THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY VOYAGE OF PRINCESS CRUISES

By Shawn J. Dake

It was a crystal clear day in the Port Of Los Angeles, as the Pacific Princess waited to board an illustrious group of passengers for what would be a very special voyage. Fifty years earlier to the day, in the nearby harbor of Long Beach another vessel had also waited to begin the first voyage of a then brand new cruise line. Princess Cruises began their long history on December 3, 1965 with the departure of the Princess Patricia to a destination they had dubbed the “Mexican Riviera.” The voyage lasted 14-days, visiting some of the most interesting ports along the way on what was still a largely primitive and undeveloped coastline. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of that event, Princess Cruises decided to recreate a voyage of the same duration to some of those same places while adding a few new ones.

A veritable who’s who of faces from throughout the company’s existence would be aboard. Among the most recognizable were the entire, six-member original cast of the television show “The Love Boat.” The ensemble was led by veteran actor Gavin MacLeod who embodied the role of Captain Merrill Stubing; Bernie Kopell capably played the womanizing ship’s physician, Dr. Adam Bricker; Cynthia Lauren Tewes fit perfectly into the role of Cruise Director Julie McCoy; Ted Lange was the likeable bartender Isaac Washington; Fred Grandy, who went on to more serious roles in real life, was Yeoman Purser Burl “Gopher” Smith; and last but not least, the multi-talented actress Jill Whelan, who was just 11-years old when she joined the cast as the Captain’s daughter Vicki Stubing.

The festivities got underway before the ship even sailed with a VIP cocktail reception in the Club Bar followed by the 50th Anniversary luncheon in the adjacent restaurant. Current and former Princess employees were among the guests including two former cruise directors from the original Pacific Princess, and the most famous cruise staff member of them all, Jeraldine Saunders, who wrote the book The Love Boats which can largely be credited with changing the perception of ocean cruising. Gavin MacLeod who has been a spokesman for Princess since 1986 gave an eloquent speech saying, "People always ask us why 'The Love Boat' was so popular and I always say it's because it gave people something to dream about. They could dream about being out on the open seas on a cruise and discovering the world's greatest destinations, dreaming about love and of course happy endings since the shows always ended on a high note. I’m proud to have played a role in the growth of the cruise industry – to see where these ships have come from the days we filmed aboard the original Pacific Princess to now experiencing the 18 magnificent ships in the fleet." Princess Cruises president, Jan Swartz added, "Today, it's fitting that 'The Love Boat' cast is here with us to celebrate our 50th anniversary since they played a key role in the success of our company." The County of Los Angeles and the City of Santa Clarita, home of Princess Cruises headquarters, also marked the occasion by proclaiming December 3rd “Princess Cruises Day.”

Throughout the afternoon passengers continued to board and for the most part these were no ordinary guests.

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EDITORIAL

Lately, we have had several members complain of mail issues. Either their payments by check to our Post Office box has, as of yet, not cleared their bank, or that their latest issue of Ocean & Cruise News has not arrived.

I sincerely wish I could explain these sporadic issues. It appears the Post Office is getting worse and worse as it is not unusual for us to receive mail from our clients where the check is dated, and postmark noted, weeks before its arrival.

Please note that since we are aware of this problem we would never rush to suspend your membership.

Should you experience a problem receiving an issue of Ocean & Cruise News, or simply want to “catch-up” while away from home, all of our issues are also available online in the member’s section of our website. You will see the current issue published above the issue in flip book format, while the same issue, and may years of prior issues can be found further down on the menu.

Several of our members who use tablets, such as Apple’s iPad, have downloaded these versions onto their iPad so they can maintain their own library. If this is of interest to our members we can look into decreasing the storage size.

Please let us know your thoughts on this and if it is something you would enjoy, we would certainly look into it.

Sincerely,

VISIT US ON FACEBOOK!

WOCLS has lot happening on our Facebook page on a daily basis. Whether you’re looking for a dose of cruise news, or to see pictures and stories of ocean liners and cruise ships of yesterday, our Facebook page offers something for everyone. Please consider stopping by for a visit. Our Facebook page can be found at: http://www.facebook.com/OceanCruiseNews

CONTACT US

To contact us quickly and easily please email us at: membership@wocls.org
LOOKING BACK

A look at what was making news in Ocean & Cruise News, Five, Ten, Fifteen and Twenty years ago.

Five Years Ago – March 2011...Crystal Cruises announces that it will include complimentary fine wines and premium spirits throughout the ship, open bar service in all lounges, and pre-paid gratuities for housekeeping, bar and dining staff....Holland America Line has launched a new Stateroom Direct Service program that simplifies the boarding process by giving guests immediate access to their staterooms upon embarkation.

Ten Years Ago – March 2006...American West Steamboat Company's 360-foot riverboat Empress of the North ran aground on the Columbia River....A fire broke out aboard Princess Cruises' Star Princess which resulted in the death of one passenger and smoke inhalation injuries to two others.....Disney Cruise Line announces it is scheduling its first-ever Europe cruises when Disney Magic repositions to the port of Barcelona in 2007....Radisson Seven Seas renames itself Regent Seven Seas Cruises.

Fifteen Years Ago – March 2001...Carnival Cruises completes the implementation of staggered dinner seating’s on all its ships .....Carnival Corporation announces that it will transfer the 758-passenger Seabourn Sun to the Holland America's fleet....Royal Caribbean International accepts delivery of Radiance of the Seas, the first of its Radiance-class of ships....Holland America Line announces that it will name the first two ships of its new "Vista" series of new 85,000-ton cruise ships the Zuiderdam and Oosterdam

Twenty Years Ago – March 1996...Holland America Line announces that Rotterdam V will retire in September of 1997... The keel is laid for Princess Cruise Lines new 77,000-ton, 1,950-passenger Dawn Princess .... Silversea Cruises signs contracts for the delivery of two 390-passenger ships to be delivered in the spring of 1998 and 1999.

The American Queen Steamboat Company announces extraordinary itineraries through the Pacific Northwest wine country for 2016.

With Washington state home to over 240 wineries and Oregon close to 700, the Washington and Oregon wine industry is booming with quality wine produced all along the Columbia and Snake Rivers. The American Queen Steamboat Company will introduce guests to the region’s award-winning pinot noirs and deliver memorable culinary experiences onboard the American Empress and onshore beginning this spring.

Guests onboard the American Empress can experience the best local wines as producers introduce a wine with a tasting or pairing event with each cruise. Represented on the American Empress itineraries are the wine regions of;

- Walla Walla Valley
- Red Mountain
- Yakima Valley
- Colombia Gorge
- Colombia Valley
- Willamette Valley

To further enhance the onboard experience, local wines are complimentary during dinner, giving guests the opportunity to try seven red and seven white local wines during a voyage.

For additional information on this extraordinary experience and to make your reservations, kindly contact the American Queen Steamboat Company at 888-749-5280, visit them online at www.AQSC.com or contact a professional travel agent.
The finest cuisine at sea is becoming a bit sweeter, as Oceania Cruises is adding several new enhanced pastries to its decadent dessert offerings – all developed in conjunction with world-renowned Master Pastry Chef Christophe Menard.

In addition, the Oceania Cruises fleet is incorporating the world’s finest chocolates – from Papua New Guinea, Tanzania and Venezuela – into intriguing new desserts from Chef Menard: Yuzu and Venezuelan Chocolate Mousse with Hazelnut Croquant and Papuan Chocolate Volcano with Passion Fruit Heart and Caramel Lava.

Another of Chef Menard’s innovative desserts – Chocolate Cake with Molten Pistachio and Griotte Cherries – has been created just for Tuscan Steak, the all-new specialty restaurant aboard Sirena. The newest addition to the Oceania Cruises fleet of intimately luxurious ships, Sirena will enter service April 27, 2016 with a maiden voyage from Barcelona to Venice.

For more information about Oceania Cruises, call 855-OCEANIA (855-623-2642) or contact a professional travel agent.

Oceania Cruises®

Cunard is pleased to announce the Spring Savings Event, which features up to 2-for-1 savings on select 2016 voyages on Queen Mary 2, Queen Victoria, and Queen Elizabeth.

Destinations and itineraries range from legendary Transatlantic Crossings to breathtaking coastlines of the Mediterranean, exquisite landscapes of New England & Canada, vibrant ports of the Caribbean and historic ports of Northern Europe.

The Spring Savings Event applies to new bookings on select voyages made until April 15, 2016. The offer features:

- Transatlantic Crossing fares from $799*
- Mediterranean fares from $599*
- New England & Canada fares from $1,199*
- Caribbean fares from $1,249*
- Northern Europe fares from $2,999*

Taxes, Fees and Port Expenses ranging from $65 to $380 per person are additional and subject to change.

For more information about Cunard or to book a voyage and to view the full-range of itineraries, offer details and full restrictions, contact your Travel Consultant at 1-800-728-6273 or visit www.cunard.com.

Cunard is among the “World’s Most Ethical Companies” by Ethisphere Institute, a leading business ethics think tank. The company secured its spot on the list by implementing and promoting the highest ethical business standards and practices both internally and in the community. Named in the Lodging, Leisure and Recreation category, Holland America Line is one of 130 total honorees representing 54 industries from around the world.

For the fifth consecutive year, Holland America Line was named among the “World’s Most Ethical Companies” by Ethisphere Institute, a leading business ethics think tank. The company secured its spot on the list by implementing and promoting the highest ethical business standards and practices both internally and in the community. Named in the Lodging, Leisure and Recreation category, Holland America Line is one of 130 total honorees representing 54 industries from around the world.

In selecting the World’s Most Ethical Company winners, Ethisphere Institute organized its criteria for 2016 into five core categories: Ethics and Compliance Program; Corporate Citizenship and Responsibility;
Culture of Ethics; Governance; and Leadership, Innovation and Reputation. Ethisphere Institute is the global leader in defining and advancing the standards of ethical business practices that fuel corporate character, marketplace trust and business success.

For more information about Holland America Line, consult a travel professional, call HAL at 1-877-SAIL HAL (877-724-5425) or visit www.hollandamerica.com.

Norwegian Cruise Line has announced select 2017-2018 Fall/Winter itineraries that feature sought-after destinations while offering the freedom and flexibility on board that only Norwegian Cruise Line provides. Highlights of these itineraries include;

- A variety of Caribbean & Bahamas cruises from New York, Port Canaveral and Miami
- Immersive 10-day Canary Islands cruises from Barcelona
- The company’s exclusive seven-day, intra-island Hawaii sailings from Honolulu.

Norwegian’s new itineraries will be available for Latitudes guests and travel partners on March 22 and open for all bookings on March 23.

Norwegian Cruise Line’s fleet features 14 purpose-built ships, including the recently launched Norwegian Escape. For more information on Norwegian Cruise Line and to book a cruise on one of these exciting new itineraries, contact a travel professional, call 866-234-7350 or visit www.ncl.com.

Seabourn, the world’s finest ultra-luxury cruise line, celebrated another milestone in the construction of its new Seabourn Encore, with the ship touching water for the first time this month. Following a traditional ceremony to commemorate this significant occasion, the ship will be “floated out” from its dry dock to its outfitting dock at Fincantieri’s Marghera shipyard in Italy, where it will undergo final construction until the ship is delivered at the end of 2016.

Seabourn will continue to reveal renderings and updates about Seabourn Encore via the dedicated microsite: http://encore.seabourn.com. Filled with imagery, details and news of the ship’s continuing progress, including “sunsets until launch,” the microsite offers an inside look at the most exciting Seabourn launch in years.

For more details about the award-winning Seabourn fleet, or to explore the worldwide selection of Seabourn cruising options, contact a professional travel advisor, call Seabourn at 1-844-848-2162 or visit www.seabourn.com.
Geneva based MSC Cruises, the largest privately held cruise line in the world, is seriously ramping up its presence in the United States cruise market. Currently homeporting one ship in Miami MSC will have a second ship in Miami year round starting in late 2017 and has recently announced they have signed a deal to develop their own private island in the Bahamas. This is a significant commitment for a cruise company as large as this that really hasn’t had a year round product sailing out of Florida. Taking a cruise on an MSC ship, as I did in December on *MSC Divina*, round-trip Miami, is like being on a floating Italian island in the Caribbean. It’s great for people who like things Italian (and Mediterranean) since there are no Italian islands in the Caribbean. There may be English, Dutch, French, Spanish, American and more but nothing Italian.

**THE LINE** - The twelve-ship brand referred to as MSC is short for and part of the Mediterranean Shipping Company. It’s a huge, privately owned commercial and cruise shipping company, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. Their cruise division is based in Europe but has important US offices in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

This short summary comes directly from the company, capsulizing who they are: “Since its inception in 2003, the Company grew by 800% and is today the fourth largest cruise line in the world, the market leader in Europe and in the Mediterranean as well as in South America and South Africa. MSC Cruises recently announced a $5.4 billion investment plan that includes the construction of up to seven new ships that will see MSC Cruises’ fleet double its current capacity by 2022. In 2014, 1.5 million passengers from over 150 countries vacationed aboard MSC Cruises fleet, one of the youngest at sea. MSC Cruises has offices in 45 countries and employees...
16,000 staff globally."

From my viewpoint, their 12 ships average about seven years old, firmly making it one of the youngest fleets in the industry. The current ships average about 2,500 guests per ship (lower beds of course) with their most recent four ships all in the 3200-3500 range. Their next one, MSC Seaside, to be homebased in Miami starting in December 2017, will be the line’s biggest ship at 154,000 gross tons and having 4,140 lower beds. The advance look I’ve had at the visuals and features of MSC Seaside look great and it will be an appropriate progression from the ships like MSC Divina.

All across the current fleet, space ratios go from 34-42 (the more recent ships are more spacious) and the guest/crew ratios range from 2.0-2.5. All of these numbers compare favorably to their competitor’s large ships in the industry. Not surprisingly, the newer MSC ships have more balconies and are more feature driven.

Most of their ships operate out of Europe of course, usually along the Mediterranean with multiple ports of embarkation and debarkation. It’s an operation that most American cruise companies don’t utilize but it works quite well for MSC.

The brand has also introduced an accommodations area on recent ships called Yacht Club. It’s an exclusive area that gives these guests special features including a private lounge, a private pool/whirlpool/sun area, separate restaurant for breakfast, lunch and dinner, unlimited beverages including alcoholic ones in the lounge and via mini-bars, outstanding butler service and more. It carries a healthy surcharge over the next lower category but for guests who want a quiet oasis and improved service and amenities while still having access to the activities and liveliness of the rest of the ship, it’s a terrific option.

**THE SHIP -** MSC Divina debuted in May 2012 and has been homeporting in Miami since November 2015 as part of the company’s increased emphasis on the American market. At 139,072 gross tons and lower beds numbering 3,502 it’s got a space ratio of 40. The ship can carry up to 4,345 when completely full. With a crew of 1,388, the guest to crew figure comes out to 2.5. All of these figures places MSC Divina comfortably in the large ship mix.

The length and width measurements of the ships are quite normal for a ship this size but somehow when I was walking around, both inside and outside, there’s something about the layout that made the ship seem long and sleek; that was a nice aspect. And the overall feeling of being on an Italian-style ship even comes through with the décor as well as deck and facility names.

MSC Divina may not be as features driven as some of the other big new ships that have come out (for example, it only has one water slide) but it’s got everything that couples, singles and families could need for a seven night cruise. The décor of the ship is one of its best features with a combination of brightness and subdued elegance, all working together. Some rooms, like the atrium, Piazza del Doge (bar/gelato/snacks) and Sports Bar, all have a classy bright feel while most of the other rooms have a more subdued color scheme.

The company touts that its main showroom, the Pantheon Theater, at just over 1,600 seats, is the largest at sea. It really is large but sightlines are good and the sound system is excellent. There’s a range of small lounges with varying activities that all work together but offering up different types of options. No guest is going to lack for drinking and eating opportunities; there are officially 14 bars and nine restaurants listed (and that doesn’t even include Yacht Club).

With all kinds of entertainment, sports and wellness areas, shopping, pools, miscellaneous facilities for all ages and lots for family fun in the mix, it’s a solid entry into the highly competitive Florida/Caribbean category.

**THE CRUISE -** This 7-night Eastern Caribbean itinerary was about as basic as it gets: two days at sea, full-day calls in St. Thomas and San Juan, another day at sea and then, originally planned, a full day call at Great Stirrup Key (it’s Norwegian Cruise Line’s private island; MSC
rents it out). But, a medical emergency delayed our actual departure from San Juan making a change necessary. The ship handled the announcements for what was going on exceptionally well. We couldn’t make the private island so we had an extra half-day at sea and then a half-day call in Nassau.

In talking with fellow guests, they really enjoyed the ports. About 60% of the guests came from the United States and Canada and it seemed like a heavy portion of them were first-time cruisers. Of the other 40%, most were from Europe, with essentially equal numbers from England, Germany and Spain. For them, the ports were terrific. And, being between the Thanksgiving and end-of-year holidays, there were 257 youngsters under 19 and they were very well behaved overall.

St. Thomas is still considered one of the main shopping ports in the Caribbean. The ship docks right at Havensight Mall which has a huge number of stores. It’s a great spot to buy booze since its part of the United States and the customs allowance is as good as it gets. As for other items such as jewelry, electronics and clothing, etc., it’s important to know what prices stateside might be so you know if you’re getting a good deal. Stores like Captain’s Corner and Outrigger are reliable for a wide range of items including clothing and souvenirs. And, for a terrific off-the-ship lunch spot, the new BBQ restaurant, The Hungry Rooster, is outstanding.

But, the key is still to get away from the mall or even downtown and get out and enjoy the island. Historic and scenic spots do exist but it’s the beaches and water-borne activities that really are the highlights. Magens Bay is gorgeous and shows up on all the lists of the best beaches. There’s snorkeling, kayaking, dolphin swimming and even side trips to nearby St. John Island.

San Juan, also part of the United States but seemingly a world apart at times has renovated the old city which is in easy walking distance from the ship and fun to explore. It is not a great shopping port but there are plenty of restaurants to enjoy, including La Barrachina, the home of the first Pina Colada. They’re quite yummy and the food is delicious. And it’s not that long a walk to El Morro, the 16th century fort that protected this end of the island.

The more adventurous can and should get out to El Yunque rainforest and take a tour or do some hiking. It’s just beautiful. Of course, for those with a different mindset, the tour of the Bacardi Rum Factory is a good option.

On cruises that go to the private island, there are plenty of water-sport options or it’s fun to just hang around and enjoy the beach. On this cruise, with only four hours in Nassau, it wasn’t really enough time to do anything major. And with four other ships there that day, the main parts of town were going to be quite crowded anyway. It seemed like a significant portion of the guests (including me) never got off the ship.

The alternating Western Caribbean itinerary also offers Nassau but includes Georgetown, Grand Cayman; Falmouth, Jamaica; and Cozumel, Mexico. All three are very popular and there’s a wide range of things to do. The hotel director told me the per cent of guests from the United States and Canada goes up to about 60% on Western Caribbean runs.

A little bit about shore excursions: none of these islands are so big or so complicated that visitors can’t do things on their own. But the ships all offer up a wide range of pre-planned shore excursions that really make it easy to get around, especially for first-timers. They also have a great sense of protection and also the reliability of getting back to the ship on time. The key thing in enjoying any of the islands on either of the itineraries is to GET OUT OF TOWN and see what else there is on each island. Otherwise, it’s possible to come home and lament that all islands are the same. They’re not, you just have to seek out the non-town options. OK, I’ll get off my soapbox now.

PUBLIC ROOMS AND ACTIVITIES - The ship itself is lovely with a wide variety of décor, virtually all of it quite calming and elegant. But even the places where there are bright lights and neon and chrome, it done very classily. Many of the rooms actually have a fairly subdued color
CRUISE FACTS — MSC DIVINA

Passenger Capacity: 3,502 (lowers) 4,345 (total)  
Number of Crew: 1,388  
Tonnage: 139,072  
Length: 1,094 feet  
Beam: 125 feet  
Draft: 28 feet  
Builder: STX France  
Entered Service: May 1995  
Registry: Panama  
Maximum Speed: 22 Knots  
Propulsion: Diesel Electric  
Passenger Decks: 13

Ocean & Cruise News Classification: SUPERIOR - 4 STAR+

Passenger Cabins:
Suites w/Veranda .................................................97  
Staterooms w/Veranda ..............................1131  
Outside Staterooms w/o Verandah ...........131  
Inside Staterooms ........................................392

Services and Amenities: Aurea Spa (massage rooms, gym, beauty salon, thermal bath, relaxation room); 24-hour reception desk; Cybercafé; Video arcades; Cigar lounge; Shopping (lots); Main showroom and many lounges for music/activities; Excursion desk; Casino; Sports bar; Photo shop/gallery; Multiple pools (inside and out) and whirlpools; Yacht Club (lounge, reception area, exclusive restaurant, pool deck/whirlpools/bar); Walking track; Facilities for youngsters; Waterslide; Library; Conference rooms; Sports arena; F1 Simulator; 4D Cinema; Adults-only solarium; Bars (over a dozen).

Restaurants: Black Crab and Villa Rosa (two main restaurants); Calumet and Manitou buffet restaurants; Eataly Steakhouse and Ristorante Italia; La Cantina di Bacco (Eataly Pizza and wine); Galaxy Restaurant; Sports Bar; Le Muse (for Yacht Club)

Grading System: A basic score of 2 indicates the ship being graded is performing to the general standards of the classification. A score of 3 indicates it is performing above what is normally expected for the classification. A score of 1 indicates it is performing below what is normally expected for the classification. A + or – is used to indicate minor differences, but not enough to warrant a higher or lower whole number.

Level of Activity .................................................2.5  
Main Dining .........................................................2  
Alternate Dining .............................................3  
Food Presentation .............................................2.5  
Overall .........................................................2.5  
Quality of Ports .................................................2  
Passenger Conveniences ....................2.5  
Quality of Food ...............................................2.5  
Food Preparation ............................................2.5  
Stateroom Comfort .................................3

Suggested Tipping: Suggested tips for dining and housekeeping staff ($12 per day/per adult; $6 per day/children 3-18; under 3, no charge); 15% service charge for onboard services and beverages

Strong Points: Italian/Mediterranean-style cruise; lots of Italian cuisine/beverages; lively, active ship; outstanding entertainment; lots of live music; beautiful, elegant décor; plenty to do; lively nighttime ship; well-staffed reception desk; Eataly restaurant

Weak Points: Standard crowding on sea days around pool; on-board revenue pursuit; rushed wait-staff at peak times.
scheme.

Inside the ships, all of the public rooms are located on decks 5, 6 and 7. Outside, the public spaces go from deck 14 on up to 18. Staterooms are mostly on decks 8 through 13 with a few each on 5, 15 and 16. Getting around is quite easy as there are four sets of elevators/staircases. Once you know where your stateroom is located, it’s easy to figure out which one of them to use.

The main restaurants that come included with the cruise are on deck 5, 6, 7 and 14 with guests having the choice of a fixed dining time/table or freedom to go at different times each night. And the extensive buffets are next to the main pool area. The extra-fee restaurants are the three-part Eataly (which includes Ristorante Italia, the Eataly Steakhouse and La Cantina di Bacco for pizza) on deck 7 and the Galaxy Restaurant (also the late night disco) with great views up on deck 16.

The huge main showroom, Pantheon Theater, anchors the front of deck 6 and 7. Deck 5 is where one finds the reception desk (actually two of them on both sides of the lower floor of the atrium) and a very popular bar. Adjacent are the Cybercafé which did not seem to be heavily used since there’s fast and continuous wi-fi connectivity all around the ship. All along decks 6 and 7 are restaurants, bars, lounges, shopping and more. Here are some of my favorites:

Caffe Italia: a coffee bar with alcoholic beverages as well. On deck 7 it overlooks the open atrium and it’s a terrific spot for a morning or late night coffee; they serve Segafredo Zanetti brand. It’s a great centrally located meeting spot at all hours.

La Cantina di Bacco: Also on deck 7, it’s a wine bar where one can get a glass or bottle from a very extensive list at reasonable prices. There’s a selection of Italian appetizers/snacks that can be had as well. It’s also the place to get the wonderful pizza from Eataly (more on that in the dining/restaurant section).

Piazza del Doge: on deck 6 adjacent to the casino, it’s painted and furnished to seem like a real Italian piazza. So naturally, this is where they serve delicious gelato and other snacks and coffees. Surrounding the piazza are some of the shops.

Black & White Lounge, Golden Jazz Bar and Le Luna: three lounges on deck 7 for live music during the evenings and activities like dance classes, trivia contests and language lessons during the day.

The Garden Pool and Bar: aft on deck 15, it’s got an infinity feel to the pool with a sitting area and tiled sunning feel. It does get crowded of course on sea days. The adjacent Garden Bar is a cool place for a late afternoon or late night drink.

Tritone Poseidon, Aqua Park and Le Sirene: these are the pool areas on deck 14. Le Sirene has a retractable roof which opens in the nicer weather of course. It’s a great place to escape to when the weather’s not great. There are plenty of whirlpools at all pool areas.

Gym: all the way forward on deck 14, it’s a terrific gym with over a dozen treadmills/bikes and several dozen pieces of other equipment. It’s quite popular.

Aurea Spa: adjacent to the gym, it’s a really pretty spa/beauty parlor area with lots of different services and treatments. And there’s no serious push from product sales during or after treatments.

Other areas that have their own features/benefits are the Sports Bars, various arcade/video game spots, photo gallery, fee-paid private solarium, outdoor sports arena, library, casino, etc. And of course there’s everything that goes with Yacht Club (covered in the Suites and stateroom section below).

ENTERTAINMENT AND ACTIVITIES - In a period of time when cruise lines are putting full-length or excerpted big-time Broadway shows on board, MSC caters to its international crowd with a different approach that works really well since not everyone on board speaks English fluently. They have a different production show every night in the Pantheon Theater, which at just over 1,600 seats (MSC says is the largest showroom at sea). Interestingly, all shows for second sitting dinner
guests are held at 7 pm and then shows for first sitting guests are put on about 9:15 or so. The exceptionally talented cast goes from a handful of singers up to over two dozen, including singers, dancers and various acrobat/novelty acts. Every show I went to was performed before a very large, enthusiastic audience with legitimate standing ovations at every show. There’s a lot of each show that’s non-verbal and, while most of the songs overall are sung in English, there’s an Italian night, a French show, and loosely themed Swing and Treasure Island (i.e., pirate) shows; and, of course, all nationalities enjoyed the acrobatic/novelty performances. Occasional other shows were an early evening opera aria performance in the main atrium (great idea, bad location) and a mid-afternoon one-hour version of La Traviata in the main theater. Evenings offered up a wide variety of live music.

Naturally, they have all sorts of activities on the days at sea (three of them) ranging from exercise and dance classes, to pool games, language lessons and trivia contests. There seemed to be a decent number of guests at all of them. This was also a baseball theme cruise with MLB veterans on board so that had its following as well.

SUITES AND STATEROOMS - When it comes to accommodations, the ship’s 1751 rooms fit lots of different categories but essentially they break down into four groups: 392 inside staterooms; the usual assortment of outside rooms (1,359), most with balconies (1,228); suites; and Yacht Club. Each of course has different levels of amenities so it’s basically, you get what you pay for. The inside rooms aren’t overly spacious but are well laid-out and don’t feel small. They provide a very economical entry point for 7-night cruises. Outsides, with or without balconies, are the largest number of rooms and, again, they are all well-done in terms of layout and amenities. The 97 suites, one named after Sophia Loren, the ship’s godmother, are truly lovely yet not massive.

For those looking for a terrific was to travel, it’s the 67-room Yacht Club which offers: privacy and quiet; upgraded amenities; dedicated lounge/bar, restaurant and pool/whirlpool deck; and more. They come with: expedited embarkation and debarkation; separate 24-hour concierge reception area; outstanding butler service; unlimited beverages in the Top Sail lounge and suites; upgraded mattresses and linens; pillow selection, etc. It’s a healthy surcharge over the next lower category (about 60% or so depending on cruise) but for those who want an exclusive area with lots of amenities and included items and still have access to all of the liveliness and facilities of the rest of the ship, it’s a good idea. The guests I chatted with there felt it was a very good deal.

FOOD AND DINING - Not surprisingly, dinners in the main dining room featured a wide range of Italian dishes including pasta and risotto, meats and fish, of an assorted variety. Soup, salad and dessert courses included Italian specialties as well. And featured wines of course also were Italian. But there were plenty of non-Italian items as well, both on a nightly basis and on the always-available alternative-selections list.

In chatting with other guests on board, the two things mentioned most often as highlights were the entertainment and the buffets, especially those for lunch, dinner and late night (I do not recall seeing that many people partake in the dinner or late-night buffets on other ships). A first-time cruising couple from mid-Florida were thrilled that they were able to eat Italian food all the time, having most of their meals at the always-casual buffet. From a personal viewpoint, the pizza at the buffet (from noon until 1 am) is some the best I’ve had at sea. And the buffet French Fries were excellent (always an important food group).

Sticking with the Italian theme, the Piazza del Doge has a really nice painted ceiling and other décor making it feel truly like an Italian piazza; the gelato and Italian pastry/snacks are outstanding. My primary pre-dinner spot became the La Cantina de Bacco with an excellent wine list (lots of Italian wines featured of course) with various kinds of accompanying light snacks.

Naturally, there is an assortment of alternative restaurants that come with a fee. In partnership with the restaurant chain Eataly (extremely popular in NYC), there’s a three-part Eataly on board: Italia, the Steakhouse and the Pizza spot, all located
near each other on the main inside guest deck. They are all outstanding, with Italian-style dishes from pasta to Piedmonte beef; the custom-made pizzas are a cut above the ones on buffet. All items carry a la carte pricing so guests can pick and choose; prices seemed reasonable all across the board. The Sports Bar has, not surprisingly, a sports-bar type menu (at reasonable prices) including very good wings. One more fee additional spot is the Galaxy Restaurant with essentially a fixed-price menu for dinner and sea day brunches (Mediterranean-fusion cuisine). It’s got a great location with sensational views up on deck 17; it did not draw a huge crowd on this cruise.

SERVICE AND CREW - The official crew count is listed at 1,388. Naturally for an Italian-oriented cruise line/ship, most of the senior officers were Italian. The hotel director, an experienced industry veteran that I’ve known for nearly 20 years, was from Poland. In chatting with him one afternoon, it became very clear that his intention is to constantly find ways to upgrade the service offered to the onboard guests, including embarkation and debarkation. In total the crew represented 52 nationalities. And, considering how many guests were on board, they were by and large very friendly and efficient. Of course, there were the few staff members having bad days; that always happens.

One fun evening event had the senior officers, both male and female, in the Black & White lounge mingling and dancing with the guests. Since this took place on formal night, it was a great visual.

CONCLUSION - If you want an Italian-style vacation but don’t want to go to Italy, a cruise on MSC Divina is a very good alternative. The ship feels like a floating Italian island. It’s possible to eat Italian food at all meals, drink only Italian beverages from espresso to birra and vino (meaning coffee, beer and wine of course!). And there’s plenty of Italian entertainment and activities to enjoy: opera shows and selections, Italian songs and Italian language classes.

It may not actually be Tuscana or Roma, but it’s a very Italian way to cruise the Caribbean.

CLASSIC CUNARD OFFICE BUILDING ARCHITECTURE

Cunard’s former office buildings in Britain and North America are to become an integral part of the fleet’s flagship Queen Mary 2 during her major 2016 refit.

The Cunard Buildings in Liverpool, New York and Southampton will each be featured in a specially-commissioned set of images that will be displayed in the ship’s suites and staterooms when she re-enters service following her three-week refit next June. Behind the images is renowned UK architectural photographer, Paul Ward, who accepted the Cunard commission and spent a month researching, visiting and photographing the buildings.

Ward’s work started in December at the Cunard Building in Liverpool, this year celebrating the centenary of its opening as the line’s headquarters in 1916. It remained the global focal point of Cunard operations until 1967 and in 2004 became part of the City of Liverpool’s acclaimed UNESCO World Heritage Site at Pier Head overlooking the River Mersey.

Moving to Manhattan, Ward spent time studying and photographing the Cunard Building at 25 Broadway, which is highly noted for its architectural significance and grandeur, with the entrance lobby and first-floor ticketing office designated a New York City Landmark in 1995.

The last of the former offices photographed in the current commission is South Western House in the company’s home city of Southampton, a Grade II listed property in England which signifies and preserves the special architectural and historic interest of the building.

Queen Mary 2’s major 25-day refit will see all Princess and Queens Grills Suites and all Britannia Club staterooms, together with more than half of balcony staterooms redesigned. Fresh design schemes and fine details will pay tribute to the original Queen Mary’s iconic art deco heritage while keeping this grand ocean liner at the forefront of luxury.
Out of a complement of roughly 630, with the exception of 18, all were Captain’s Circle past passengers and the vast majority of those were “Black Card Elite,” representing the highest level. Many had booked a year and a half before or cleared a waiting list, as this voyage had sold out within hours of going on sale. The most-traveled passenger had sailed 2,028 days with Princess. These were an experienced group of passengers.

At 4:10pm, the Pacific Princess cast off her lines, blasted her whistle and backed out of the slip. The sail away party was already underway outdoors on the pool deck. The ship’s dance company kicked off the entertainment with a special song for the occasion, dressed to represent various departments among the crew. Then each member of “The Love Boat” cast made personal remarks saying how much Princess Cruises and this moment meant to them. Singer Jack Jones was on hand to perform the Love Boat theme song as he has done hundreds, perhaps thousands of times before, but on this occasion as the voyage got underway it seemed just a little bit more special. The Pacific Princess made her way down the main channel of L.A. Harbor, passing the venerable U.S.S. Iowa, the S.S. Lane Victory and Angel’s Gate Light while a spectacular sunset turned the sky shades of orange and purple over the western tip of Santa Catalina Island.

The first day at sea set the tone for the entire voyage. From the very first voyage in 1965, the daily shipboard newsletter has always been called the “Princess Patter.” This writer had the distinct privilege of being the first “Princess Pick” event of this cruise with a historic illustrated-lecture titled “50 Years Of Princess Cruises” presented in the Cabaret Lounge to a standing-room only audience. Everyone was eager to learn about the origins and phenomenal growth of this cruise line that has become so much a part if their own lives through their vacation choices. Relaxing days and calm seas became the norm as the ship slowly cruised south at 13 knots, just as the Princess Patricia had through these same waters 50 years earlier.

On this voyage it was hard not to feel like being in a real-life episode of “The Love Boat.” There was the crew in their TV uniforms starting the day with an informative interview/question and answer session in the lounge. It is fascinating to hear their reminiscences about working together through nine seasons on-the-air and their now nearly 40 year relationship with each other. Not to mention recalling some of the most famous guest stars that came aboard from the golden-age of films and early television. Academy Award winning actresses like Eva Marie Saint, Shirley Jones and Olivia de Havilland were just a few, of many fondly remembered as favorites. It was a wonderful insider’s glimpse into the making of a television show that turned out to be so important for the cruise industry and Princess Cruises in particular. The cast posed for photographs with passengers and after a break for lunch patiently signed autographs in the lovely Pacific Lounge, on anything thrust at them. The next morning, there was a cocktail mixing demonstration with none other than bartender Isaac himself, Ted Lange in his bright red jacket, concocting his signature cocktail “The Isaac.” Judging by the turnout at these events “The Love Boat” remains a firm favorite among Princess Cruises passengers.

One special culinary treat on this trip, was the lavish Sunday Brunch arranged in the Club Restaurant. Normally reserved for guests on the annual World Cruise, this massive spread was laid out for the Anniversary Cruise as well. Nearly every food group imaginable could be found from fanciful breads, cheeses, sliced Italian meats, goose roulade, fish and caviar to the beautiful desert table with offerings nearly too pretty to eat.

After four days at sea with the weather growing gradually warmer, the Pacific Princess reached her first port-of-call, Puerto Vallarta. The city has grown from the “sleepy little village” it was 50 years earlier when the Princess Patricia dropped anchor off the beach, as there was not even a pier in those days. Today it is a bustling city and Banderas Bay is lined with hotels and condos. The December 7th arrival date corresponded with that first call in 1965, but from this point on, the itinerary would deviate from the original, which only offered four ports in 14-days. The Pacific Princess spent two days in Puerto Vallarta so guests
could enjoy all that the resort had to offer. That first night, a Mexican Folkloric show was performed aboard in the Cabaret Lounge. The Sail Away at 4:30pm the next day was a rather noisy affair as two ships of the line were in port together. The Crown Princess blasted whistle salutes as her much more diminutive fleet mate left the harbor with each toot being returned in kind.

The next morning, arrival was in the port of Manzanillo, which had also been on the original itinerary. The city seems to be in the midst of a building renaissance as construction was ongoing nearly everywhere. Beaches and resorts like Las Hadas, had once put Manzanillo on the map, but for many years cruise ship calls have been limited, despite the city having a wonderful pier festooned with unusual artworks. This would be the turnaround point on this voyage. Fifty years earlier, the Princess Patricia would have continued to the already famous resort of Acapulco, as the southernmost port of call. Instead the Pacific Princess continued on to Mazatlan, the final port connected to the original itinerary. A very warm welcome was provided by dual fireboats spraying their plumes of water, while on the pier a military band and colorfully costumed dancers performed as passengers lined the ship’s rails and their balconies. A special banner read “Welcome Back m/s Pacific Princess In Commemoration Of The 50th Anniversary Of Princess Cruises.”

The ship remained in port until nearly midnight. Back onboard that evening, old-fashioned cruise entertainment, consisted of a session of Celebrity Liars Club, with select Love Boat cast members joined by Donny Most from the hit television show “Happy Days” and the real-life ship’s doctor. Later in the cruise, Mr. Most would present his song styling in a cabaret performance of classic hits, largely influenced by the great Bobbie Darin. Then “Ye Olde Pub Night” featured fun, sing-a-long enjoyment; a reminder of the days when passengers and cruise directors shaped their own brand of shipboard good times.

A day at sea would bring the Pacific Princess closer to her final three ports, all located near the southern tip of the Baja California peninsula. Loreto, La Paz and Cabo San Lucas had not been on the itinerary in 1965 but all were welcome additions in 2015. The backdrop of the desert environment meeting the Sea Of Cortez provided some unique photo opportunities.

While passengers spent the day ashore in Cabo, elves must have come aboard and completely decorated the ship for Christmas. Adding to the festivity, all of the staff donned red Santa hats, really getting into the spirit of the holiday. One evening before dinner, the crew gathered on the
Grand Staircase in the two-deck atrium and sang Christmas carols, which was very nice.

The December weather throughout the cruise had remained smooth, warm and perfect. It wasn’t until the 15th when nature let everyone aboard know they were on a ship. The Pacific Princess pitched a bit on its journey north as it bucked the prevailing currents. Overcast skies and cooling temperatures let us know we were heading home. Even if outdoor activities around the pool diminished, there was still much to do.

The final days at sea were eventful. As maritime history lecturer, my next presentation was a visual tour, covering all 35 ships Princess Cruises has had in their 50 years. There were question and answer sessions with Jack Jones covering his remarkable career in music, and later a hilarious time as Bernie Kopell recalled his encounters with the famous and infamous stars he met on “The Love Boat” as well as his previous roles including starring on the sitcom “Get Smart.” Another afternoon Gavin MacLeod met with passengers at a book signing event. One of Princess Cruises employees with the greatest longevity is Master Chef of the fleet Alfredo Marzi, who’s roots date back to the Italian Line. He shared his culinary secrets with passengers, then led them on a personal tour of the ship’s Galley. Of course there were the usual sessions of Jackpot Bingo and various casino tournaments among the 60 or so events listed in the daily program.

Each evening too was packed with fine dining and entertainment. Highlights of a farewell dinner included escargot, pasta, lobster and desserts of crème brulee or the ubiquitous Baked Alaska. For this cruise, Princess had brought in guest performers from their annual “Entertainer Of The Year” competitions to entertain with the best of music, magic and comedy. Actress Jill Whelan put together a very entertaining “One Woman Show” surprising the audience with her exceptional singing ability and highlighting comedic moments from her career in TV and film. A special treat was a spontaneous duet she performed with Jack Jones at the second seating show. This was just one more example of the many magical moments to be found on this very special anniversary cruise.

All good things must come to an end it seems and this voyage was no exception. In the early morning hours of December 17th, the Pacific Princess made her way back to the Port Of Los Angeles and berthed at Pier 93A, where so many Princess ships before her had made their own memorable voyages.

The 50th Anniversary cruise was now over; itself now a part of the history of Princess Cruises. It could not have been a more fitting way to commemorate the company that pioneered cruising on the West Coast. Happy anniversary Princess Cruises!

NEW DISNEY SHIPS ORDERED

Walt Disney Company has announced plans to build two additional cruise ships, each of them showcasing the immersive family entertainment, enchanting storytelling and unparalleled service that only Disney can deliver. The company has entered into a memorandum of agreement with the Meyer Werft shipyard in Germany. The schedule calls for the new ships to be completed in 2021 and 2023.

Each new ship will be approximately 135,000 tons which is slightly larger than the newest Disney Cruise Line ships, the Disney Dream and Disney Fantasy. Each is planned to include about 1,250 staterooms. While design plans, ship names and itineraries are still in development, the Walt Disney Imagineering team is already dreaming up exciting new ways to create the world's most magical oceangoing adventures.

Since first setting sail in 1998, Disney Cruise Line has been an industry leader in innovation and game-changing creativity. With the launch of the Disney Dream and Disney Fantasy in 2011 and 2012, the company introduced several firsts for the industry, including a water coaster at sea (AquaDuck) and virtual portholes in interior staterooms (Magical Portholes) that provide real-time views of the sea as well as sightings of animated Disney characters. Plans for the expansion of Disney Cruise Line come during a period of momentous growth and innovation for Disney properties around the globe.
Regent Seven Seas Cruises announced the promotion of Serena Melani to Captain of Seven Seas Mariner. The first female Captain in the Regent Seven Seas Cruises fleet, 42 year old Captain Melani is one of just a handful of women to ascend to the rank of captain in the history of the cruise industry. Overseeing 700 passengers and a crew of 450, she embarked February 21 on her maiden voyage as captain from Buenos Aires to Rio de Janeiro.

Seabourn celebrated another milestone in the construction of its new Seabourn Encore, with the ship touching water for the first time today. Following a traditional ceremony to commemorate this significant occasion, the ship will be "floated out" from its dry dock to its outfitting dock at Fincantieri’s Marghera shipyard in Italy, where it will undergo final construction until the ship is delivered in December of this year.

Norwegian Cruise Line has unveiled the English and Chinese names for the world’s first purpose-built cruise liner for the China market. The most innovative ship ever styled exclusively for Chinese guests has been named Norwegian Joy – translating into Chinese as (Xi Yuè Hào). The name Norwegian Joy emphasizes the experience that the ship will offer a promise that guests will ‘Experience Paradise on the Sea’.

Crystal Cruises announced that it will return to the famed Northwest Passage in August 2017. Beginning August 15, 2017, Crystal Cruises' Crystal Serenity, will sail a 32-day expedition-style voyage traversing the Arctic Ocean from Anchorage/Seward, Alaska to New York City via the legendary route (500 miles north of the Arctic Circle).

Viking River Cruises welcomed the latest additions to its fleet with the christening of six new Viking Longships during a waterfront celebration in Amsterdam. Recognizing the contribution the travel trade has made to the growth of the river cruise industry, Viking honored six of its key partners by naming them as ceremonial godmothers for the six new ships.

Carnival Cruise Line has postponed its entry into China by nearly a year, pushing the start-up of the Miracle from spring 2017 to early 2018. Carnival issued the following statement: “Following a recent review of our fleet-wide deployment plans over the next few years and the best formula for balancing capacity needs, we have decided to enter the Chinese market in early 2018 and remain excited about expanding our operations to this part of the world. Carnival Miracle, which was originally scheduled to begin service in China in spring 2017, will now continue to operate Mexican Riviera and Hawaii cruises throughout 2017 and will be repositioned to China in early 2018.”

Clive Palmer’s ambitious project to build a replica of the Titanic is now scheduled for 2018 according to a report citing a spokesperson for the Australian businessman. Earlier reports had the project being cancelled by Palmer. The maiden voyage was originally set to be from China to New York, but that has now changed, with the ship sailing from China to the United Arab Emirates.