

**INSIDE VIEW:**

# CREATING ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME EXPERIENCES

**A conversation with Marcella Himmelreich,  
Hotel Manager on Holland America's Westerdam**

by

**Richard H. Wagner**

**M**arcella Himmelreich is a second generation Holland American. "My dad worked for Holland America Line. He always spoke about his time at sea with lots of good memories." Therefore, when she read a notice posted at her school in the Netherlands that Holland America was offering a trainee program, "I knew right away that that was what I wanted to do."

After completing the trainee program, Ms. Himmelreich decided to return to Holland America. "I thought it might be nice to work on a cruise ship for a few years and then suddenly it has been 12 years. It has been a really great experience. I have been given a lot of nice opportunities"

The experience gained in those opportunities has led her to the position of hotel manager on the

Westerdam. In that position, Ms. Himmelreich is part of the ship's senior management team, reporting directly to the captain. Hers is the largest department on the ship and encompasses, amongst other things: the entertainment, the dining, the accommodations, guest relations, financial administration, and the shore excursions. In short, it includes just about everything that touches upon the guests' cruise experience.

#### *The Westerdam Experience*

"Overall our aim is to make [a cruise on Westerdam] a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I think the good thing about a cruise is that the guests can make it as busy or as quiet as they like. If a guest likes to relax and lay by the pool for seven days, he or she can do that.

[But] we have a variety of activities that they can choose to attend; ranging from: the Culinary Arts Center, where we have the cooking classes and the cooking demos; the digital workshop where we have a number of classes throughout the day; trivas that we organize; to Tai Chi at the beginning and end of the day. The guests have choices. They can divide their time as they like and make it their own top vacation."

"It's a premium cruise experience that we are offering. I think it is the little touches that make a difference - - the fresh flowers that we have around the ship; the little chocolate on the pillow; when the guests retire in the evening, the towel animal on the bed; the silver in the dining room; the luxury experience that we provide in the Pinnacle Grill - - the little details."

Service is a key element of this type of cruise experience and so Ms. Himmelreich not only meets regularly with her immediate subordinates but also "I manage by walking around to see how everyone is doing. We also need to make sure that the crew have the proper tools to do their job. That is why it is important to be around and see what is happening."

Keeping the crew motivated is also a priority. "We are really lucky with the Filipino and Indonesian crew because they are really great to work with. I think hospitality is their second nature." Still, Westerdam has: "training sessions [onboard] for the crew and sports activities that are offered for the crew - - after-work recreational activities to keep everybody entertained. We don't just entertain the guests; we also take care of the crew. Also, we offer food items that are served at home in Indonesia and the Philippines."

"Good living conditions are also important and part of the extra motivation. Two crew maximum in a cabin. Two cabins maximum share a bathroom. It is not like on the older ships in the old days where there was a common shower area. Those circumstances have really improved."

The Holland America fleet varies quite dramatically in size with its more recent ships like Westerdam being at the larger end of the spectrum. "I have been on almost all of the ships. I haven't been on the Prinsendam or the Nieuw Amsterdam. I had a good contract on every ship that I worked on. When I talk to the guests, there are some guests who prefer the smaller ships but there are guests who prefer the bigger ships. The other day I spoke to a guest who said: 'I always used to prefer the small ships but I have gotten used to the bigger ships now.' I think change is always, of course, difficult.



*Hotel Manager Marcella Himmelreich*

There are some of the guests now who only prefer the Vista class [such as Westerdam] because of the layout. On this ship you can walk forward to aft on all decks. I [also] like the way the Lido layout is, the spaciousness."

#### *Passengers on the Westerdam*

The sophisticated and cultural cruise experience provided by Holland America has won it a very loyal following. "Holland America has the highest number of repeat guests cruising with us. Just now on our last Caribbean cruise, out of the 1,900 guests we had 1,400 repeat guests - - more than two thirds - - and the same for this upcoming cruise."

Still, one does not have to be an experienced cruiser to enjoy the Westerdam. "Everybody is welcome here on the Westerdam and on Holland America Line. Whether they are in an inside cabin or a deluxe suite, everyone receives the same service."

There is a common bond amongst the passengers, however. "I think all of the guests who come aboard like to travel. They are here to have a good



time."

It is an international mix of passengers with an increasing number of guests coming from places outside of North America. One nation that is beginning to discover cruising is the Netherlands. Although the Netherlands has a great maritime tradition and Holland America has long been known as *the* Dutch passenger line, relatively few Dutch people took their holidays on ships. "I think people in Holland [thought] that cruising is only for the elderly and for rich guests. But cruising has become so much more affordable for everybody. It is a very convenient way of traveling."

Consequently, "in Holland and Europe in general, cruising is becoming more popular. When the ship sails from Rotterdam, we can have up to 1,000 Dutch guests on the ship. Even in the Mediterranean, we had cruises with 200, 300 Dutch."

"We had one couple from Holland on last week and it was their very first cruise. She won the cruise as a prize. They loved it; they had a really good time. I have never met any guests who were on a cruise and said 'I'll never do this again.' Once guests have cruised, they will always come back again, I believe. "