Travel and Adventure: Newest 'love boat' debuts amid romance but offers escape

by Molly Arost Staub

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. â€” Hundreds of well-wishers swarmed the deck around Neptune's Pool of the Ruby Princess. Ladies were bedecked in red formal clothes and gents in tuxes with red ties and cummerbunds, They helped Tristan Sabatini's, the signature restaurant onboard the Ruby Princess, exudes romance. Photo by Molly Arost Staub. Holland America Lines provides an escape for the entire family, including small children. Photo by Molly Arost Staub. The Sanctuary is ideal for those who wish for an adults-only location aboard the Ruby Princess. Photo by Molly Arost Staub. and Ryan Sutter â€” who met and married through the TV series "The Bachelorette" â€” inaugurate the new ship as godparents. Then, in another precedent-setting event, Kip Hickman and Danielle Vurpillat, of California â€” winners of a USA TODAY contest â€” were married at the inaugural. Surrounded by red roses and bunting, Gavin MacLeod, who played Captain Stubing on "The Love Boat" TV series, gave the bride away.

But should future passengers think this 3,000-passenger ship is just about romance? "In these troubled times, with our country's involvement in wars and the economy on many minds, vacationers should think about it as an escape," said Alan Buckelew, the line's president. Strengthening that, numerous innovations have improved the ship's image.

I searched the ship on my two-night introductory voyage for journalists and travel agents. I spotted a continental innovation at the Wheelhouse Bar, which now offers complimentary pub lunches on sea days. New enrichment programs including astronomy, navigation and the history of art certainly aim for more intellectual audiences. Although mixology seems an odd part of the mix.

Even kids get a new enrichment program with the Wizards Academy from the award-winning California Science Center. Youngsters explore the connection between science and magic in a participatory way. Another fun program is Yoga for Kids. And there's Wii for teens.

To learn even more, passengers may choose the Ultimate Ship Tour. They get a three-hour, behind-the-scenes peek, not just in the galley or on the bridge, but backstage in the medical center, the engine control room and photo laboratory. It's a bit steep at $150 per person, but participants do meet some senior officers and receive themed gifts.

That favorite, the giant outdoor movie screen which Princess introduced - Movies Under the Stars â€” has now been boosted with blankets and popcorn. My favorite space, the adults-only The Sanctuary, still offers a sea of serenity for an extra daily fee.

Noticeable everywhere, however, was a stepped-up sense of friendliness and help. "We're continuing to instill warm and gracious service," said Rai Caluori, executive vice president of fleet operations. This was most noticeable in a vast improvement among the crew's service since my last Princess cruise. Not just in the specialty restaurants, but even in the Lido restaurant, where dirty dishes were whisked away and cups of coffee brought almost as soon as they were wished for. One oddity noted in the Lido restaurant, Horizon Court, was the lack of sugar-free desserts. Passengers had to ask for such, and then an individual one was brought out. Perhaps this will be corrected on full-length sailings.

Although two new production numbers highlight the ruby red, column-free Princess Theater, neither was presented during my two-night cruise, so I couldn't judge. But one comedian in the Explorer's Lounge had everyone holding their sides; another was a bit tasteless.

The three main dining rooms fill the need to dine elegantly - and are only one deck high. "This is not a shopping-mall ship," Caluori said. "There's no sense of crowding."

In the specialty restaurants, Sabatini's â€” a highly romantic Italian-flavored venue featuring numerous tables for two and outdoor tables (with a $20 surcharge) â€” and the Crown Grille steakhouse offer steaks and chops ($25 surcharge). Service and presentation in both were immaculate. Suite guests also are entitled to exclusive breakfasts in Sabatini's. The Horizon Court Buffet has added innovations of waffle stations for breakfast and lunch, plus complimentary lemonade.

As for accommodations, my mini-suite cabin boasted luxurious linens, two flat-screen televisions and a bathtub â€” yes!! â€” which helped this passenger relax immediately. I discovered 31 wheelchair-accessible cabins, and that 80 percent of all outside cabins offer those oh-so- desirable verandahs - ideal for breakfasts or cocktails. Although those really in a mood to splurge can order the Ultimate Balcony Dinner, where the balcony is transformed into a private restaurant.

For a different mood, La Piazza, the focus of the atrium, serves as an old-fashioned Italian piazza, dishing out street entertainment such as jugglers and barbershop quartets. Amusement while snacking is available from surrounding eateries. For example, Vines, the atrium-area bar that offers 30 wines by the glass and seafood appetizers has now added 12 varieties of cheeses.

For those who must stay connected, besides Internet service, mobile phone access while at sea and Wi-Fi throughout the ship will be available in mid-2009.

Concerning ports, the Ruby Princess will sail in the Caribbean in the winter and in southern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean in the summer. Passengers returning from warm shore excursions will receive chilled face cloths.

Finally, the silent disembarkation, with passengers assigned to specific spots minus loudspeaker announcements, worked far better than other systems I've experienced on mega ships.

IF YOU GO

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