

A new generation of cruise ships

by Laurence Miller

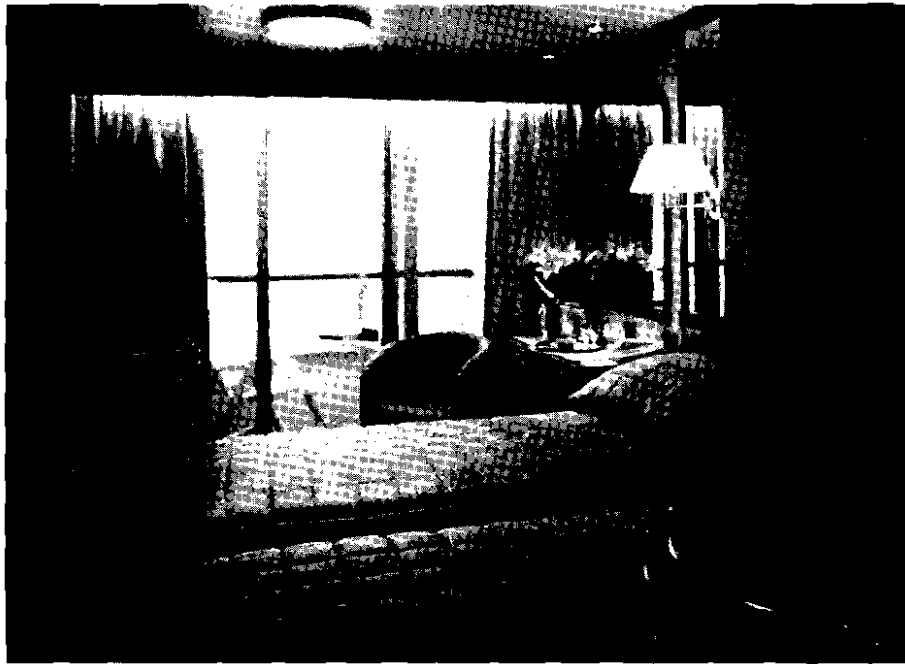
The giant new cruise ships entering service are distinguished not only by their size but also by the new standards of accommodation for the average passenger that the increased amount of space on board makes possible. Amenities include a major percentage of cabins with private verandas, extensive physical fitness facilities, more inviting dining arrangements, and use of decor and space planning in an attempt to recover some of the intimacy lost as cruise ships have increased in size. The author reviews how each of the major cruise lines has taken advantage of the challenges and opportunities that the creation of these ships has represented, and presents an overview of the largest new cruise ships that have entered service in the past several years.

The new super cruise ships, nicknamed megaships, that have garnered so much attention during the past two years represent not just new tonnage but a completely new generation of cruise vessels. As a group, of course, they are larger. But it is not only a matter of size. The sum of amenities made possible by the increase in space and by new design approaches is distinctly in advance of vessels built as recently as five years ago.

Progress includes such design features as the number of cabins with private balconies, the general standard of cabin amenities, the quality of decor, the materials used, and the special activities these new giantesses support, especially in the area of physical fitness.

Private cabin verandas are an accessible luxury

One of the most conspicuous changes in recent cruise ship design has been the advent of vessels with a major percentage of cabins featuring private balconies. While the concept of providing a large number of such spaces was born as early as 1984 aboard Princess's 44,348-ton *Royal Princess*, with 21 percent of cabins so equipped, the practice of providing verandas on this scale was not immediately copied by other lines and the practice increased only gradually. It is noteworthy that aboard these new megaships, the percentage of rooms with private balconies ranges from 23 percent in the new *Celebrity* and *Royal Caribbean* ships to a high of 55 percent in the 109,000 gross-ton *Grand Princess*, the world's largest cruise ship as of her debut in May 1998.



SUN SHINES IN: The balcony in this standard double cabin aboard Sun Princess enhances the sense of being at sea by providing direct access to sun and light.

Balconies transform the experience of being in a cruise ship cabin. Immediately on waking, passengers can be outdoors. Glass area is greatly in excess of that provided by standard cabin windows. When weather conditions permit, guests have the option of leaving the balcony door open at night so they are lulled to sleep by the sound of the sea.

All of these factors have made balcony cabins enormously in demand. At the time the 101,000-ton *Carnival Destiny* made her debut in the fall of 1996, it was necessary to book a year ahead to secure a veranda cabin. Carnival had underestimated the fare premium consumers were willing to pay for a cabin with private veranda.

Ships feature advances in interior design and quality

In these new cruise giants, there is a general advance in standards of decor and in the quality of materials used. No major cruise line has recently put into service a ship obviously built or decorated on an excessively tight budget. Undoubtedly, costs incurred in frequent replacement of inexpensive deck coverings and upholstery when compromises have been accepted in the past have had an influence.

For instance, the selection of indoor/outdoor carpeting as a deck covering afforded savings in both topside weight and initial cost. However, this measure resulted in decks that seldom looked fresh,

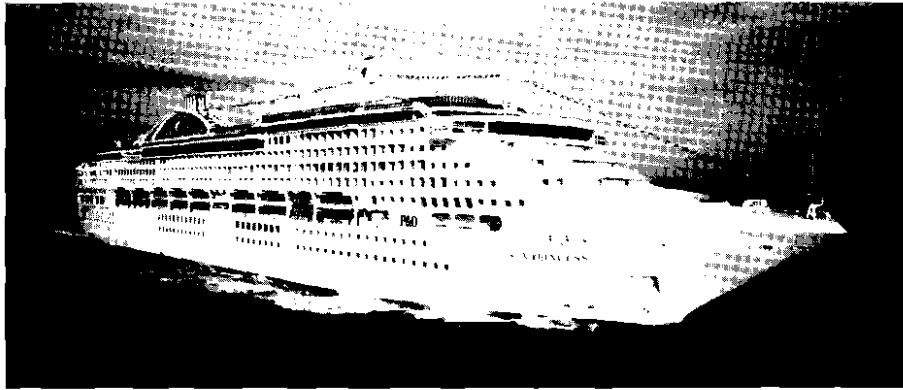
absorbed and retained moisture, and required frequent replacement. Now, teak decks are common in areas most frequented by passengers, and economy carpeting is seldom seen. The challenge of keeping carpeting looking fresh has involved similar lessons, and carpeting now contracted for on new ships is generally of high quality.

Long ago, size in and of itself ceased to be a major draw for most people. As ships grow in dimensions, intimacy is lost and passenger interaction becomes less personal. Absent is that "we're all in the same boat" friendliness where passengers don't hesitate to converse with each other without special reason or in the absence of an introduction. In these new giantesses starting with Princess's *Sun Princess* and Royal Caribbean's *Legend of the Seas*, designers have made a conscious attempt to overcome the lack of intimacy created by very great size. They have limited the dimensions of lounges and bars, divided dining rooms into smaller spaces, and tried to avoid great open interior rooms, other than showrooms, where people are expected to interact with one another. It is a fair statement, however, that these 70,000 to 109,000-ton great cities of the sea do not duplicate the ambience aboard what used to be the average size passenger ship of 20,000 to 25,000 gross tons. At the same time, gone too are the monumental public lounges that have generated nostalgia for such pre-war liners as White Star's *Majestic*, French Line's *Normandie*, and the Italian *Conte de Savoia*. The Grand Ballroom of this last ship, though beautiful, somewhat resembled the main gallery of a museum.

External grace at sea has been lost

There is, however, perhaps a more valid reason for nostalgia. Although in most of this newest generation of ships some effort has been made to create attractive exteriors (compared with such ships as Carnival's *Holiday* and Holland America's *Nieuw Amsterdam* where such values occupied no place in the design philosophy), the new ships never approach the external grace of line of such vessels as *Sagaffjord*, *Vistaffjord*, *Eugenio Costa*, and *Sea Breeze*. However, few are downright ugly. Cruise lines have finally recognized that a ship's exterior, appearing again and again in brochures and advertisements, represents a 40-year investment in public relations. The new Celebrity and Holland America ships, as well as the *Carnival Destiny* and *Sun Princess* classes, are downright attractive from many angles.

The products of Italy's Fincantieri shipyard have generally represented a more successful accommodation of traditional aesthetic virtues in modern ship design than the Northern European competition. This has given us the most recent Princess, Holland America, some Costa vessels, and Carnival's *Carnival Destiny* class. It is to be hoped that future products of Finnish shipyards, formerly the leaders in modern cruise ship construction, will follow suit.



HERE COMES THE SUN: The care given to the external appearance of Sun Princess has resulted in a fine, sculptured look that is also a 30-year-plus investment in public relations.

Enter the 100,000-ton megaship: *Carnival Destiny*

Justly garnering most of the attention among the new fleet of ships is the generation of 100,000-tons-plus vessels just taking to the seas. The first of these, the 101,000-ton *Carnival Destiny*, has become hugely profitable and popular, initially commanding a fare premium cruise over her almost-new fleetmates. Rather than conforming completely to the Carnival stereotype, the interiors of *Destiny* are comparatively subdued. Cabins, always a Carnival strong point, are more spacious than those in either Carnival's earlier ships or those of Holland America's *Statendam* class. In furnishings, they equal the latter. As with Royal Caribbean's new "Vision" ships, a large percentage of rooms have private balconies. In *Destiny's* case, 432 out of 1,321 cabins (32.7 percent) have this amenity.¹

But the cabin strong point is but one of the things that sets *Carnival Destiny* apart. Of equal importance, the dining rooms provide a more civilized venue for meals than previous Carnival ships. In order to avoid excessively monumental spaces, there are two dining rooms flanking the kitchens. In ambience, the dining rooms resemble those aboard Holland America's new *Statendam* class ships and are a general advance in civilized dining over similar spaces in the *Fantasy* Class ships. There is more space per diner, ceilings two decks high, and even musicians' balconies.

Also noteworthy, the line has begun to re-invest some of its massive profits in food service. The alternative dining options — 24-hour pizza, and Chinese or Italian dining lunch service areas — are winners in quality, convenience, and accessibility. Fitness facilities extend over 15,000 square feet on two decks. *Carnival Destiny* brings the basic Carnival Cruise Line experience increasingly into the mainstream, not a product just for those who enjoy the vibrant nightlife.

Caveats? A few. The most frequently-asked question is if passengers are ever aware of the 2,642 others on board. One is mostly aware of the crowds in the central lido pool space on sunny days at sea. The terraced arrangement makes one aware of each individual occupant. However, passengers can choose a less crowded sun area in the aft lido which also features a retractable glass roof in the event of inclement weather.²

Carnival Destiny will be followed by a virtually identical *Carnival Triumph* early in 1999 and by *Carnival Victory*, a third sister ship, in the summer of 2000.

Royal Caribbean expands internationally

Among *Destiny's* chief competition, offering extensive itineraries in the Caribbean and elsewhere, is Royal Caribbean International and its Project Vision ships. These are really of two classes. The first two units, the 69,490-ton, 1,804-passenger *Legend of the Seas* and *Splendor of the Seas*, have an unusually fast 24-knot cruising speed and are used on itineraries where this is important in order to provide adequate port time.³ They have five engines rather than four, and the added weight of the propulsion system means that engines and funnel are amidships rather than aft. The traditional RCI trademark, the Viking Crown Lounge, is in its traditional position — atop the funnel, eliminating the need to build an additional structure to afford this space a panoramic view.

Starting with the 73,000-ton, 1,950-passenger *Grandeur*, *Rhapsody*, and *Enchantment of the Seas* (to include *Vision of the Seas* next spring), a cruising speed of 22 knots was accepted. Engines are aft and a separate structure, just aft of the atrium, houses the Viking Crown Lounge. This gives these ships their lumpy profile, namely a small funnel aft and a massive amidships structure housing the Viking Crown. The profile has been accepted in order to provide a more central location for the Viking Crown, via elevators directly from the atrium. It is to be hoped that this will cause these lounges with panoramic views to be patronized more by passengers.

The Project Vision ships enhance Royal Caribbean's appeal to the mainstream of cruising by providing larger and better-furnished cabins, public rooms that are some of the prettiest afloat, and the usual Royal Caribbean International inventory of good entertainment and good shipboard management. The relationship between in and outdoors is especially fine, with dramatic seaviews from most public rooms. *Legend* pioneered the use of the multi-story atrium, called the Centrum, aboard RCI ships, for something other than spectacle — making several levels of this space a lounge where people are likely to congregate. Aboard many ships, this has in the past merely been a spectacular transit space during embarkation and during the cruise.



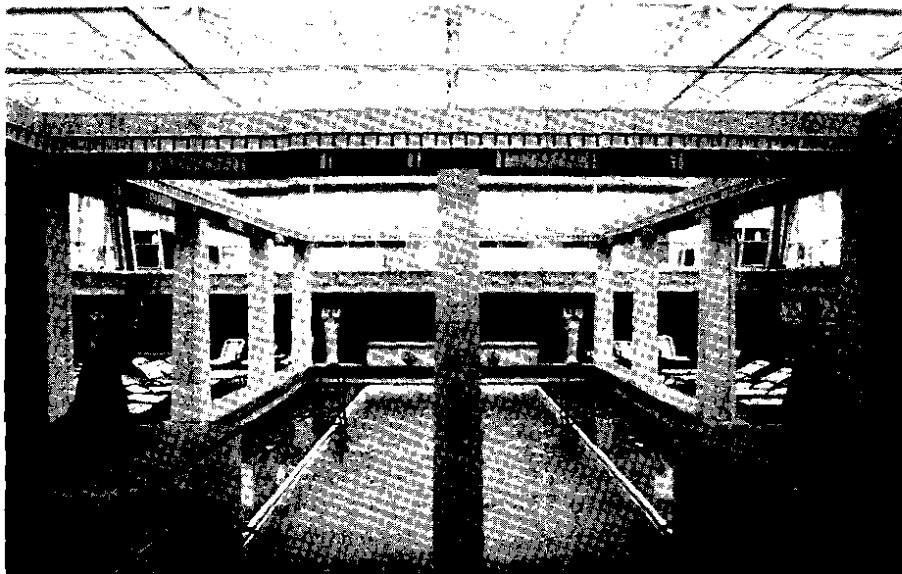
PLACE TO CONGREGATE: Bars and shops in and around the Centrum aboard RCI's Splendour of the Seas make it not just a transit space but a destination in itself.

This welcome feature is also found in *Carnival Destiny*, where a bar has been placed squarely in the base of the atrium. This feature is also being added to the later units of the *Fantasy* class.

As for the Vision balcony count, of the thousand cabins, 229 have balconies aboard the most recent ship of this class, *Rhapsody of the Seas*. The extensive glass areas make these vessels glow in the dusk and at night — something that will make a passenger forget the external profile lacking in grace. *Grandeur of the Seas* has broken the mold in cruise ship decor by having some of its interiors inspired by the 1920s rather than by 1930s Art Deco. The dining room, in particular, is reminiscent of that aboard Cunard's old *Berengaria* and evokes the age of glamour at sea.

The Vision ships, in common with the other new giantesses, provide enough space for experimentation with new types of public spaces. *Legend* and *Splendour* have outdoor 18-hole miniature golf courses; all have solariums, second pools with sliding glass roofs. The indoor/outdoor pool is nothing new; what is innovative here is that the pool surround has decor and furnishings more in keeping with a public room.

Future ships for RCI? Most spectacular of these are the three Project Eagle 136,000-ton vessels now on order. These will be the world's largest cruise ships for the foreseeable future, each accommodating 3,100 passengers, and with double occupancy, a maximum of 3,840 with every berth filled; they will be built by the Finnish shipbuilding firm of Masa, formerly Wartsila. The first of these is scheduled for delivery in November 1999 and the last in Spring 2002. The Eagles, not yet named, will use their huge amount of internal space for such innovative features as an ice rink, wedding chapel, rock climbing wall, a roller-blading track, and a three-level dining room. The company has also placed a firm order for the first ship of the Voyager

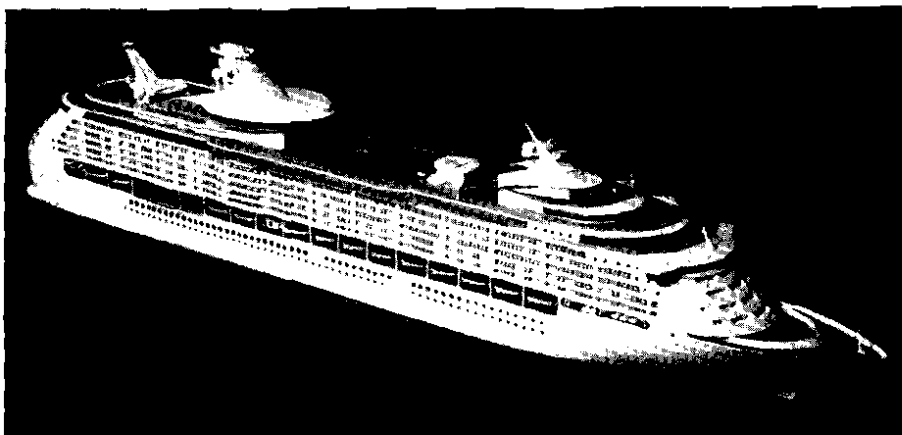


ALL WEATHER AREA: Solarium aboard RCI's Rhapsody of the Seas is a second topside pool area with the atmosphere of a club. The glass roof retracts in fine weather.

class, a development of the Vision class design. Lead ship of the Voyagers will be built in Germany's Meyer Werft shipyard and is scheduled for delivery in February 2001.

Developments at Celebrity Cruises are upscale

Celebrity Cruises, now owned by Royal Caribbean, provides a somewhat more upscale experience in their new superships *Century*, *Galaxy*, and *Mercury*. This is true mostly in the software rather than the hardware, in the food and service that are more important to most



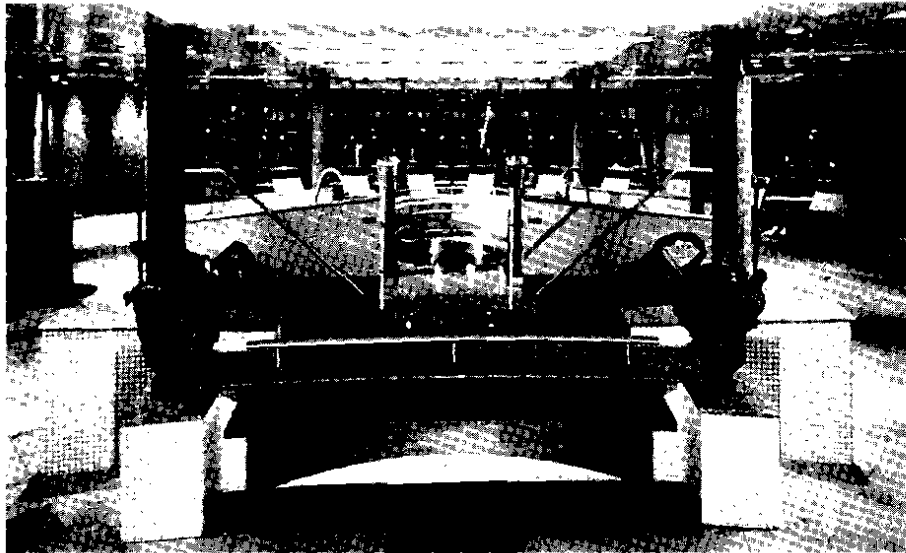
FUTURE SHIPS: RCI's 136,000-ton Project Eagle design is the world's largest cruise ship. The first of three enters service in November 1999.

passengers than other single elements of the cruise experience. An executive of a competing line described the product as a contemporary version of Holland America — that, is, deluxe and ultra-modern. The new vessels which are quite similar in design range from 70,606 to 77,713 tons and carry about 1,800 passengers. They bring to the line a state-of-the-art physical setting for the traditional Celebrity experience — some of the best food afloat, increasingly good entertainment, and European service.

The decor and ambience of these ships is distinctly European and could have been fashioned for an European clientele. In an era when ship interiors often look quite similar, this is a truly refreshing development. In contrast with the usual rose and grey colors, a variety of primary colors are used, blues and reds standing out. The effect is exciting and conveys the feeling of “we aren’t in Kansas anymore.” Decor in general is reminiscent of a modern, first-class European hostelry, such as Sofitel, different from the surroundings to which North Americans are exposed daily. Like the Project Vision ships, there are first class meeting facilities. Aboard the *Galaxy*, which created a stir when entering service late last year, there is perhaps the most striking observation lounge/disco afloat. This is a high-tech dance venue, a wonderful conventional lounge and observation space, and a new variation on a design feature found on many ships. Its counterpart aboard *Mercury* is more intimate in feel, but equally striking.

Fitness facilities, which occupy 10,000 square feet, receive special emphasis. Of *Mercury’s* 935 cabins, 220 have private balconies. The three near-sisters, *Century*, *Galaxy*, and *Mercury*, have quite individual personalities. While passengers sailing on all three ships would be aware that they are sailing with the same company, they might not be aware that the vessels are, in fact, built to roughly the same design. The elegant dining room aboard *Century* stands out, as does the nautical decor of the same room aboard *Mercury*. Another standout is the “Martinibar” aboard *Mercury*. The general effect has been accomplished by employing the same designers on all three ships, but giving them different areas to design on each. *Galaxy*, the middle ship of this trio, especially impressed the rather jaded travel trade press upon her debut last year because of its layout and decor in combination with the cuisine and service on board. In common with other mega-designs, the showrooms are especially free of obstructions in the form of pillars, etc., and offer excellent sightlines.

RCI has chosen to make a major investment in Celebrity and has ordered two ships of a new design, the Millennium Class, from France’s Chantiers de l’Atlantique shipyard in St. Nazaire, France, for delivery in June 2000 and January 2001. These will be a further development of Celebrity’s *Mercury* design.



FITNESS EMPHASIS: AquaSpa aboard *Celebrity Cruise's Mercury* reflects trend toward large and well-equipped fitness facilities afloat.

Growth at Princess makes them a major player

Princess Cruises is one of the three major players in the modern cruise industry, so it comes as no surprise that they are a major contender in this new category of cruise vessel. The line has weighed in with the "Grand Class" ship, starting with the new 77,000-ton *Sun Princess*, followed this year with the much-heralded twin, *Dawn Princess*. These Fincantieri-built ships are perhaps the best looking of all the new vessels externally whether one is on board or viewing the ships from afar. The look is a nicely sculptured one. Decor aboard *Sun* is particularly elegant. These two ships are soon to be followed by a third, *Sea Princess*, and a fourth, *Ocean Princess*, both in 1999.

These are not to be confused with *Grand Princess* which, at 109,000 tons, will be world's largest when she arrives next spring. *Grand Princess* is built to a completely different design and will be followed by two sister ships, not yet named, in 2001. The line has developed the "Grand Class" concept, referring not to a single ship design but to a pattern of service. Among the amenities are casual, sit-down dining available 24 hours each day. Princess has applied this label to all their new ships starting with *Sun*. Aspects of it are being applied to older vessels through retrofit.

Grand Class ships completed to date have an attractive decorative style that might be called "California International," casual California elegance with some Italian and British touches. There are carpet designs, themes, and ceiling treatments that appear to be British in their inspiration, all reflecting the line's UK ownership, and some

rather subtle Italian ambience, suggested in the paneling, reflecting the ships' Italian builders. Cabins on ships completed to date are a little smaller than aboard most other new ships, but still fit the mode of improved decorative treatment and convenience.

Offering the same style of onboard experience, but in a very different package, will be the 109,000 ton *Grand Princess*, like *Carnival Destiny*, too large to fit through the Panama Canal. Following an initial deployment in the Mediterranean during the summer of 1998, the ship will be permanently stationed in the Caribbean in fall. Of 1,296 cabins, 710 will have private balconies. The ship will accommodate a total of 3,300 passengers served by 1,100 staff. The space that results from a ship of this dimensions will be used for such attractions as an interactive motion picture theater that can feature undersea adventures, skydiving, and the like; two alternative restaurants; the highest ratio of cabins with private balconies in the industry (55 percent); three show lounges; five swimming pools; and what is certain to be the vessel's trademark, a nightclub/disco suspended 150 feet above the sea at the ship's stern. A moving walkway will transport passengers to this venue through a glass tube from Deck 15.

Externally, the huge vessel has the lines of a Spanish galleon with light draft, towering sides, and little poetry of line. However, while these characteristics are bound to give her deck officers a challenge from time to time when entering port in a strong crosswind, they are likely to be lost on the passengers who will be exposed to an endless array of facilities and activities.⁴

Carnival Corporation takes over Costa Cruises

Carnival Corporation has just completed its takeover of Costa Cruises at time of writing, and its influence is just now being felt in the building plans of this active Italian company. The 76,000-ton, 2,274-passenger *Costa Victoria*, the latest ship delivered to the line prior to the acquisition, has many fine points including European decor, a three-deck-high nightclub/lounge, and fine deck areas. However, the ship's design does not reflect the maturity traditionally associated with shipyard products of the Carnival Corporation, especially Holland America and Carnival. Poor showroom sightlines were corrected after the ship's initial season. Such other features as lack of window exposure for key public areas are difficult to correct. Future Costa designs are bound to be less idiosyncratic and reflect highly developed knowledge of how passengers interact in a ship and what they like. When the builder of a companion vessel to *Costa Victoria*, the *Costa Olympia*, went bankrupt, the line elected to sell the incomplete hull rather than complete the ship in another yard, in retrospect, probably a wise decision. Meanwhile, *Costa Victoria* and an earlier ship, *Costa Romantica*, cruise the Caribbean in winter and the

Mediterranean in summer. A 23-knot speed makes it possible for *Costa Victoria* to offer seven-day cruises from Venice that include both the Greek Islands and Turkey. Plans have been announced for the first Costa vessel to be built under the aegis of the line's new owners, Carnival Corporation. The 82,000-ton vessel, built by Finland's Masa yard, will be completed in the year 2000.

The Fantasy class is a transitional design

Carnival's large Fantasy Class ships, *Fantasy*, *Ecstasy*, *Sensation*, *Imagination*, *Fascination*, *Inspiration* and *Elation*, due next spring, and *Paradise*, initially advertised as the world's first smoke-free cruise ship, due late in 1998, all over 70,000 tons, are transitional vessels compared with others discussed. While they offer the large cabins, extremely quiet operation, and most of the activities supported by other new ships (also, nightlife the most vibrant afloat, better even than that aboard *Carnival Destiny*), they have few cabins with private balconies and seem somewhat more conservative in their general architecture, if not in their decor. The close juxtaposition of the disco, a nightclub, casino, and a large indoor promenade that is itself an evening destination accounts for why these ships develop and keep both early and late vibrancy in their evening scene. Hopefully, their best attributes will be carried over in a new series of 82,000-ton ships (one firm order, two optional ones) due late in 2000, and in 2001 and 2002. This new class of vessels, to be built by Finnish Masa yard, are reported to offer balconies to a high percentage of passengers.

Holland America continues to grow

As if these new giantesses are not enough, there is Holland America's new 62,000-ton *Rotterdam VI* that entered service last fall. The ship is a faster, slightly larger, and more upscale version of the *Statendam* Class, which also includes *Ryndam*, *Maasdam*, and *Veendam*, that entered service 1993-96. The ship is intended for world and extended cruises, can achieve 25 knots in service, and has expanded deluxe accommodation and concierge service.

World cruise clients demand the very best and receive very special care on board and in service from the home office. They have flocked to this ship and fully booked the initial world cruise. Though not really in the megaship category, this fine new vessel is worthy of mention. The line has just ordered two new 63,000-ton ships from Fincantieri, basic adaptations of the *Rotterdam VI* design but with lower speed. Each will cost \$300 million and bear the traditional Holland America names *Volendam* and *Zaandam*. They are due for completion in May and November 1999, respectively.

Has the order of magnitude of the largest new cruise ships peaked? At least two industry veterans have suggested privately that this may

be the case. It is, of course, impossible to predict what cruise lines will do if the current prosperity continues. However, there are some limiting factors. First, as one increases tonnage and capacity, it is difficult to increase deck space proportionately as size exceeds 100,000 gross tons, and, second, convenient, accessible dry-docking facilities is a pressing problem. The three largest companies have ordered three 100,000-plus ships too large to traverse the Panama Canal. These would most likely be used for the weekly seven-day cruise service from South Florida to the Western Caribbean, to the Eastern Caribbean, and from San Juan to the Southern Caribbean. There can also be occasional seasonal deployments to the Mediterranean, as with the maiden season of *Grand Princess*, where demand from North American and European markets is high and suitable ports are readily available.

However, the main operational area of these largest ships will be the Caribbean. Once the needs of the three high-volume routes mentioned above have been met, the major cruise lines — Carnival, Princess, and Royal Caribbean — have shown an inclination to revert to smaller designs that can transit the Panama Canal, offer summer cruises in Alaskan waters, and provide to owners much greater versatility.

These giant new megaships, because of high initial cost, are possible only for the largest companies. Any firm about to invest multiple millions in the cruise segment of the hospitality industry, and seeking to do so using less expensive older tonnage, should be acutely aware not only of the experience at sea offered by these new cruise giantesses, but also of the economies of operation that they afford. They are enormously more profitable than the more conventional ships they replace, and are able to be make money at substantially lower fares than ships built as recently as the 1970s. Although experienced industry observers may decry the trend toward extremely large ships as depriving ocean travel of its intimacy, the economies of scale available by increasing size and capacity are very large in every cruise ship size category and in every segment of the market.

Those who become competitors in this highly competitive industry should be wary of economies that reduce initial cost, but eliminate amenities widely offered. Some errors of omission can be rectified through refit, but it may be impossible to provide others that given segments of the market increasingly expect. One can upgrade decor, but it may not be practical to transform elements that are basic to the design, such as radically increasing the number of cabins with private verandas.

References

¹ Accommodation figures such as number of balconies are taken from press releases issued by the line. These tend to be exact and accurate.

² Impressions gained during a January 1997 cruise. The writer has also sailed on the following ships referenced: *Legend of the Seas*, *Grandeur of the Seas*, *Rhapsody of the Seas*, *Galaxy*, *Mercury*, *Dawn Princess*; all the Fantasy class ships in service at time of writing; on *Statendam*, *Maasdam*, *Veendam*, and *Rotterdam VI*; and has visited *Century*, *CostaVictoria* and *Sun Princess*.

³ Exact tonnage figures are used when they become available following measurement of a vessel on completion. Some lines, like Celebrity, use exact figures as soon as they have them. Most round heavily. Best source of exact data is Peter T. Eisele, "Guide to Cruise Ships," *Steamboat Bill (Winter 1996)*: 290-303.

⁴ Teijo Niemala, "Grand Princess Debuts in Europe," *Cruise Business Review 2* (July 1997): 12.

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