



## **Epic In America**

Cruise Week Florida correspondent Art Sbarsky provides our latest first-hand perspective on the Norwegian Epic:

If it were somehow possible for *Norwegian Epic* to dock right on the Las Vegas strip, it would fit right in with the other hotels; with its vast array of dining and drinking locations, entertainment and activity choices, and wide range of accommodation, the ship is the closest the industry has come to emulating Vegas.

It all begins with the sprawling three deck expanse on decks five, six and seven; wherever you walk there are dining, drinking, and entertainment options. The casino in the middle of those three decks, is the hub from which five entertainment, seven beverage spots and eight restaurants spread out. In addition, there's lots of shopping, an art gallery and the barber shop.

Most of the other public facilities are up on decks 14 and 15. The pool area on deck 15 seems to be a bit crowded but part of that is because of three great water slides and the Aqua Park. At opposite ends of the deck are the Spice H2O pool, bar, grill area for adults only (an important part of the equation as it's really the only even semi-quiet spot on the ship) and Garden Café/Great Outdoors with lots of buffet items, both inside and out. Deck 14 houses the huge gym (over 20 treadmills) and Mandara Spa; the main part of the kid's facilities, Recess, is here as well. Strangely, the only entrance to the really pretty Deck 14 Italian restaurant, La Cucina, is from above via the café.

As for dining and drinking, eleven of the 21 restaurants are included as part of the cruise fare (and the rest with modest and very acceptable surcharges). Plus there are 20 bars.

The line-up of restaurants on *Norwegian Epic* is more extensive than on NCL's earlier Freestyle ships in two ways: There are more of them (e.g., *Moderno Churrascaria* and *O'Sheehans*) and some of the previous ones have been enlarged (e.g. *Teppanyaki* is nearly twice as big). And, while there is no longer one main dining room, smaller very attractive rooms such as the *Manhattan Room* and *Taste* have separate menus and do not have a surcharge.

## **Shows Emulate Vegas Experience**

During the two-night press sailing I experienced two of the shows: *Cirque Dream* and *Dinner and Blue Man Group*. I love *Cirque* and this variation, especially in a theater-in-the-round-type showroom and with dinner/beverages served. It's an amazing, nearly-two hour experience, with a reasonable surcharge of \$15/\$20 per person for the dinner version. For those who do not want dinner, seats on the circular balcony actually may provide a slightly better perspective.

*Blue Man Group* performs in the 600-seat *Epic Theater* and this innovative, avant-garde, street-art type of

show may not be to everyone's taste but it's been a huge success in multiple cities for going on nearly two decades now. The excellent show goes about eighty minutes and there's no surcharge. Add in other evening options such as the *Second City* comedy troupe, the *Legends in Concert* performance, jazz club, comedy club and more, and *Epic's* entertainment really does stand out.

## **Accommodations**

The private enclave *Courtyard Villa* complex occupies the forward section of Decks 16, 17 and 18. Sixty-suites and villas make up the courtyard along with terrific private facilities: lounge, restaurant, bars inside and out, gym, pool, whirlpools, concierge and sunning areas. It's as if the penthouse area of a Vegas hotel has gone to sea. This is the place for clients who want the best of accommodations and pampering (butler service and more).

In the category of "form following function" it's the *Courtyard* complex on these upper decks that creates the boxy looking forward portion of the ship. NCL may not have created a sleek, traditional ship look but to make this lovely area happen, something had to give.

The rest of the accommodations take up all of decks 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 as well as part of deck 14 (with spa suites adjacent to the *Mandara Spa*). All outside rooms have private balconies. And many of the rooms have the much discussed "wave" design and unusual bathroom set-up. The walls of most of the rooms have a curved approach with the bed tucked into the wall, and the sofa extending out into the room.

## **The Basics: Showers & Sinks**

As to the bathrooms, a lot has been said (much of it negative) about the separation of the shower, toilet and sink. The first two have frosted, sliding glass doors and a curtain that can be pulled in front of them to create a bit of a private space. The sink is small and in between the toilet/shower area and the bed. It's got a large faucet that makes using the sink a bit awkward (confidential word has it that plan are already underway for changing these faucets to a better design).

The impact of the curtain is so positive, it's strange that they did not follow the curved divider on the floor between the wood and carpeted surfaces for the curtain. If they had, the pulled curtain would have taken all three bathroom parts and, literally, curtained them off. As it is now, the sink is more in the bedroom part of the room making for, perhaps, awkward moments.

There is some truth to the line's positioning that having separate facilities makes it possible for more than one person to use them rather than having one person monopolize an entire bathroom. It's innovative to be sure and clients just need to be informed of this in advance so they are not surprised.

Perhaps the best rooms are the aft-facing *New Wave Balcony Staterooms* and *Penthouses*. But getting the



## Epic Studios

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most attention are the 100 Studios on Decks 11 and 12. They are 100 square feet and now being sold as singles--they were originally meant to be doubles; the change also resulted in the lower bed capacity of the ship being reduced from 4200 to 4100).

While they are essentially inside rooms, the design is exceptionally efficient, with clever sliding doors over the wardrobe, TV and shelf areas. The beds are actually doubles instead of twins; the latter would have made for a more spacious appearance. The majority of the Studios are connecting.

Embarkation for the two-night sailing was a bit chaotic: check-in machines down, lack of signage or staff who knew what was going on but hopefully once they get going, boarding will be perfected and, perhaps, operate closely to the magnificent new terminal Royal Caribbean is using in Port Everglades. It just raises the concern of what getting on and off the ship in ports is like for new behemoths sailing today.

*Norwegian Epic* advances the concept of what a ship can be in that it really is a floating Vegas-type hotel. Add in the freestyle-concept and it would behoove for travel agents to explain this to first-timers. They need to know how they can go about making restaurant reservations, book some of the shows in advance and decide just how much of everything they want to do.

## The Old And *Nieuw* In Europe

Europe correspondent Ralph Grizzle reports stepping aboard *Nieuw Amsterdam* last week in Venice felt much like stepping aboard *Eurodam* two years ago in Rotterdam. Even the events were familiar. In both cases, the inaugural ceremonies fell over America's Independence Day, and in both cases, royalty from the *Netherlands* named the ships.

With deck plans from either ship, you could easily find your way around the other. "The *Nieuw Amsterdam* is a twin to the *Eurodam*, which I love," says Tom Baumann, president of Travel Leaders Leisure Group. "They toned it down a little on *Nieuw Amsterdam*. It has a little more elegance to it as far as colors go and some of the artwork."

Indeed, the key difference between the two ships is largely in the decor. Through art, craftwork and photos, *Nieuw Amsterdam* reflects the history and spirit of New York City (known, of course, as *Nieuw Amsterdam* to its Dutch founders.) There's even a New York City Checker Cab and a hot dog stand (nonfunctioning) in Club HAL.

During an age when other companies are introducing ships with headline-grabbing innovations--grass

lawns and restaurant complexes on *Celebrity*, entertainment megaplexes on *Oasis* and *Epic*--Holland America Line continues to steer the course with its Signature-class ships, traditional mid-size vessels with a mix of the tried-and-true. HAL President and CEO Stein Kruse calls it "part of the beauty of Holland America Line, consistency as we build classes of ships."

That's not to say there is nothing new on the 2,106-guest *Nieuw Amsterdam*, the fourth vessel to carry the name for the line. *Nieuw Amsterdam* debuts a new wine pairing dinner called the Master Chef's Table. The special evening in a semi-private room in the Pinnacle Grill features seven courses served on signature Versace plates. Cost: \$89 p/p, with a maximum of 18 people.

A mix of agents on board *Nieuw Amsterdam* referred to the ship in terms of "feels like coming home" and praised Holland America Line's high standards of service. Those who had been on *Eurodam* noted the familiarity of the ship but with slight improvements. "Always, the second time around is the charm when it comes to a new ship," Baumann says. "And they've done an outstanding job with *Nieuw Amsterdam*."

## Conferences Co-Exist with Webinars

A look at three trade conferences held this summer finds respectable attendance numbers despite a growth in webinars and ongoing concerns about spending money to travel for meetings. All three of the conferences--American Marketing Group (Travelsavers, NEST, etc.), CLIA's Cruise3sixty and Vacation.com attracted respectable numbers--900 agents for American Marketing Group, 1400-plus agents for Cruise3sixty and 1200-plus attendees reported for Vacation.com.

"There's a role [for industry meetings] but they have to be done right," summed up Rick Mazza, president/CEO of American Marketing Group, where we observed great effort was made to cover as many bases as possible for this year's conference.

Indeed, CLIA's Marketing Director Jim Smith observes the breadth of industry meetings are why webinars aren't forcing out traditional gatherings. "Webinars tend to be specific," he says. "We have our own webinar series for the cruise lines where they speak to specific aspects of their products--typically 45 minutes to an hour with very, very focused data and information."

In contrast, he notes, the conference featured a plethora of topics. "Cruise3sixty had over 50 CLIA seminars, technology workshops, cruise line product demonstrations, destination workshops," says Smith. "The offering of educational opportunities is so much broader in a conference than you can ever hope to communicate or process for the end user in a webinar environment."