

# AT THE HELM OF RUBY PRINCESS

A conversation with Captain Tony Yeomans, the first master of Ruby Princess

by  
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Captain Tony Yeomans is the master of the new Ruby Princess, a ship that embodies in many ways all that Princess Cruises has developed over the last decade with its highly successful Grand-class of mega-cruise ships. The question naturally arises who is this person who was selected for this important command. I recently had the opportunity to talk with Captain Yeomans, a native of Derby, England, about his career and his new command.

## *The Captain's Career*

Captain Yeomans began his nautical career in 1967 with Trident Tankers, a subsidiary of Britain's venerable Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company ("P&O Line"), where he worked on one of the first ships to carry freight in containers. However, he soon moved over to P&O's passenger division, starting on the 28,790 gross ton Orsova,

Like modern cruise ships, Orsova would sail in circuits that began and ended in the same port. However, within those circuits were a series of point to point voyages. She would begin with a six-week voyage from Britain to Australia. A two-class ship, the first class was occupied by "Mums and Dads" who were going to visit their children who had emigrated to Australia. In tourist class, there would be young Britons who were emigrating and young Australians

who were returning from touring Europe.

When the ship reached Australia, the passengers would disembark and with a new set of passengers, Orsova would go on a six-week voyage around the Pacific calling at Hong Kong, Japan, Hawaii, Los Angeles, Acapulco, New Zealand and then back to Australia. There, she would pick up the "Mums and Dads" who had been visiting their children as well as a new set of Australian tourists and head back to Britain via South Africa.

"Junior officers used to eat in the first class dining room in the annex. There were two tables and each one sat about 14 officers in green leather armchairs. In those days, it was mess kit [formal attire] every night. The first class passengers used to supply us with the wine every night. We never had to buy wine. It was a different world, actually."

Yeoman's next ship, the Himalaya, did two week cruises from Australia. Contrary to the notion that cruising has traditionally been the province of retirees, "the average age [of the passengers] was 26. And out of the Himalaya's 1,200 passengers, I recall that 863 were single females."

Eventually, Yeomans was assigned to the legendary Canberra, P&O's flagship. "She was a great ship in many ways but the actual maneuverability left a lot to be desired. She had twin screws and a small rudder. As soon as you got near land and tried to go around

a corner - - horrendous."

This was because cruising was not what the Canberra had been designed to do. She was built in 1961 to do fast runs between Britain and Australia and could reach speeds of 28 knots. But when the emigrant trade shifted to jets, Canberra became a cruise ship, rarely doing more than 21 knots.

Yeomans recalls, however, one cruise late in her career where Canberra needed to do 26 and a half knots in order to get from the Azores to England on time. "There was a lot of talk whether she would be able to do it. The engineer said that it would take three, maybe four hours to work up to 26 and a half knots. It was less than an hour after we got away that the engineer called me up and said: 'We are up to speed. Do you want any more?' And the click-clack from the autopilot [as it adjusted the rudder to stay on course] that we had always suffered with totally disappeared. It was just silent. She did not need any rudder at 26 and a half knots. The size of the rudder was correct for what she had been designed to do in the first place. Total silence, no vibration."

Meanwhile, Stanley McDonald had begun offering cruises from Los Angeles to Mexico on a ship that he had chartered. "He was very successful at it." Since the chartered ship was called the Princess Pat, McDonald called his company Princess Cruises.

By the early 1970s, the potential of the West Coast cruise market had attracted P&O's attention and it stationed a new ship, the Spirit of London, in Los Angeles. However, P&O soon decided that rather than compete with Princess, it would be better to acquire the company and Princess Cruises became a subsidiary of P&O.

Following the acquisition, P&O purchased for Princess the two ships that Princess was then chartering - - the Pacific Princess and the Island Princess. While best remembered for their roles in the popular Love Boat television series, Yeomans recalls that they were outstanding ships in their own right. "The Pacific and Island were super luxurious ships for that era - - far more luxurious than anything else that was around." One of the public rooms stands out particularly in his memory, "all the furniture was white leather - - stunning, absolutely stunning."

At the same time, P&O transferred the Spirit of London to Princess, renaming her Sun Princess. "A beautiful ship," comments Yeomans, who sailed on her for more than six years. "I came on as second officer and left as chief officer."

"The first new ship that we really built was the Royal Princess [now P&O's Artemis] in 1984. She was a totally innovative ship for her time - - all outside cab-



*Captain Tony Yeomans on the bridge of Ruby Princess*

ins, 1,200 passengers. I did about two years there and then it was back to the Canberra."

In those days, there was still movement of personnel between P&O and Princess. However, the two lines were developing divergent characters that would make such movements increasingly rare as time went on. For example, Princess was acquiring a reputation for having Italian restaurants with Italian staff while passengers on P&O expected traditional British dining with Indian staff. Also, the P&O ships were mostly steam ships while the Princess ships were diesel electric motor ships, which made it less easy to move engineering personnel between the two fleets. "Over a period of time, it just disappeared and everybody stayed where they were."

Returning to Princess, Yeomans next assignments were with the new 77,000-ton Sun Princess class of ships. He was staff captain on the Dawn Princess and was involved in her construction. Later, he was promoted to captain of the Sea Princess. Since then, Yeomans has gone on to command nine different Princess ships including Ruby Princess.

## Bringing out Ruby Princess

After commanding the Grand-class mega-cruise ship Diamond Princess for three years, Yeomans was asked if he would like to be the first captain of Princess' new Grand-class ship, Ruby Princess. "When you are offered these things, it is nice to take them," Yeomans said with a smile.

The process of taking command of a new ship does not begin the day of the maiden voyage or even when the shipyard delivers the ship to the cruise line. Indeed, well before delivery, Yeomans traveled to Malfalcone, Italy where the ship was being built for her sea trials and then, in the final month of her construction, took up residence at the shipyard.

At the same time, Princess was putting together a crew for the new ship. The captain of a new ship has the privilege of requesting that certain people be assigned to his ship. However, confident in the quality of Princess' bridge officers, Yeomans made only one such request and deferred to Princess' head office for the rest.

It was different "on the hotel side. [The senior hotel officers made] quite a lot of choices of the waiters and busboys who they knew were good. The same with housekeeping, the executive housekeeper can pick his stateroom stewards. There are so many of them it is impossible to pick them all but at least you can get a hard core that you know will come through."

When they assembled in Malfalcone, Ruby Princess found she had a veteran crew. "Off of the Emerald Princess, a sister [to the Ruby], we had about 350 crew. From the Crown, a sister ship, there were about 70. From my last ship, the Diamond, there were 65. So, you have these large groups of hotel staff mainly that had been on similar ships with Princess. In actual fact, there was only 10 percent of the crew who hadn't sailed with Princess before and that 10 percent were all musicians and dancers. So, the whole ship's company had been with Princess before and we weren't teaching anybody new tricks because the whole product is very much the same throughout the fleet."

Still, when the ship left the shipyard and sailed across the Atlantic to Fort Lauderdale, Florida where it was to take on its first passengers, there was crew train-



ing, exercises and drills each day. This preparation yielded dividends. At Fort Lauderdale, Ruby Princess underwent her first United States Coast Guard inspection. "They were incredibly complimentary." So too were the comment cards that passengers handed in at the end of the ship's first cruise.

Much of this has to do with the attitude of the crew. "From the first day on here, she has been a very happy ship. On most ships you walk around and there are a lot of happy faces but here, they are almost grinning like Cheshire cats most of the time. There seems to be enthusiasm throughout the ship."

Ruby Princess herself deserves some of the credit. While there have been some minor technical glitches, they have been far fewer than what would expect on a new ship. "She has been terrific. The propellers keep turning, the thrusters all work, she makes her speed." Indeed, even in a 40 knot gale off Grand Caymen during her fourth cruise, the ship rode comfortably.

Ruby utilizes traditional propeller shafts rather than the Azipod propulsion systems used on some new cruise ships but Yeomans does not see that as a disadvantage. "When pods first arrived, [people] were very enthusiastic about it. 'Oh, I have so much power down there' and all this business. But, then they all started breaking down - - seals failed and all the rest. They are still failing. They cannot be used in the way they were designed to be used. There are limitations on how far you can swing the things around and whether you can go ahead and astern with them. So, keeping to two propellers, two rudders and stern thrusters, we are very happy with it. With the Grand-class, I have never run out of power. She is fine."