

QE2 Cruise of Christmas Past

by Allan Fox, November 2005



We arrived in New York City at midnight, at the end of a 36 hour journey, five days before Christmas, and the night was freezing.

Sleeping late that morning, we opened the curtains to a winter wonderland. It had snowed and the roads, and the roofs, and the cars, all had on a thick white overcoat. Traffic was slow, people were rushing, and the steam rose from the manhole covers.

The Port of New York is literally in the city itself. Arriving at the footpath the driver popped the boot and like a magnet we had porters unloading our bags and taking off to the luggage check in. Rushing to keep up we found ourselves in a cavernous, old building, adorned with balloons and Christmas trees decked out in the traditional holly and mistletoe and hundreds of fellow travellers. A group of wandering carollers were dressed as if they had escaped from a Christmas card.

QE2 sailed in the evening. Standing in the cold we pointed to the lights of the Empire State Building and the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, before we glided past Ellis Island and waved to the Statue of Liberty.

Our cruise would circle the Caribbean and return us to New York 16 days later. Before then we would visit Fort Lauderdale, Montego Bay [Jamaica], Bonaire [Netherlands Antilles], Curacao [Netherlands Antilles], Bridgetown [Barbados], St Thomas [US Virgin Islands] Cape Canaveral, and Miami.

Everywhere we went on the ship there were Christmas trees and decorations including a ginger bread village complete with ginger bread cookies just begging to be picked up and munched on.

Our cabin was on Mauritania Deck; it was clean and cosy and ironically had the largest bathroom I've ever enjoyed at sea. Restaurant assignment on board is linked to your cabin allocation so we were in the Mauritania Restaurant.

The dining style on board is classical European cuisine, and you can have as much or as little as you like. An alternative menu is provided for those that prefer not to eat too 'heavy', whilst at the Lido buffet you can grab a late breakfast, an alternative lunch or perhaps an evening snack.

If, like us, you just love to experience a bit of pomp and splendour now and again, then afternoon tea in the Queens Lounge is an absolute must. Attentive service, white gloves, crisp white linen, china cups, pointed sandwiches and Battenberg cake. Lemon anyone?

In addition to the formal and informal restaurants, there is a whole host of things to keep you entertained.

At the Golden Lion pub they can serve up a pint of Boddingtons, wherever you are in the world. Whilst at the yacht club bar you can enjoy the music and entertainment into the early hours. The Chart Bar is the only bar I've ever been in where there was a real harpist playing a real harp. And for that pre-dinner drink the Crystal bar was excellent.

In the Grand Lounge the live entertainment included the crew pantomime 'Red Hot Cinders' and the evergreen crooner Mr Des O'Connor. During the day we attended presentations, demonstrations and the occasional movie.

The QE2 library is reputedly the largest at sea, with the adjacent book shop stocking charts of the north Atlantic. For those that plot their own course in life?

The Grand Promenade is everything that shopping at sea should be. Harrods, Bally, HR Stern, the QE2 shop, QE2 Fashions and the QE2 Collection where you can buy everything QE2 in crystal, porcelain and hand blown glass.

Feeling tense? The QE2 Spa is my favourite spa at sea. Sitting in the sauna with the boys from Brooklyn chewing on an unlit cigar, wandering off for a splash or a massage and coming back to rest a bit more, made me feel as if I'd joined "the mob".

We had sailed out of New York harbour on an icy evening to circle the Caribbean. We returned relaxed after long lazy days at sea, invigorated with the thrill of visiting new places, and the warmth of making new friends.

The QE2 is a lovely old lady, who has been an icon since she first set sail. She will always have a place in our memories, for this 'Cruise of Christmas Past'.