

**INSIDE INTERVIEW:**

# GOING ASHORE

**A conversation with Beatrix Bense,  
Tour and Travel Manager on  
Cunard's Queen Mary 2.**

by

**Richard H. Wagner**

One of the advantages of ocean travel is that you can spend the day exploring far away places and then return to the luxurious sanctuary of the ship in the evening to be transported to yet another exotic port of call. The way many guests choose to explore the ports is through shore excursions or tours organized by the ship.

To find out more about how a ship goes about providing shore excursions, I spoke with Beatrix Bense, who heads the Tour Office on Cunard Line's flagship Queen Mary 2. Ms. Bense, a native of Budapest, Hungary, has been sailing with Cunard and sister company Seabourn for some 15 years. She has been on QM2 "almost from the beginning in 2004."

Cunard's shore excursions are arranged by people working in the Carnival UK head office in Southampton, England. They also arrange the shore excursions for the cruises done by the ships of another of Cunard's sister companies, P&O Cruises. In addition to its obvious economic efficiencies, this arrangement

fosters a greater expertise about the ports and the tours available in the ports. Cunard only has three ships in its fleet and those ships do not repeat the same itinerary every week. Thus, it might be a considerable period of time between calls in a given port. When the Cunard fleet is combined with P&O's seven ships, the frequency with which one of the lines' ships will call at a given port increases. As a result, the people arranging the tours gain greater familiarity with the port.

"They have great experience. They have experience with the tour operators. They know who are the reliable ones."

Information flows both ways. "We report everything - - all the guest comments, all sorts of feedback." The ships suggest things that "should be improved, anything that should be changed in the tour description, or something that should be cut out of the tour program. We constantly give them feedback and they listen."

Of course, P&O and Cunard provide much dif-

ferent cruise experiences and the tours must reflect that difference.

"The [head office] seeks ones that fit with the Cunard style, image and our clientele. It is different from even P&O. So there are [Cunard] tours that are not run for P&O and the other way as well - - P&O has some tours which we do not have."

The arrangements are made long before the cruise takes place. The head office "checks on all the shore excursions and all the details. They set up the allocations [i.e. the number of spaces that will be available for a given tour] like a year in advance."

Passengers need not wait until they come onboard before booking their tours. Information about the tours is posted on the Internet and guests can book their tickets online. "Three or four months ahead the guests can pre-book the shore excursions."

During the period before the cruise, the head office sends reports on how the tours are selling to the Tour Office aboard QM2. The Tour Office is also in contact with the tour operators in the various ports that the ship will be visiting during the upcoming cruise.

"A week prior to the cruise I get the pre-sale figures and reconfirm one more time the allocations. If I need more space, I try to get more space and we set up the whole cruise."

"Before the first day of the cruise I get the [final] pre-sales report, we process these and hand out the tickets." As a result, guests who booked their shore excursions online will have their shore excursion tickets delivered to their staterooms the first day of the cruise.

Many guests do not book beforehand. Accordingly, the Tour Office, located in the Grand Lobby, is open each day for onboard sales. There is also a drop box where guests can drop off an order form when the tour office is closed or if they do not want to stand on line.

"Every day I update the tour operators on how the sales are improving. If I need more space then I request it."

To help the guests decide whether to book a shore excursion, the Tour Office distributes a list of the available shore excursions along with a concise description of each tour. In addition, Cunard's head office prepares a video about each port that includes a discussion of the various shore excursions. The video is played continuously on one of the channels of QM2's in-cabin television system.

Guests often have questions about the tours and



*Beatrix Bense*

want to discuss them with the Tour Office. In order to be able to answer such questions, the Tour Office staff endeavors to go beyond just reading about the tours.

"We try to go on tours ourselves as much as possible. [The staff] all try to do as many tours as escorts as possible so they know exactly the product. It is easier to sell and it is easier to give information."

QM2 does not cruise all of the time but rather spends much of her time doing transatlantic crossings. Thus, it may be a long time between calls at a given cruise port. "That's why you really need experienced staff. All of us have been here years and that helps."

One question that guests often ask is why should they take a Cunard tour when there will probably be taxi drivers and others offering tours at the end of the pier when the ship docks. Ms. Bense noted a number of advantages of taking a shore excursion.

First, you can never be sure what you will find on the pier. There might be taxis on the pier but there may not. The driver may charge a reasonable price but he may not. He may be willing to take you where you want to go but he may not. He may provide great tours but then it is also possible that he may not really know much about the port or that he may not have all of the required government certifications.

As noted earlier, Cunard looks into the tour operators it uses beforehand and requires the operators to have all the necessary government approvals. "It is the tour operator's responsibility but Cunard checks on all of this before it signs the contract with the tour operator." Moreover, when he or she books through the Tour Office, the guest knows the cost of the tour and what he or she will see before the ship even arrives in the port.

Furthermore, if a taxi becomes lost or breaks down and the guests are not back at the ship at the time it is scheduled to sail, those guests may well be left behind. With a tour booked through the Tour Office, the guests "can be sure that if anything happens, the ship will not sail without them."

Some guests simply prefer to explore a port by themselves rather than as part of a group. For them, the Tour Office "can set up private arrangements for two or just for a family. It can be customized. We do everything. The price depends upon what the guests want to do." Such arrangements can range from making lunch reservations at a particular restaurant to planning an overland safari for guests traveling on QM2's World Cruise. "Everything is possible."

If a guest cannot decide what to do in a port until the last minute, he or she is not out of luck. "We are more than happy to accommodate any last minute requests if we have empty seats. So even if someone has not booked anything and just wants to join on the day, they can come [see us] even at the buses for a last minute pier sale. Of course, it is advisable to place their booking as early as possible. If you do it early, you have a better chance of getting what you want."

The other side of the coin is when a guest wants to cancel a booking he or she has already made. "Medical cancellations, confirmed by the doctor, are accepted without any deadline. Otherwise, we have the [cancellation] deadline advertised on the booking form, which is approximately two days ahead."

When the ship arrives in port, the Tour Office staff assembles the guests who have booked on the vari-

ous tours and escorts them to where the tour operators are waiting. The assembly point is either in one of the ship's public rooms, often the Royal Court Theatre, or on the pier. "The guests get the meeting instructions in the daily program."

As noted earlier, the staff members often try to accompany one of the tours. However, there are only five people working in the Tour Office and some must remain with the ship. Therefore, the Tour Office seeks other members of the crew and people affiliated with the ship (e.g., lecturers or gentlemen hosts) to escort each tour.

"An escort is our eye to make sure that everything goes as per the brochure description, everybody is counted [i.e., no one is left behind at the various stops] and everything. We provide them an escort briefing because they have to behave like they are our representatives. So it is not just anyone. Sometimes, it is a big responsibility. It has happened in the past that we have given a briefing to someone and they have said 'No thank you, I would rather buy a ticket.'"

Even when the ship sails out of its last port of call on a cruise the Tour Office's work is not done. It also handles transfers to the airports and other destinations at the end of the cruise. Sometimes these transfers include a tour of New York or of the area surrounding Southampton prior to bringing the guests to the airport. In addition, upon arrival in the port, the Tour Office must assemble the guests taking the various transfers and organize them so that they will be able to meet their transport once they have disembarked and gone through customs.

"I am the one who sets up the whole disembarkation order, timing and rotation. I have learned during the years so it is easy to put this plan together."

Still, sometimes the unexpected intervenes. One time an accident involving another ship rendered QM2's normal berth in Brooklyn unusable and so the ship had to dock in Manhattan. As a result, all of the transfers had to be adjusted. Another time a blizzard was taking place during disembarkation. "It was great because once we survived [such] great difficulties, it gave us confidence that we can do everything."