

THE CRUISING LIFE:

DINING WITH THE OFFICERS ON NORWEGIAN JEWEL

by

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At one time, it was standard practice for the senior officers on passenger ships to host a table at dinner. The best known example of this is the captain's table where a number of distinguished guests would be asked to dine with the master of the vessel. Less well-known is the fact that some of the subordinate officers would also act as hosts. For example, on the Queen Elizabeth 2 as late as the 1990s, the hotel manager, the chief engineer, and the ship's doctor all had their own tables in the ship's main dining room.

This tradition of the sea received a major blow with the introduction of flexible dining on cruise ships. In the past, guests would dine in the ship's main dining room at a specified time -- either the early seating or the late seating. Thus, all of the guests dining at one of the officer tables would arrive and have dinner at the same time. With the advent of flexible dining, all of the guests no longer dined at the same time -- they come to dinner whenever they so desire. Furthermore, with the proliferation of alternative dining venues, all of the guests no longer dine in the main dining room. As a result, an officer might end up sitting at an empty table, dining by himself. In addition, restaurant managers anxious to have more seats for passengers during peak hours looked longingly at the seats occupied by the ship's officers.

The result is that very few of the lines still have officer tables. Captains on Carnival, Celebrity, Royal Caribbean, Holland America and some other lines still do host tables on formal nights for VIPs and passengers high in the lines' loyalty programs. But it is often up to the individual captain whether to host a table on a particular cruise. A notable exception is Cunard, where there are still subordinate officer tables on formal nights.

Once again demonstrating its willingness to go against the trend, Norwegian Cruise Line, the line that popularized flexible dining, is experimenting with officer tables on the Norwegian Jewel. "There were a lot of things in traditional cruising that were nice and we do not have to throw them away. We have to keep the good things and improve the other ones" explains Hugo Vanosmael, Hotel Director on the Jewel.

In today's environment, "the problem is how you are going to do it."

Under NCL's approach, an item is included in the ship's daily program, the Freestyle Daily, saying that guests who are interested in dining with the ship's officers can sign up at the ship's reception desk. Thus, the program is completely voluntary and no one feels obligated to go. On some cruises, as many as 400 guests will sign up.

The item in the daily program goes on to inform readers that the guests who will be invited to dine with the officers will be selected at random. "It's a draw. People sign up and if they are not picked, I never have had any complaint. If you end up with the captain, it is sheer luck of the draw. There is no jealousy. It is a fun thing."

Guests who win the lottery are informed by a letter delivered to their cabins. It tells them when the dinner will take place, where to meet and who the officer will be that will be hosting the table.

The letter I received said to meet in the ship's art gallery at 7:15 p.m. the next day. When I arrived, the gallery was a beehive of activity with members of the ship's staff checking off names and introducing the participants to the officers who would be hosting their tables. The officer then introduced the guests to each other.

Once the groups had assembled, we were led to the nearby Tsar's Palace, one of Jewel's two main dining rooms. A huge room at the stern of the ship, the Tsar's Palace is decorated in the style of Imperial Russia, with white walls embellished with gold trim and reproductions of portraits of the tsars. One enters in the grand style, down a curving staircase.

A series of large tables in the center of the room had been reserved for the officers. "Normally, we can do ten tables." Between 80 and 100 people participate. Each table is hosted by an officer. "The seniors are always there - - the captain, the staff captain, the chief engineer and me, we always go." Other officers participate on a voluntary basis provided their duties allow.

My table was hosted by Brian Walters, the Assistant Hotel Director, who has been with NCL for 37 years. As such, he was not only able to talk about cruising today but also entertain the passengers with memories of the early days of NCL and of his time on the legendary SS Norway. One of the virtues of officer tables is that it develops a rapport that personalizes the relationship between the passengers and the cruise line.

The guests at the table were a mixture of couples and passengers traveling solo. Several were first time cruisers. Most were from the New York City area (Jewel is homeported in New York) but there was also a guest from the UK. Although they were strangers prior to sitting down, the conversation flowed fluently. "People are still interested in meeting other people and



The dinners are held in Jewel's impressive Tsars Palace dining room.

never will that change," notes Mr. Vanosmael.

Resort casual was the dress code. A few of the guests wore jackets but no ties. Most were dressed in slacks and a top.

The menu was the same menu as the menu for the rest of the restaurant. I had the salmon filet - - an item available each night - - and it was cooked perfectly. This was followed by a rather good strawberry soufflé.

A tradition at officer tables is that the wine is on the house. On this occasion, the Jewel poured a chardonnay and a cabernet sauvignon.

Throughout the meal, the restaurant staff was very attentive. One might be tempted to think that this was because a senior officer was at the table. However, on other nights in the Tsars, I found the service to be prompt and professional.

The evening was a very enjoyable experience and the friendship began there lasted throughout the cruise. In addition to creating a bond between the passengers who participated and NCL, the event also benefited NCL's relationship with the other passengers. "People see that we are going out with people, sitting at the tables and having a dinner. That is good PR."

The dining with the officers program on Norwegian Jewel is complimentary. It is offered on most cruises but not on all cruises. For example, on cruises where there are a large number of families traveling, there is a greater need for large tables and so the tables used for the officer program are not available,