showers and toilets and multiple crew members in each cabin. On Emerald Princess, however, "the majority are twin berth rooms, sharing a toilet between the two rooms. The cabins have television and a lot of the crew have DVD or video players. They can use the phones. They can purchase phone cards and they can call home at extremely cheap rates. The crew internet cards are extremely cheap as well. So, they can call home from their rooms."

"What we try to instill in the crew is the acknowledgement of the guests, the recognition of the guests, to make them feel that for 10 days they



are someone special and they are someone special to us - - they are our guests. It is really important. There are little things - - if the room stewards can remember names, it makes a huge difference. The bar staff, when they ring up the bill, they can see your name on the microscreen [and so they can say when addressing the guest]: 'Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, I hope you enjoy your Scotch and Coke or your Bloody Mary or whatever' - - little things like that. You get that at a good hotel."

"I think for us it is all about our service and our crew. That is where our strength is. We don't have all the gimmicks. I'm not saying they are bad. They definitely appeal to a certain market but the end of the day, our core values and who we are and what we are is providing the ultimate vacation experience for our guests. In doing that we look at our software which is our people and make sure that they supply the product, which is a good quality product, consistently. If the crew do that we are 8/10 of the way there."

"And it is all about, particularly in this economic environment, ensuring that our guests have a great vacation. [We want them] if they are planning another vacation, [not to] even think about should we check out this or should we go there, it is just we are back with Princess again. That is really our primary objective and it is important that we do that particularly in this economic climate. We all know how tough things are out there and we need our Captain's Circle guests back and we would love to have our first timers back. And the only way is by giving them an exceptional vacation experience by providing exceptional service and fantastic food and the rest of it."

## Secrets of the Emerald Princess

When they think of dining, most passengers focus on the ship's main dining rooms, the buffet and the specialty restaurants. However, Mr. Becker pointed out that there are dining options elsewhere in the ship that all too often go under the radar.

**The Adagio Bar** - - Located high on Deck 16 at the stern of the ship, the Adagio Bar is removed from the main public areas of the ship. Next door to the Sabatini's specialty restaurant, the room carries over the sophistication of its neighbor with luxurious furnishings done in muted earth tones. "It is another nice little touch and a lot of people choose to go there: 1) before they go for dinner at Sabatini's; 2) after they go for dinner at Sabatini's and 3) a lot of them just go there because there is a nice piano player. It is a nice, little, quiet, slightly hidden away type bar. It has a really nice feel to it. Great for couples or for someone who just wants to sit down and relax. For \$3.00, you can have any and as many of the desserts from Sabatini's, which is an absolute bargain as well. And they have the different flavored olives. The olives are great. They make some really great martinis and things up there."

**Vines** - - On the starboard side of the Piazza is Vines. It is done to look like a wine cellar with large barrels and stone walls. However, Vines is not just a wine bar. "It is basically a fusion of wine and food with fairly light fare where people can just meet together in. You can stay with the food or go for wine and the food - - a joint venture between the two. Octopus, salmon caviar, Scottish salmon filets, cheese, whatever. It is a fusion between East meets West foods plus different flights of wine."

**The International Café** - - Opposite Vines on the Piazza is the International Café, which is part specialty coffee house, part bar, and part European sidewalk café. "I'm very happy to say that the lunch time offerings from the Café are so popular. So many guests on tour are saying that it is a nice healthy option there - - 'we don't really want to go

up to the buffet but we don't want to sit down either.' We must be doing 150 to 200 people there quite regularly at lunch time. The milk and cookies from 3:30 to 4:30 are very popular as well."

**The Wheelhouse Bar** - - A traditional venue on Princess ships, the Wheelhouse Bar is decorated with nautical paintings depicting the ships of Princess' predecessor companies. It has large overstuffed chairs and a rather British feel. "We average between 250 to 350 people in there every sea day to do the pub lunch. That is a nice novelty and the British thoroughly enjoy it as well." In the evenings, the Wheelhouse features a jazz combo. "It has a really nice old school traditional lounge feel to it, so I enjoy it. It has a good feel to it."

**Sabatini's Breakfast** - - Sabatini's is Emerald Princess' Italian specialty restaurant. However, for passengers traveling in the ship's suites, this elegant venue is also a breakfast option. "There are 30 suites, so theoretically you could have as many as 60 guests. Particularly coming in at 7 or 8 in the morning, the buffet gets pretty busy. So, [these passengers] can just come up here for just a few Danishes and croissants or have some eggs with a full breakfast. We have the Sabatini galley open and we have one of their chefs, a first cook or two and a third cook and they are doing the breakfast. It is just nice quiet and tranquil."

*Below: Vines.*

