

Costa 'Chinoise'

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By Allan Fox

Marco Polo may have taken spaghetti from China to Italy in the 13th century but it is Costa Crociere Cruise Line that has taken cruising to the Chinese in the 21st century.

Costa, looking to complement their already significant presence in the Mediterranean and in the Caribbean, decided that Asia was ready for the 'Italian cruise experience'.

Originally built in 1992 as the container ship "Annie Johnson" and converted to a very contemporary and stylish 984 passenger vessel, the 28,000 tonnes **Costa Allegra** has been operating short round trip cruises to Vietnam, from her temporary home port of Hong Kong, since 2006.

At the onset Costa tailored their on-board experience to appeal to the Chinese customer, with a Chinese Executive Chef, a Chinese menu and extensive Chinese dishes on the buffets, Chinese staff in the dining rooms and room servicing areas, and Chinese Cruise Staff and translators, to ensure that passengers understood what was happening and that they enjoyed their cruise experience.

The experiment has had mixed success to date however. Several cruises have sailed full but the majority of them have sailed with only 200 to 400 passengers.

Captain Mauro Muratore explained that it has been a period of learning for Costa and that they had been making changes as they progressed through the cruise schedule. For example; Costa original marketing strategy had been broadened to include a greater number of Asian countries and they had consequently reduced the number of Chinese staff on board and introduced additional nationalities to the crew.

Perhaps what Costa didn't anticipate was the Chinese approach to cruising, which is vastly different to their American or European experience.

- The Chinese are family oriented and as such children stay with their parents until they all retire for the evening. One consequence was that the late night revue had to 'cover up' because of complaints from parents.
- Shopping and drinking has little appeal to a family on holiday and as such the cash registers onboard are silent. There is, for example, no drinks service on the outer deck and the ships shop carries limited merchandise.
- Meals are very important, Chinese prefer not to order more than one course at a time, which they want to see on the table, in order to gauge how much food they have available to them and how hungry they may be after that course.
- The specialty restaurant, which carries a \$20 cover charge per person, is deserted.

Conversely, the most successful activity on board has been the live entertainment, led by Cruise Director Patricia Gomez. The Chinese literally join in every activity with a *joie de vivre* usually reserved for the Calypso isles.

It is not uncommon to have every available space on deck occupied during the dancing classes led by Giovanni Azzaro [Costa aptly list his title as Chief Adult Animator], whilst a packed house is guaranteed at the Learn to Speak Italian classes and the Wine Appreciation lecture. And it goes without saying that the ping pong tournaments are tremendously popular.

As this first season comes to an end Costa has scheduled a number of longer cruises [10 -15 day] prior to returning to Europe for the northern summer and it is anticipated that there will be significantly less Chinese who book to go on these. The Chinese do not receive as much annual leave [as say an Australian] and they are seen as reticent to go on longer holidays.

Patricia confirmed that a number of Costa traditional services [later dining, fixed sitting] would be returning to reinstate the Italian ambience, which may have been diluted whilst they have been in Hong Kong; but she firmly believed that Costa would be back next year to carry on.

Have Costa been successful ? Only time will tell if this bold move will result in a sustainable cruise business. In the meantime, check with your travel agent before you book a cruise to Asia - they will ensure that you book the right cruise for you.

Ciao !!