

**INSIDE VIEW:**

# THE CHOICE FACTOR

**A discussion with Captain Alistair Clark, Executive Purser David Sheperd and Cruise Director Leon De Ste. Croix about the role of the Ventura in the P&O Cruises fleet and the British cruise market.**

by

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**T**he British cruise market is in the early stages of a transformation. "It's a growing market. I think cruising was [thought of] in Britain as something only the rich could do. More and more people now are viewing cruising as the perfect holiday rather than what was the case for many, many years in the UK - - fly over to Europe," noted Leon De Ste. Croix, Cruise Director on P&O Cruises' Ventura.

Cruising is now seen as an economical and convenient way to holiday as the ships take people to a variety of places, without the annoyances of packing and unpacking, at a reasonable price that includes accommodations, meals and entertainment. "The mindset about cruising has changed; the people's perception of cruising has changed. The perception in the States has always been that cruising is something that almost everyone can do but that has not always been the case in the UK but that has changed over the last six or seven years."

This transformation has drawn the attention of all the major cruise lines and they are deploying ships to Britain. However, P&O Cruises has been serving British passengers for 170 years and as a result has an advantage over the other lines in its understanding of the British market. "We are very experienced with dealing with the British. British identity, British values and expectations - - although expectations are always shifting. Also, with a lot of other cruise lines, it is hit hard everyday, bang, bang, bang, very, very pushy. The British as passengers, as people really, don't want that all the time. They like to dip in and out of it - - enjoy it and step away from it; have time to read a book or have a quiet meal. From my experience of working with other cruise lines and I have, it can be a bit of what Brits would see as OTT - - Over The Top. So, you have to get that balance right and I think we fit that niche nicely."

At the same time, the public is demanding more from cruising than it did in the past. Thus, while P&O



*Left to right: Captain Alistair Clark, Cruise Director Leon De Ste. Croix and Executive Purser David Sheperd.*

has the advantage of tradition, it must also adapt and innovate. It cannot "become blinkered to other ideas because you can't afford to - - you have to keep an eye on everything else. We are always endeavoring to give more than people expect."

One of the ways that P&O has adapted to the changing market has been to introduce two large 116,000 gross ton ships into its fleet. Ventura was the first of these, entering service in 2008.

Ventura, and her sister Azura, are based upon a design that first debuted with the Grand Princess and which had been developed by Princess Cruises for a decade prior to Ventura's entry into service. During much of that time, Princess was a subsidiary of P&O and thus P&O was familiar with the design. More importantly, P&O was aware that the design was popular with British cruisers. "Certainly, when I was on Crown Princess, there were a lot of British people - - 300 or 400 a cruise - - and they enjoyed it," commented Captain Alistair Clark.

The primary attraction of these large ships is that they enable P&O to offer guests a variety of choices within one ship. "These ships have gone down excep-

tionally well because they are dynamic, they are innovative, [the passengers] have the freedom of choosing where they want to eat, they have a variety of entertainment, and the big ship feel. A lot of passengers do like that," explained Mr. David Sheperd, Executive Purser.

"The choice factor comes in here. [We have] our Club Dining but we also offer our Freedom Dining and we have our specialty restaurants as well. There are three shows whereas the traditional ships in the fleet have a 6:30 dinner and an 8:30 show and an 8:30 dinner and a 10:30 show. Those who go to dinner at 6:30 go to the 8:30 show, then dancing and then retiring. On here, they have that option if they wish or they have an option to choose where to dine every evening."

Mr. De Ste. Croix added: "A young family might want to spend time with their youngsters so they could come to an early show in the theater, 7 or 7:30 because we do the three show format on here. Then they could go and drop off the kids at the night nursery where they would be looked after by the youth team while they go and enjoy an adult evening and pick up the kids later on. So they get a bit of quality time themselves. Some of the older generation might want to come in for a 7:30





*Ventura*

show and then go to a classical concert and then go dancing. So things are structured a little bit differently on this ship. Because it is a large ship we are able to offer a very broad range of events, entertainments and tastes. It's about choice."

Thus, there is no single Ventura cruise experience but rather a variety of experiences that passengers can select from to design a holiday that meets their own needs and tastes. In short, Ventura is an embodiment of P&O's aversion to the notion that in cruising "one size fits all".

This same aversion is reflected across the P&O fleet with the different ships offering a variety of styles and options for passengers to choose from while at the same time maintaining an overall P&O flavor.

"We have our passengers who prefer the more traditional, two dinners and two shows and smaller ship feel -- the more intimate feel which Artemis is delivering and which Adonia will deliver next year. Again, it comes back to choice -- small ships and large ships." Mr. Sheperd explained. (P&O also has four mid-sized ships -- Arcadia, Oriana, Oceana, and Aurora).

The fleet is also divided so as to give people the choice of a family holiday or of an adults-only experience. "We recognize that some of our passenger profile will be teachers for example. They want to get away and they want to get away from the children, which is understandable. And there are people who don't like to have children around them. So we can offer that choice to that particular profile. We have Arcadia and we have

Artemis, which are adults-only ships. We are very much a family ship on Ventura."

Mr. De Ste. Croix added that with regard to the entertainment, "the style is a little bit different. Certainly, our main evening shows on here appeal to all age groups and there are lots of very different styles of shows. On a regular two week cruise or 21-night cruise, all the shows are very different in style. When you go to the Artemis and the Arcadia, they hold it more toward the tastes of those who want adult-only cruising."

Another overlay is the level of formality onboard. Two of the ships have a two-tier dress code with formal nights and smart casual nights while the others have a three-tiered structure that also includes semi-formal nights. Again, it is matter of giving people choices.

While the British public is becoming more and more receptive to the idea of cruising, the fact remains that Britain is not located in the Caribbean and some people who are new to cruising are apprehensive about the weather. In particular, they worry about the notorious Bay of Biscay, which ships must cross to get to the Mediterranean or the Canaries. However, Captain Clark pointed out that Ventura "handles it very well -- like any big ship; we are all exactly the same. The number of times in a season that is rough in Biscay are so few, it is not a big factor."