

INSIDE VIEW:

DINING CHOICES ON VENTURA

An overview of the various dining options on P&O Cruises' Ventura with Food and Beverage Manager Alasdair Ross.

by

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Once upon a time, dining on cruise ships did not require much thinking. There only was one place where a passenger could eat and the cruise line said when you had to be there if you wanted to get fed. Nowadays, however, on modern ships such as P&O Cruises' Ventura, there is an array of dining venues with a number of options that allow the passenger to have a variety of dining experiences during the course of a voyage. In the interest of informed decision-making, I talked with Alasdair Ross, Food and Beverage Manager, about the dining options on Ventura.

The main dining rooms

Ventura has three main dining rooms, the Saffron Restaurant, the Cinnamon Restaurant and the Bay Tree Restaurant. All three are similar in size and décor with wood-paneled walls and large colourful still-life paintings of by artist Paul Wright.

The Saffron and the Cinnamon are located one above the other bordering the ship's main atrium. The Bay Tree Restaurant, which is somewhat larger, is located at the stern of the ship on Deck 6.

Only the Saffron Restaurant is open for breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea. This is done on an open seating basis. Upon entering the restaurant the maitre d' asks how many people are in your party and whether you would like to share a table. A waiter then guides you to your seat.

The breakfast menu contains a number of standard items that are available each morning. "Each day we [also] have a different special to give [the passengers] something else if they don't want sausage, bacon and eggs etc."

While the lunch menu changes daily, the afternoon tea maintains tradition with the familiar cakes, pastries, scones, and sandwiches.

In the evening, all three main restaurants have the same dinner menu. The cuisine and the style of dining reflect British tastes. "Over 95 percent of our passengers are British so we cater for our British passengers. We try to do different things with different styles but a lot of people want the British style food; that is where they are comfortable. Traditionally, we like hot food. Also, our passengers like silver service whereas for American passengers that isn't important. So we have the silver service. They like the theater of the silver service "

For dinner each passenger is assigned to one of the three restaurants. The Bay Tree and the Saffron follow the traditional passenger ship dining system, which P&O calls "Club Dining." The Cinnamon follows a flexible dining system called "Freedom Dining."

"Club Dining is where you sit at the same table every night. You either do the 6:30, which is first seating, or 8:30, which is second seating. [Those passengers] go to the same table every night, with the same people, and with the same waiters. Everything remains the same and that is what P&O traditionally did. Then you have the Freedom Dining concept, which allows people to come in any time between 6:00 and 9:30 and request the table size that they wish. They can sit wherever they wish. If there are no tables available, they are given a pager and are beeped when there is a table available for them. It seems to work very well and we are getting more and more people requesting it."

Casual Dining

Located high on the ship near the swimming pools and outdoor facilities is Ventura's buffet restaurant. The food serving lines are along the center line of the ship with the tables radiating out to the sides of the ship. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer an often spectacular view over the surroundings as the restaurant is quite a way above the sea.



Alasdair Ross

The buffet is divided into two areas called "The Waterside" and "The Beach House." A passenger can use either section. "The same menus in both; the menus are changed daily."

"Breakfast and lunch are very busy." The Beach House offers a continental breakfast from 6:30 to 7:00 and then a full English breakfast from 7:00 until 10:00. The Waterside opens at 8 a.m. and has a full continental breakfast until noon. It then changes over to lunch, which it offers until three. "On the sea days, the Beach House will be open for lunch as well."

"In the evening, we do a special buffet dinner in The Waterside with a different [style of] food each night - - Italian, Indian, Asian/Oriental, Mexican. That is an alternative for passengers who do not wish to eat in the



The East Restaurant on Ventura

main restaurants. It is very popular. Certainly, the Indian dinner night is a very popular night. Traditionally, the British passengers do like their curries. So, they like to go to the Indian dinner. Depending on what the buffet is, you can have 200 [passengers dining there]. On the formal nights, most of the passengers are dressed up so they go to the main restaurants."

"The Beach House in the evening is the Beach House Grill. It offers a menu that has a selection of starters, main courses and desserts. The main courses are based around grills and sizzlers. We have three items on there that are main courses that are charged. So there is a supplement for the filet steak, the surf and turf and the fruit de mer. It is for people who do not want to use Freedom or Club Dining but who still want to sit and have a served meal. When we sail out of [scenic] places [The Beach House Grill] is a very popular venue because the guests get to see the views."

The ship's dress code does not apply in the buffet restaurant. "The dress code is formal and smart casual on this ship. On some P&O ships it is smart casual, informal and formal. They stipulate the dress code in the main restaurants and also in the Red Bar and the Metropolis. The rest of the venues, people can wear what they wish to wear. We do suggest smart casual and not t-shirts and shorts"

Aside from the buffet restaurant, there are two casual dining venues in the Laguna Pool area. This is an open-air area but both venues are sheltered from the elements by the next deck. One venue is a combination

pizzeria and ice cream parlor while the other is a light grill. Both venues carry the prefix "Frankie's".

"Frankie Dettori, the jockey and Marco Pierre White got together and created this brand which is 'Frankie's.' We have our pizzeria, which is open through the day from 11 o'clock in the morning until six at night. The grill, which is the burger bar with chicken, burgers, hot dogs and those sorts of things, is also available from 11 until 6 in the evening. There is a limited menu there which changes as the days progress."

Another style of casual venue is Tazzine, located in the lobby at the base of the ship's central atrium. This is a specialty coffee shop. "The principle in here is if you buy a coffee, you get the food free. We do that with sandwiches at lunch time and in the morning we do different fruits, muffins etc. for breakfast. And then for the rest of the day, [we have] cakes, chocolates, those sort of things."

This is a popular venue, especially on port days. "People who want a light lunch come here when they have just come on board after being ashore."

Specialty Dining

Guests on Ventura also have the choice of three specialty restaurants. Each of the three venues offers very different dining experiences in the type of food served, the style of presentation and the environment.

The White Room is a fine dining establish-

ment. The atmosphere is refined with dim lighting allowing just a glimpse of the elegant but contemporary décor. Located on Deck 17, its floor-to-ceiling windows look out onto a terrace and beyond that over the wake of the ship.

"In the summer or in the Caribbean [the terrace] comes into its own. Sitting outside there in the evening is beautiful if the weather is conducive. When the weather gets hot, a lot more people will sit outside there to have their dinner."

This venue is called the White Room, not in reference to its décor but rather because it was developed for P&O by British celebrity chef Marco Pierre White. "He set up restaurants here, on Oceana and on Aurora."

This did not involve merely lending his name to these venues. Rather, Chef White helped to train the staff. In addition, the staff "work[ed] with him before he took over the restaurant and when he comes on. They know the standards he wants to achieve and where he wants to go."

"He comes on here regularly. He spends three or four days with the chefs going through and updating menus, any changes in styles. He also does cooking classes for passengers when he comes onboard."

"On here, we have a bistro-style menu. It is really very good. [His cooking] is not very fussy, he is sort of free and the food sells itself."

The White Room is only open for dinner and there is a cover charge of 25 pounds. Sometimes, guests ask why pay extra for a meal when there is a nice meal included in the fare? Of course, no one is obligated to dine in the specialty restaurants. However, venues like the White Room provide a unique experience. The meals are prepared ala minute using top quality cuts of meat and prepared according to a master chef's recipes. "If you went to London and out to an [equivalent] restaurant, you wouldn't get much change from 110 pounds. Here, you can do it for 25 plus a bottle of wine."

A much different experience is The East, located along the indoor promenade in the heart of the public room area on Deck 7. The room is done in reds and blacks with hanging globe lanterns. It is distinctly Asian but one would be hard put to identify the décor with any one country. Rather, it is a flight of the imagination to an idealized Asian venue.

This theme is carried through to the menu. "It is a pan-Pacific/Asian-type menu. It is not specifically oriental but a mixture of those flavors."

One specialty of the house is the tandoori dish "They do a lamp cutlet, a piece of chicken and a piece of fish and they do it with six different sauces. I would recommend if you are going to East to try that."

The room has a variety of seating. There are open tables and secluded banquettes. In addition, there is a counter where guests can watch the meals being prepared. "There is a front galley and they do some preparation in there so people can see some of the starters being produced. They do the tandoori dish in there as well so there is a big tandoori oven and people can see that being produced as well. There is a bit more theater in the East."

The third specialty restaurant is a Spanish-influenced experience. For many years, British tourists went to Spain for a warm weather holiday. As a result, Spanish cuisine is popular in the UK. The Ramblas, named after the famous boulevard in Barcelona, is Ventura's wine and tapas venue.

The Ramblas is both bar and dining venue. It has a large traditional bar, cocktail table seating and restaurant-style tables. All of this is in a room designed to give the feel of a patio in Spanish house, complete with trees. Its wine menu features Sherries and wines from the Iberian peninsula.

To accompany them, "you have a choice of tapas or meals. You can do tapas for 2.50 pounds or a meal, which is three courses with a choice for 5 pounds. So you can go in there and enjoy a classical guitarist who is in there at certain times in the evenings [along with the food and wine]. It opens at 11 and shuts at 11 so it is from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. for lunch or dinner."

In sum, Ventura not only has a sizeable number of dining venues but she offers a variety of dining experiences. The filet mignon in the White Room and the tandoori dish in the East stand out in my mind. However, I enjoyed exploring all of the options Ventura offers.