



CUNARD

LEGEND OF LUXURY

‘THERE ARE PEOPLE GETTING OFF IN BERMUDA,’ a woman whispered to her husband. She seemed puzzled. “I wonder where *they’re* going.” Clearly, this information was not in the *Daily Programme*.

Wheeling my suitcase down the long, long corridor of Deck Three, I did my best to maintain an illusion of mystery and glamour. I couldn’t let on that I was going home to feed my cat, check the phone messages, do laundry, and resume my everyday life. People on great ocean liners do not lead everyday lives.

“Sample the Luxury,” the ad had invited us, seven months earlier. Bermuda passengers had soon booked 48 cabins for a homeward voyage on the most famous ship sailing the seas, the *Queen Elizabeth 2*.

We would leave New York at sunset Tuesday, in a harsh

November breeze. Two days later, we’d drop anchor in the Great Sound, warmed by brilliant sunshine. Inbetween, we’d discover—um—to tell the truth, we weren’t sure what we’d discover. That was exactly the point.

Cruise ships are part of our landscape in Bermuda. Year after year, we watch them come and go, yet few of us ever set foot on board. They are a setting for *other* people’s adventures. This two-day ‘sampler’ voyage would, without requiring a huge commitment of time or money, let us see what we had been missing.

Of course, the *QE2* is not just any old cruise ship. She’s a legend. Launched more than 30 years ago, the flagship of the Cunard line was designed for both cruising and rapid trans-Atlantic crossings. She’s the last of the great ocean liners, with more than 1,100 voyages and four-and-a-half-mil-

Cruising through champagne wishes aboard the Queen Elizabeth 2

lion miles behind her. The old *Queen* may not be the sleekest, the shiniest, or the state-of-the-artiest, but she has cachet. She's a dignified lady, once a great beauty who, with care and investment, is aging well. (The same could be said of many of her passengers.)

Though she was launched in 1967, the ship recalls an earlier era when people had more time—not just time to travel, but time to live well. Within minutes of boarding, I was reminded of the old saying that the journey is as important as the destination.

"This is going to be fun," declared my very nice husband (V.N.H.) as we explored our stateroom. "Room to dance," he said launching us into a cross between a Tango and a Viennese Waltz. We'd expected dark, cramped quarters, with a little porthole, and beds that fold out of the walls. But ours was a light, airy room with space to spare. "There's a bathtub!" I exclaimed. "There's champagne!" he replied.

"And a lifeboat drill at 4:15." He passed me a lifejacket.

After the safety drill, there was time to explore. V.N.H. checked out books from library while I checked out the spa. We swung by the computer centre, theatre, casino, nine bars, six dining rooms, and museum cases filled with memorabilia from Cunard's glamorous history. We located the shipboard mall where passengers could charge to their rooms anything from Band-Aids to ballgowns, postcards to pearls, teabags to tuxedos. Then we felt the motion. The gangway had been removed. The lines had been loosened. We were sailing. We dashed on deck, trying not to look excited. So did everyone else.

The lights of Manhattan twinkled in the dusk as we headed out to sea. The huge ship replied with hundreds of flashing cameras. Tugboats led us into the channel, then tooted farewell. The *Queen* acknowledged her freedom with great blasts of her powerful horn. "This is very cool," whispered V.N.H.

More than cool—it was freezing. We were on the top deck, high above the river, moving fast and heading into an icy wind. This explained why the smiling young women in the cruising brochures wear those silly—I mean silky—headscarves. The crowd began to thin. Those with heavy sweaters, heartier dispositions, and late sittings at dinner would hang on (tightly) past the gleaming torch of the Statue of Liberty. A few brave souls stayed on deck until we slipped safely

under the Narrows Bridge, with just inches of headroom.

There was still time for a hot bath before dinner. The fact sheet revealed the *QE2* converts 1,450 tons of seawater to fresh water every day. "Sample the luxury," I declared, filling the tub well beyond the water-conscious Bermudian limit of three inches.

I imagined the water in the tub would slosh around with the rocking of the ship, but the *Queen* is amazingly stable. The fact sheet explained why. Measuring 963 feet and weighing more than 70,000 tons, the *QE2* slices through the waves. As many as nine huge engines propel her forward at an average cruising speed of 28.5 knots (well over Bermuda's highway speed limit). If she's trying to outrun a hurricane or heading to a rescue, she can reach 32 knots.

Writer Sue Johnston aboard the QE2 in New York

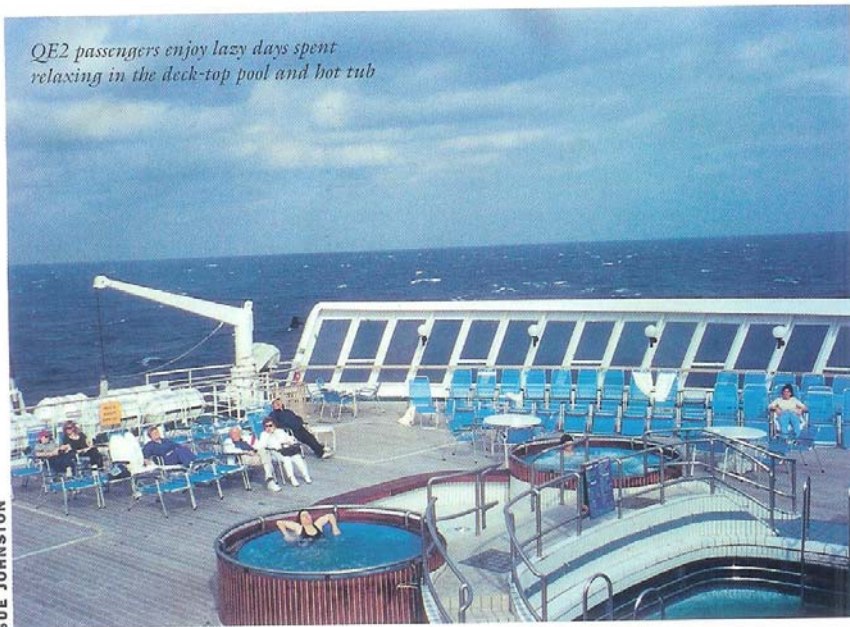


Her 10 passenger decks and 926 cabins accommodate 1,750 passengers. She has a crew of 1,016, of whom more than 100 are chefs and 178 are waiters. She travels with 1,000 bottles of champagne, 16,000 eggs, and 330 pounds of smoked salmon—and she's the largest purchaser of caviar on earth. These important facts reminded me that I was expected in the Princess Grill. They needed another princess and I was happy to oblige.

V.N.H. and I were assigned to a table by the window and prepared to be spoiled. We weren't disappointed. The

QE2 passengers enjoy lazy days spent relaxing in the deck-top pool and hot tub

SUE JOHNSTON



menu for every meal (even breakfast) presented imaginative choices. There was something for everyone, from the low-fat and vegetarian passengers to the meat-and-gravy crowd and the card-carrying gourmets. The soups were amazing—pear and celery, slow roast garlic, and chilled blackcurrant with

peach. Sorbets separated the courses—cassis, strawberry ginger, and banana rum. Tucking into a *mille-feuille* of sautéed forest mushrooms, I tried to hatch a plan whereby I would reside permanently on board. This goal intensified with the arrival, much later, of heaps of good, chocolate truffles.

Our waiters could not confirm the story that there actually is a woman who keeps a room on the ship year-round. She may be an urban legend. If she's real, she was certainly not in our restaurant. But a lady at a nearby table was making her 99th voyage on the ship. She would be back for Christmas, and her 100th.

"This is my real life," one multiple cruiser confessed. "The rest of the year I'm not myself."

Another led us on a tour of the

historical displays on board, sharing tales of the great days of sea travel, before he or we were born. After his 30th cruise, he simplified his life by joining the activities staff.

In terms of activities, I was content to sit on deck looking out at the vast Atlantic and sensing the motion of the sea.

SAIL OF THE CENTURY

Bermudians pack popular QE2 cruises

"I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT BEING A MILLIONNAIRE, BUT I BET I'D be darling at it." Writer and socialite Dorothy Parker said that, and it's a sentiment to which many of us can relate. Heather Henneberger, of Meyer Travel, gave us a chance to test our theory.

She organized the "sampler cruise" after spotting an 'odd cruise' in the QE2's 1998 itinerary over a year ago. "The ship is permitted to call in Bermuda just three times a year," she explains. "Usually it's New York-to-Bermuda and back in five days. Those cruises are very popular and it's hard to get a booking.

"But on this cruise, the ship wasn't headed directly back to the States. She was actually going somewhere—to the Caribbean—a very popular destination for Bermudians."

Henneberger approached Cunard to see if they'd split the cruise and let her offer her customers a chance to

sail from home. "That way, people could board here for the Caribbean, and another group could sail here from New York. We filled 48 cabins from New York to Bermuda, and 54 from Bermuda to the Caribbean and back to New York."

Will it happen again? "There's always a chance," Henneberger says. "Sometimes these things happen without rhyme or reason. I'm hoping to see it again. In the year 2000, it looks as if she'll come here on her way to Spain."

Meanwhile, there may be something on another ship for 1999. *Norwegian Sky* is being launched next summer and she's sailing from Bermuda to Tortola, Jamaica and other interesting islands in October. Confident in Bermudians' appetite for luxury and adventure, Henneberger's holding 90 cabins. ■

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For the socially inclined or those who need structure, organized activities included movies, lectures, art classes, team trivia pursuit, bridge, scrabble, sports and fitness classes. Evenings featured formal concerts, and cocktail piano or a harpist in the bars. There was a lively evening crowd at the casino.

And there was dancing—foxtrot, tango, cha-cha and such on one deck, disco/soca fusion (until 3 a.m.) on another. After about three minutes in the ballroom, V.N.H. and I fled to the safety of the disco. Next day, we joined the afternoon dance class for a step-by-step foxtrot lesson. If we'd been on board another week, who knows what we might have learned?

The big event of the second evening was the captain's cocktail party, a glittering affair for which dress was formal. In a sea of sequins and satin lapels, we recognised familiar Bermuda faces and, with them, raised a glass or two. Comparing notes, we discovered we were all first-time cruisers who'd taken the sampler because it sounded like a fine little adventure.

Some of us had sampled too well and were now hooked on ocean travel. We'd studied the *Queen's* 1999 itinerary, and after viewing the price list, were investigating the possibility of returning as a guest lecturer or lounge singer—or boarding as a stowaway! "The trick is to get past security," we

speculated. "Once you're on board, there are hundreds of nooks and crannies where you can hide." "And you can live on afternoon tea and happy hour buffets." "If people ask who you are, act as if you're that legendary eccentric who lives on the ship." "More champagne?"

I caught the group's Hollywood-esque reflections in the window and had to smile. Was this a masquerade? Or was this life, as it should be lived? V.N.H. and I dined and danced the night away, then set the alarm for an abusively early hour so we could witness our arrival in Bermuda at sunrise.

The Island was a beautiful sight as we slipped through the reefs, past Dockyard, and into the Great Sound. Safely anchored, we enjoyed one last breakfast before packing up. Both Customs and Immigration were set up in one of the bars. The idea of sipping a Mimosa while clearing Customs had definite appeal, but the bar was closed. The experience was painless, nevertheless. We all declared our CDs and new New York shoes, then boarded a ferry to Albuoy's. For us, the adventure was over.

After a half-day in Bermuda, the *Queen* would cruise to the Caribbean for 10 days. But she would do it without us. "All the young people are leaving!" moaned one of the crew. "It's okay," a ferry worker assured him. "More Bermudians are getting on. You should see them party. You will not know what hit you." ■