

# REDEFINING CELEBRITY

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**C**ELEBRITY SOLSTICE entered service in November 2008, the first new-build for Celebrity Cruises in six years. The ship is 122,000 gross tons and can accommodate 2,850 passengers. Bold and confident-looking, SOLSTICE is an innovative entrant into the premium cruise market. I recently had the opportunity to speak with SOLSTICE's Hotel Director Simon Weir about the thinking behind SOLSTICE and about bringing out the new ship.

## *Leading the way*

**S**OLSTICE is a quantum leap for Celebrity. For one thing, she is over 30,000 gross tons larger than Celebrity's next biggest ship and 46,000 gross tons beyond its popular Century-class ships. "I think if Celebrity [had just] brought out a big ship, it could have been criticized for leaving what it was known for behind and going into a new era, which could also be described as a different product. It hasn't [been so criticized] because this is the biggest ship with an intimate atmosphere that I have seen thus far. I think guests who fear big ships like this. We have actually broadened the market somewhat. Other ships show expanse and it is very impressive. This ship doesn't really show its size. It has grand rooms but there is nothing that is either intimidatingly big or lacking club-like and intimate surroundings."

At the same time, SOLSTICE is not merely a bigger version of what Celebrity has done in the past. "We have re-defined Celebrity in most areas - - in food and entertainment. There is some relation in everything we do to what we have done in the past but we have moved forward, refined what we are by re-defining. SOLSTICE is quite unique as a ship because what works here may not work on any other ship. On another ship it would either be diluted or [it would be] 'you are kidding me, what would you want to do that for?' I think this ship has allowed us to do other things and try and resist doing other things that we have done for so long without giving them a twist."

In the entertainment area, SOLSTICE features a half acre outdoor Lawn Club with real grass, a Hot Glass Show with live glassblowing demonstrations and production shows featuring acrobatics and aerial performances in a European-style theatrical circus. However, perhaps even more innovative is the use of small spaces for intimate club-like jazz, classical, pop and comedy perform-



*CELEBRITY SOLSTICE (Photo: R.H. Wagner).*

ances. "Celebrity is coming very close to being a major hotel at sea or a high level hotel. You don't have to leave the hotel to be entertained and it is really becoming a little world apart. I think the ship is designed to occupy the guests. There was a time [when a ship reached port that] everyone would exit the ship. The ship would almost close down. Now, we compete with the island."

There has also been innovation in dining. In response to Norwegian Cruise Line's ("NCL") Freestyle dining, most cruise lines have dedicated portions of their main dining rooms to flexible dining systems. The main dining room on SOLSTICE retains the traditional ocean liner two-seating approach to dining. However, SOLSTICE answers NCL by having an array of alternative dining venues including an Asian restaurant, an Italian steakhouse, a sophisticated venue with French/Italian cuisine, and an informal bistro as well as a buffet. "We just tripled-up our options for guests. You can pick a different experience every night and never repeat. That's freestyle but we have also got traditional and a lot more people want traditional. It is great to have the option and the big change in cruise ships is to have options."

SOLSTICE is the lead ship in a class of five ships, all of which were ordered before SOLSTICE went into service. She will be joined by EQUINOX this summer and by ECLIPSE in 2010. The other two ships are slated for 2011 and 2012. "This is a very special ship and

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it is something that will lead Celebrity into the next decade but it is a big commitment. And five - - all actually committed to before the first one came out - - is quite remarkable."

What does this move mean for the existing Celebrity fleet? "We've sold the HORIZON and the ZENITH. We are very happy with the Millennium class vessels. There was a request for the GALAXY and based upon where we are heading, that was an idea that Celebrity thought it would go with. Ships are available in every company and once a request [to buy a ship] comes in, they think long and hard about it but we have no plans other than the GALAXY at the moment."

### *Bringing out SOLSTICE*

**S**OLSTICE is the largest ship built to date by the Meyer Werft shipyards in Pappenburg, Germany. Although Meyer Werft has in recent years built large cruise ships for Royal Caribbean and for NCL, amongst others, building a ship of SOLSTICE's size posed a problem. Pappenburg is inland and is connected to the sea by the River Eems. Complete and fully loaded, SOLSTICE would not have been able to navigate the river. Therefore, the still incomplete ship was towed (backwards) down the river to Eemshaven in The Netherlands for final fitting out. "This is the biggest vessel ever to be dragged backwards. It was about an eight hour trip with two feet on either side and two feet underneath. They even had to wait for the tide to change [before] we could make it out."

This complication also required Celebrity to depart from the usual role the prospective owner occupies while the ship is under construction. Typically, when a cruise ship is being built, the cruise line is responsible for supplying and installing much of the new ship's equipment and furnishings. This work is normally done at the shipyard by the new ship's crew. However, because there were severe restrictions on how much could be loaded onto the ship, the number of crew who could come aboard in Pappenburg and the amount of work that could be done there by Celebrity was limited. "We had a skeleton crew onboard that lived here while the ship was in the shipyard. Because of the complexity of the weight, loading the ship was done later than most ships."

The majority of the crew joined in Eemshaven. "On a start-up a majority would be experienced Celebrity [crew members]. Although we don't want to take away from the rest of the fleet, it was a team of leaders rather

than a team of solo performers - - seasoned, established leaders, all ready for the challenge ahead. You are relying on their hard work."

"You all start together, you all have the passion of bringing something out, which in this case is special. I think you become actually tighter-knit. On other ships when you come throughout the year, you somewhat join a family that is in progression. When a ship starts, pretty much every crew member, the majority, come at the same time. There is basic camaraderie. It is a kinship that seems to work."

After a month at Eemshaven, Celebrity officially took delivery of SOLSTICE on October 24, 2009. The ship then embarked on a transatlantic crossing to Fort Lauderdale. Celebrity decided to forego the revenue and not take any passengers on this voyage. "It had been a long time since Celebrity had a new vessel. Everyone was very confident about what they did in a familiar surrounding. However, [the crossing] gave us a chance to familiarize ourselves and to train the 1,200 crew members to perform in areas that we have never had before on Celebrity ships. The nine days that we had going across the Atlantic was so beneficial for us - - on the first night on the day the curtain went up, we really looked like we knew what we were doing."

The first time the curtain went up was not on a cruise with paying passengers. When SOLSTICE reached Fort Lauderdale, "we did about eight pre-inaugural cruises. Some were just the day, some were the day and the evening and disembark late. We had a sales conference onboard and a three-day charter just before the first revenue cruise. We had different types and different flavors."

"Each time on those pre-inaugurals there were more people, with complimentary drinks and food. Everything was pushed to the extreme and that is the very first time you say it will have to work. [The crew] is under great pressure but that is basically their way of getting better. It was hard work for the crew. What you don't want to do is tire them too much so that by the time the inaugural cruise comes [they cannot perform]. That is when their energy has to be even doubled."

"I think we were all looking forward to the first real cruise. By that time, we felt ready. The pressure, the transatlantic and that whole camaraderie that you build up taking the ship from the yard and getting it onto the high seas, led to it being a very successful start-up on a new prototype vessel."