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Sunday Travel

Smooth sailing

Fuel costs add a little chop to an otherwise buoyant outlook for cruise lines, including the Eurodam

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ABOARD THE M.S. EURODAM, North Sea » There's something about the smell of a brand-new cruise ship. It's not quite like that "new car smell" that dealers spray into their vehicles. Maybe it's the brass polish, or simply the fresh-scrubbed shine of the floor and on the faces of the crew. And added to that, the eagerness of everyone aboard to do things just right the first time.

The Eurodam is Holland-America Line's newest and largest cruise ship, No. 14 in the current fleet and the latest in the 135-year-old operation. Passenger capacity is a little more than 2,100, in contrast with other HAL vessels, which normally sail with fewer than 2,000.

I boarded this new ship in Southampton, England, more than a week ahead of her official maiden voyage. On this inaugural program, we sailed to Rotterdam for an elaborate ceremony and entertainment program which included a blessing by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Following that, the ship sailed to Hamburg and then Copenhagen, where her official maiden voyage began.

While sailing on this unadvertised itinerary, I learned a few things about today's cruises. For example, industry insiders say that now is the optimum time to book a cruise to anywhere, especially for those sailing in European waters. Due to the current global economic crisis, punctuated by the rising cost of fuel, today's high seas bargains will be only a memory in years to come.

The Eurodam is not a flashy ship, nor does it want to be, of course. But it is comfortable, well-decorated, and offers some innovations to its passengers. Taking a cue from some luxury hotels, the ship has installed some private tented cabanas near one of the swimming pools and in a more private area on a different deck, all available at an extra charge. It also has some special spa facilities not found on other ships.

There are many features that come with no supplements, of course. These include the evening shows in the theater, the digital workshop classes (paid for by Microsoft), and



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talks by a port lecturer. Guests pay separately for several other things such as alcoholic beverages, spa activities and goods bought from the on-board shops. There's a modest add-on for two of the three small specialty restaurants aboard. And, of course, you must factor in the casino, de rigueur on all cruise ships today.

My small, balcony stateroom was very comfortable, and overall I enjoyed this brief introduction to the new Eurodam. I'm sure it will take its rightful place among the fleets of floating fun palaces that for now, still ply the oceans of the world.

— Robert W. Bone / Special to the Star-Bulletin

FULL STORY >>

By Robert W. Bone / Special to the Star-Bulletin

POSTED: 02:30 a.m. HST, Oct 12, 2008

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For more than a century, Holland-America was headquartered in a 19th-century building at the Rotterdam waterfront in the Netherlands, where our ship parked to enjoy all the hoopla. The distinguished old structure is still there, although ironically enough, it is now a hotel named the New York. The hotel has kept the old "Holland-Amerika Lijn" sign atop the building, however, along with the twin clock and weather vane towers, all of which managed to survive Rotterdam's heavy bombing raids in World War II.



Robert W. Bone / Special to the Star-Bulletin
A three-story atrium is a feature onboard the Eurodam, Holland-America Line's newest and largest cruise ship.

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The Dutch feel strongly attached to their old shipping company, even if it is now entirely a cruise ship operation, and an American-owned one at that. Its world headquarters these days are in Seattle.

Many cruise companies who competed with each other over the years are now owned by large U.S. conglomerates. Holland-America's profits feed the coffers of Miami-based Carnival Cruises, a firm which also embraces such well-known operations as Princess, Costa, Seabourn, and even the former British companies, Cunard and P&O. In fact, Carnival is now the largest cruise corporation in the world.

Carnival's main competition, at least in the United States, is Royal Caribbean, which has also swallowed up some distinguished companies, notably Celebrity (formerly Chandris), Pullmantur, and Azamara.

To Carnival's credit, its Holland-America division has kept the old Dutch flavor in its

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fleet of mostly mid-sized cruise ships. By and large, HAL eschews loud decorations and such flamboyant facilities as water slides, boxing rings and rock walls found on some cruise vessels, opting for a more dignified atmosphere. Even its hulls are still painted a basic black, and thus are not lumped in with the "white bottoms" as other modern cruise ships are known.

Up to now, Carnival and other cruise lines seem to have been grinding out new ships like sausages over the past several years. At one time, Carnival is said to have presided over as many as five launches in a year. But, along with every other industry leader, the company's leaders exhibit less certainty about the future when it comes to effects from the skyrocketing cost of fuel. Mickey Arison, Carnival's CEO (and the son of its founder) acknowledged that his company has awarded no new ship contracts for the coming 12 months. (Others under construction will come arrive as scheduled.)

At the same time, cruise fares generally have been holding steady as she goes.

"The prices we're charging for cruises today are about the same as 20 years ago, even though the whole experience has improved immeasurably," said Stein Kruse, Holland-America's top executive.

As a general guide, sample cruise fares for the 10-day Baltic Sea cruise from Copenhagen currently begin at about \$2,000 for an inside cabin and about \$2,500 for an outside cabin, per person, based on double occupancy (not including air fares).

In contrast to many other travel-related businesses, activity has been brisk among American travelers who want to beat the tyranny of unfavorable dollar exchange rates by using a cruise ship as their hotel and transportation, often combined with such practices as taking all or nearly all their meals on board, especially in Europe, where dining out can be two or three times the cost of a comparable dinner in many U.S. restaurants.

While on shore in Amsterdam on this trip, I paid three euros (almost \$5) for a modest vanilla ice cream cone. I vowed to take all further ice cream indulgences here aboard the Eurodam, where they are, in effect, free. For the same reason, I took no meals on shore, except for those included in shore excursions sponsored by the ship.

Another effect which is becoming apparent in the cruise world: While the industry enjoys a reputation as a solid choice for American vacationers, it is even more of a bargain for Europeans, who live on a euro-based economy. Already, languages other than English are heard much more often in the common areas of this and other ships. The percentage of U.S. citizens aboard these vessels is likely to be lower now while citizens of the European Economic Community receive even greater value for their money, and are increasingly choose cruising as a vacation opportunity.

Robert W. Bone, who lives in Kailua, has been writing about travel for 40 years, and is the author of several travel books including the "Maverick Guide to Hawaii." His Web sites are travelpieces.com and robertbone.com. More of his photos based on his Eurodam trip may be seen online at robertbone.com/eurodam.

EURODAM WILL CRUISE TO CANADA, NEW ENGLAND

The new Eurodam is scheduled to make cruises to Canada and New England ports for the fall foliage season, move to the Caribbean during the winter months, and then return to a Northern Europe itinerary for the summer of 2009.

Holland-America offers about 500 cruises to more than 320 ports. Itineraries vary from two to 108 days, and their ships regularly visit all seven continents. There's also a Grand World Voyage, and sailings to ports in the Caribbean, Alaska, Mexico, Canada/New England, Europe, and through the Panama Canal.

Details for this and other Holland-America ships and their itineraries can be found online at www.hollandamerica.com or by contacting Holland-America Line at 1-800-SAILHAL.

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