

Carnival's Fantasy Class Cruise Ship: Ticket to Success

by
Laurence Miller

Carnival Cruise Line's Fantasy class of cruise ships is the largest group of virtually identical passenger vessels in the history of ocean travel. These ships represent the culmination of Carnival's product development and are a prime reason for the line's current success. The author details the evolution of their design, with emphasis on hotel aspects, through previous ships in the fleet.

Success has many ingredients. At Carnival Cruise Lines, the formula includes competent and stable management, good control of costs, and sales genius. However, one of the winning cards in this premium deck is the penchant for building ships that buttress the line's appeal.

The embodiment of the Carnival Cruise product is the Fantasy class of eight 70,000-ton ships either completed or under construction. The Fantasys represent the largest group of commercial passenger ships built to a similar design in maritime history.¹ That this should be the case 30 years after passenger travel by ship was virtually pronounced dead is worthy of mention.

Individually, there is nothing particularly remarkable about these ships at first glance. The most recent at the time of writing, the *Imagination*, is 70,367 gross tons, 855 feet long, and 118 feet wide. While the Fantasys accommodate 2,040 based on double occupancy, they frequently sail with more than this number and can carry 2,594 with all berths filled.

There is nothing unique about the statistics of this class; new cruise ships in the 70,000-ton range are not a rarity. Nor is there anything extraordinary about the external experience, which is decidedly on the plain side. The nicest thing one can say about the looks of a Fantasy Class ship is that when viewed from alongside, these ships present "an impressive wall of white," as said by a reporter of the 1931 *Empress of Britain*.²

Ships Feature Innovative Design

On closer examination, these ships represent the culmination of some innovative design thinking combined with accumulated operational knowledge concerning where to invest money in a newbuilding so that the ship will, in every respect, go the distance. A large part of the distance to be covered is to develop accommodation arrangements that encourage people to enjoy each other's company so that those who are intent on partying early or late are encouraged, in the layout, to do so in the same section of the ship.

The successful onboard ambience of the Fantasy Class and the interior design genius of Joe Farcus are synonymous. Interiors combine color, light, whimsy, fantasy. They also embrace high material standards, whenever possible, i.e., whenever safety standards permit, genuine rather than simulated materials are used. On most ships of this class, miles of florescent fixtures change the background color through many primary hues in the course of the evening.

Many daytime visitors used to more traditional interiors are put off by the confluence of varying textures and colors—in the eyes of many, too various to make a strong daytime statement. It is at night, however, when these ships, internally, come into their own. Jarring effects retreat into shadows, and one is aware of light and music, and of people having a good time. The nighttime ambience of these ships makes them, in all probability, the most exciting afloat after sunset.

Financing Is Favorable

One reason for Carnival's consistently positive balance sheet, driven in a big way by the Fantasys, is the ability to get good ships at the right price.

According to Gerry Cahill, Carnival's vice president of finance, the company's favorable construction prices are attributable to the following factors:

- Currently, Carnival tends to build large classes of ships in the same shipyard. There are substantial discounts when successive ships are built to an identical design.
- Ships are ordered when currency exchange rates are favorable.
- Carnival has the financial resources to arrange its own financing independent of the shipyard.³

The Fantasy Class are all built in Finland's Wartsila/Masa yards, the same organization under two successive managements. Cost per unit has tended to be just above \$300 million. This is amortized over eight years, an amazingly short period compared with traditional practices. In the days of the great liners, a period of 20 years was common. Just as extraordinary, the ships are paid for from operational cash flow and by drawing on a \$750 million line of revolving bank credit. Some funds are also received from the public markets.⁴

How did Carnival get to where it is today?



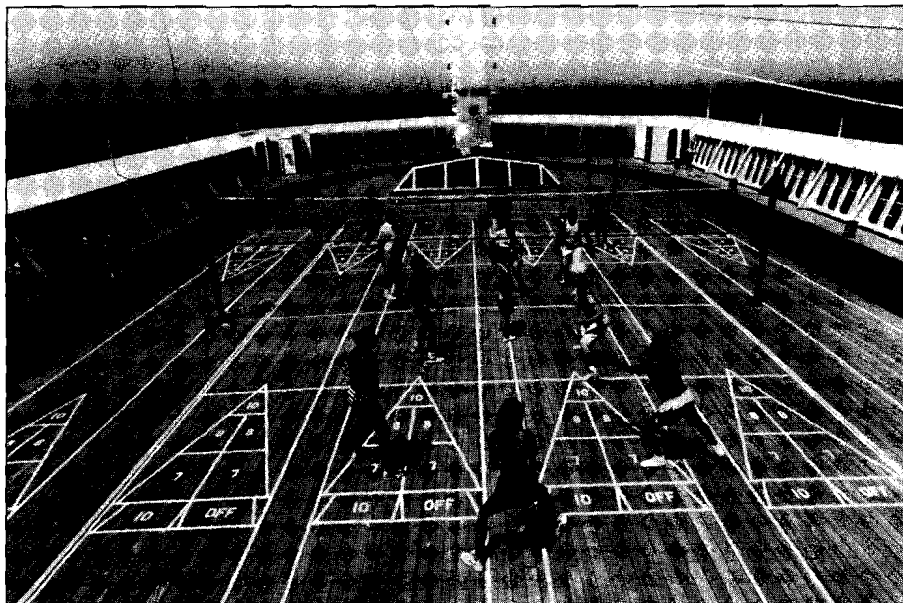
A typical stateroom offers comfort for passengers.

In the days when it operated just the *Mardi Gras* and *Carnivale*, both former Canadian Pacific transatlantic liners, the line was little different from a number of other marginal operations. Compared with other companies, the quality was not that good. The ships were purchased for Carnival because they had been built or refitted with cruising in mind, but their essential character was already set. Meshulam Zonis, senior vice president for operations, recalls going over the plans of both ships with a fine-tooth comb in search of space into which more sleeping accommodation could be built.⁵ This resulted in improved revenue, but some of the most closet-like cabins in the industry.

This writer remembers visiting the *Mardi Gras* in the late '70s and walking through seedy interiors featuring peeling, velvet-flocked wallpaper and indoor/outdoor carpet. Even the red band circling the hull was not painted in a straight line.

Carnival Begins Its Rise

Carnival's star began to rise when it acquired, at a bargain price, the Safmarine (formerly Union Castle) liner *S.A. Vaal* in 1977. The then 30,212-ton vessel, though best known as a passenger liner, was in fact a huge, fast cargo ship with one-class accommodation for 728 passengers. The huge former cargo spaces gave Carnival the flexibility, finally, to produce a ship that met their requirements, with moderately high-density accommodation that was more than competitive with what other year-round Caribbean operators were offering. Even though the ship was virtually gutted, given greatly enhanced accommodation and a lovely profile, the total cost for Carnival was in the region of just \$23 million.⁶



Guests play volleyball and shuffleboard or use the jogging track on the Sun Deck.

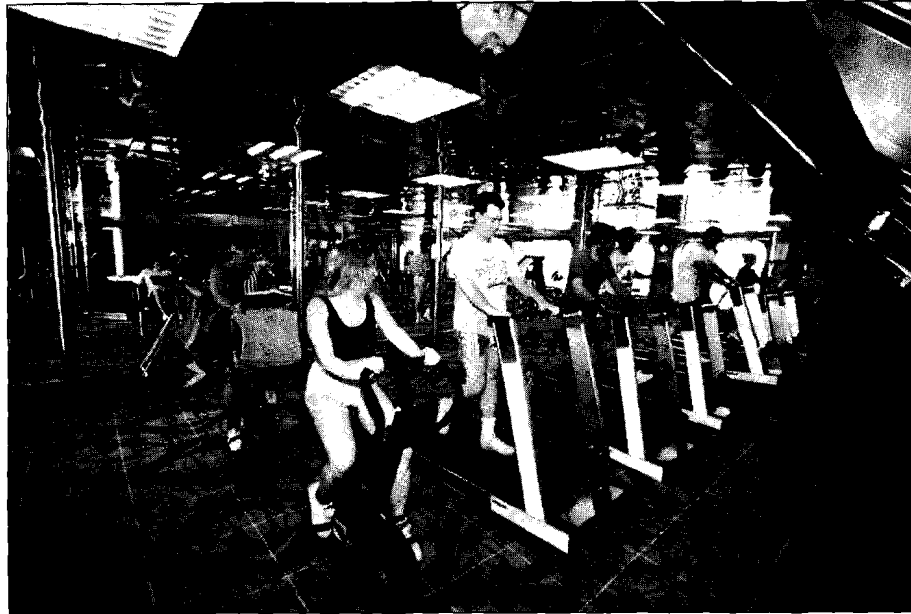
After the *Festivale* entered service in 1978, converted to carry 1432 passengers in accommodation that was state-of-the-art for the mass market, the company hit its stride. The economy had improved dramatically; the TV series *Love Boat* was at the height of its popularity, and the cruise industry was booming. With the ship going out full every week at full brochure tariff, the purchase and conversion cost was recouped in a few years.⁷ The three ships were now sufficiently profitable not only for the line to survive but also for it to order new ships.

The line's first new building, *Tropicale*, has always been a popular and successful ship, one that marks the beginning of the evolution toward the Fantasys. The vessel introduced Carnival's trademark funnel, credited to designer Joe Farcus, and set the high standard characteristic of all new Carnival ships for comfortable and spacious cabins superior to all the competition; but it was, in some respects, a conventional ship.

Tropicale (1981) was part of a new, more spacious generation of newly-built cruise ships also typified by Home Line's *Atlantic* (1982), Sitmar's *Fairsky* (1984), and Princess' *Royal Princess* (1984), classes that linked the propulsion technology and marine architecture developed in European ferries with the standards of accommodation expected of the mass market and middle echelons of the North American cruise industry.

Newer Ships Introduce New Ideas

Carnival took advantage of the attention *Tropicale* gained on entering service by announcing the construction of an even-larger



A variety of exercise equipment is available for the health-conscious.

Holiday of 40,052 gross tons. The *Holiday* class, shortly to consist also of the near-sisters *Jubilee* and *Celebration*, were the prototype of the *Fantasy* class and introduced into cruising some important innovations. Instead of dividing passengers progressing fore and aft into two promenade decks, one on either side, Carnival opted for a single "main street" on the starboard side that would become an umbilical cord tying together the ship's entertainment attractions. All public rooms were on two decks, and these were tied together forward through an atrium and a two-deck-high showroom.

There would be no out-of-the-way lounges or bars. Passengers are reluctant to go out of their way even to use a luxurious and attractive space. One example is the spectacular but little-used Viking Crown Lounges on Royal Caribbean ships, and a second, the attractive but isolated observation lounge aboard *Star Princess*. The *Holidays* repeated the *Tropical's* highly successful cabin design and, with few variations, the successful layout of sun decks. However, some compromises were necessary even in a ship of more than 40,000 tons.

Only the forward of the two dining rooms offered a bar and congregation area where passengers could await the opening of the dining room before each of the two sittings for lunch and dinner. More space could have been used for such functions as the fitness center, the main amidships sun and pool area, the casino, and the informal deck restaurant. The extra length and space of the *Fantasys* made it possible to overcome these disadvantages.

The first of the *Fantasy* class ships was delivered to the line January 26, 1990. These represented a further development of the

Holiday class layout but, measuring 70,367 gross tons, were free of many of the restrictions imposed by size and technology of the former.

There were multi-purpose lounge/waiting area/bars adjacent to both the fore and the aft dining rooms on all these ships, making the aft dining area just as desirable to passengers as the forward one. Aboard *Fantasy*, the Majestic Bar, an elegant room of quite conservative design, offers passengers comfortable furniture, good sea views, a sit-down bar, and a grand staircase linking the room to the Jubilee Dining Room below.

Fitness Areas Are Superior

Fitness facilities were expanded into what might be considered the finest afloat. High up and forward, there is a jogging track, away from sleeping passengers, with eight laps equaling one mile. Its location means that it can be a single-purpose area with deck covering that is appropriate for jogging. Just below and indoors, the 3,000-square-foot gym area offers views through floor-to-ceiling windows in three directions, including forward over the bow. There are 35 exercise machines of various descriptions. A 1400-square-foot aerobics room, plus dressing areas and six massage rooms, complete the facilities.

The greater length of these ships, together with the cantilevered superstructure from the Promenade Deck up, make for a larger sun deck, casino, and indoor promenade which doubles in some sections as a nightclub, venue for one- and two-person entertainment attractions.

The ships are built to last, featuring teak decking in most areas, quarter sawn and natural (as opposed to plantation) grown for longer wear.

The ships are operationally extremely efficient, and dependable, with a quiet accommodation. They take advantage of recent technical progress and, in a number of areas, set the pace for world-wide cruise fleets. There are also substantial safety advances.

The primary operational advance was in the switch from geared diesel to diesel electric propulsion, offering major advances in space and operational versatility. The Fantasys can sail at extremely slow speeds forever without damage to engines, a problem in previous ships. Engines are mounted on resilient rubber rafts, separating the engines from the structure of the vessel and dramatically reducing vibration. According to Captain Vittorio Fabiotti, chief coordinator of newbuildings, these ships were the first to offer this feature.⁸ Main engines supply both propulsion and auxiliary power; there is no need to scatter auxiliary engines in several areas of the ship. Three thousand sensors provide for total monitoring and control of the propulsion system.

Diesel electric propulsion saves 50 percent in vertical space, areas now available for crew. Crew accommodation, in turn, impinges less on the passenger accommodation. The captain enjoys the use of a "joystick," controlling through one lever engines, rudder, and bow and stern thrusters.

Navigational Safety Is Increased

Adding to navigational safety are the extremely powerful bow and stern thrusters (three each). The huge vertical walls represented by the ships' sides make them extremely prone to windy conditions. The "sail area" is 82,000 square feet which, combined with a comparatively shallow draft of 25 feet, can be a problem in awkward wind conditions. The thrusters are specified to overcome the effects of 35-mile-per-hour winds during the docking process. Two further advantages are that they can be run independently of main engines and can be operated for indefinite periods; there will be no thruster engine burnouts at critical moments.

There are some unusual computerized refinements in the fire detection system. Before dispatching crew to fight a fire, the captain consults a CRT that provides not only the location of the fire but a picture of the space in which the blaze is located.

Finally, something that is appreciated by experienced cruise passengers is there is the ability to disembark luggage in record time. No passengers leave a ship on the last day until all luggage is unloaded. On the Fantasys, a baggage-and-stores handling area makes it possible to disembark 6,000 pieces of baggage in 40 minutes.

As with all classes of ship, improvements are made as succeeding units are constructed. Starting with *Sensation*, there is improved garbage treatment in response to environmental regulations. Stage lighting and production facilities have also been improved. Final units of the class will have propellers mounted on rotating pods, in lieu of rudders, to make the ships even more highly maneuverable.

If fortune continues to smile on Carnival Cruise Lines, the Fantasy Class of cruise ships may become known as not only the largest class of passenger ships ever built in tonnage and accommodation but, also, the most profitable.

In size, they will be eclipsed within the Carnival fleet when the 101,000-ton *Carnival Destiny* enters service in November 1996. However, the sheer size of the Destinys, preventing them from negotiating the Panama Canal, makes it unlikely that their numbers will rival the Fantasys, and just two have been ordered to date.

References

¹Nearest competitor is Royal Caribbean's 69,000-ton Legend of the Seas Class with six units; nothing in maritime history approaches either the Fantasys or Legends in magnitude of a class of passenger ships.

²Leslie Reade, "Epilogue," in *The Canadian Pacific Quadruple-screw Liner Empress of Britain* (London: Patrick Stephens, 1971), p. 136.

³Letter of November 17, 1995, in response to written questions from writer.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Recounted by Meshulam Zonis, Carnival's senior vice president for operations, in 1988 interviews with writer.

⁶Laurence Miller, "From the 'Golden Fleet' to the 'Fun Ships': a History of Carnival Cruise Lines," *Fairplay Cruise Review* (London: Fairplay Publications, 1988), p. 20.

⁷Writer's conversations with Carnival executives during sea trials of *Jubilee* in 1986.

⁸Much of the material concerning design advances of Fantasys over previous ships, and characteristics of the Fantasy Class ships themselves, came from an interview with Captain Vittorio Fabietti, chief coordinator of new buildings, Carnival Cruise Lines, August 3, 1995. This was supplemented by subsequent conversations with Stephen M. Payne, senior naval architect, Technical Marine Planning, London. TMP has been Carnival's marine design consultant throughout the history of the company. Recently, the line hired away most staff, including Mr. Payne, and formed its own organization.

Laurence Miller teaches Cruise Line Management in the School of Hospitality Management and is Director of University Libraries at Florida International University.