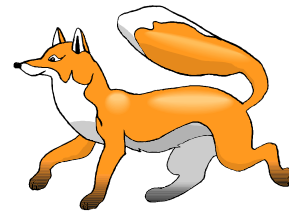


Cruise Report



Ship: Pacific Sun
Dates: 16 December – 19 December 2009
Itinerary: Cruise to Nowhere ex Fremantle
Duration: 3 nights
Add-ons: Nil

Introduction ..

I suppose there was only one good reason for booking this cruise, bearing in mind that we cruised on the Rhapsody of the Seas in October 09 and we sail on the Golden Princess in January 10, and that was to take our grandson Sean on a cruise.

To this end the cruise was hugely successful, although we shouldn't overlook the challenges of travelling with a 7 year old, even with the help of a good kids club.

The Ship ..

The Pacific Sun started life as the old Carnival Jubilee and is in pretty good condition overall. She is operated by P&O Australia, who have crafted an 'Aussie' cruise product, more of that later.



There one area that was noticeably poor, in my view, was the buffet.

- Rather than being an open space where you can see the layout and the locations of the various food types,
 - It was congested, the inevitable queues being in high traffic areas
 - There were adhoc buffets created with tables to accommodate what the original builders never dreamed of, like decent coffee ?
 - The ceiling is low [and the area feels cave-like]
- The hot choices were all there, but very basic.
- The cold choices similarly were all there but limited in range;
 - Only [same] 2 choices of juice daily
 - Same pastries, fruits etc daily
- No free grill or pizza offering during the day – although you can buy a pizza in the early hours of the morning [until 4am]
- Proper coffee is available at a cost from the adjacent café, which is an obvious makeover because it's light and airy and has *uber-modern* fittings



This buffet could/would get very repetitious in a very short time one suspects.

But as I said, the public areas and the bars are all well looked after and the fixtures and fittings in good condition.

The Crew ..

As a regular cruiser you get used to seeing all nationalities on board ships with cruise companies appearing to have a plan – Indonesian staff and Swedish Officers for example.

P&O have assembled a strange group and even though I thought about it during those rare quiet moments, it just struck me as odd;

- There were a multitude of persons from 3rd world Asian countries,
 - Chinese, Indonesians and Indians - Suggesting poor pay conditions ?
- There were a ‘few’ that were slick at their jobs and looked as if they had worked for *real* cruise companies, whereas most looked fairly new and still learning
- There was one noticeable waiter [an older Indian gent] who had obviously been around the traps and took shortcuts, like [not] offering coffee after dinner by addressing the table after he had served dessert and saying, “Let me know if you’d like anything else ?”. So we did, just to wind him up really.
- The Europeans were restricted to the shop and spa – usually contracted out to international companies – we were pleasantly surprised that they were open in Australian waters
- There were literally no Aussie staff onboard other than a number of young folks in the cruise directors team and some of the receptionists
 - The cruise director was from Canada and was suitably energetic

The Aussie Cruise Product ..

P&O Australia are essentially a 3 [maybe 4] star brand and this is reflected in the service levels;

- In the bar and auditorium it was always an effort to get a drink, which I can never understand. How much booze do you have to sell to justify a waiter ?
Is this a Diane Brimble hangover ? Not enough bar staff, hard to get a drink, hard to get drunk, responsible service of alcohol enacted, we did our bit and cannot be blamed ?
 - No bar snacks but chips [aka crisps] on sale
- In the room
 - No fridge
 - No bar
 - No water
 - No evening turn down [we thought we had been missed, until we checked]
- Around the pool
 - No towels – get from room steward, and you had to ask
 - No drink service – go to bar and collect
- Lot’s of Extras charged
 - Room service had a charge for both products and delivery
 - Pizza was on sale
 - Ice cream was on sale
 - Bar snacks on sale

And of course there is the contentious issue of on board gratuities, i.e. tipping !

In both Australia and the UK, cruise companies are considering abolishing the practice of adding a daily gratuity to the onboard account because so many guests request them to be taken off and, according to the press, P&O will introduce this change in 2010. Logic says that cruise prices will be increased to compensate for this.

Why is the change considered necessary ?

Fundamentally, it's because cruising has its roots in the USA where tipping is a way of life and everyday people recognise this. Service employees are paid less and rely upon the 10% - 15% gratuity as part of their income. On board ship we have the traditional envelope hand outs at the end of the trip and the automatic charging.

Whereas in Australia and the UK, where tipping is not a standard practice, a tip is given as a recognition of 'over and above' service and often there is no tip, because the person is simply doing the job they are paid to do. Wages of course are also higher than for their counterparts in the US.

The domino effect is that if large numbers of guests stop the automatic tips and say they'll tip those that have provided good service themselves, well quite frankly Aussies are not going to be tipping to the same value, and the commercial model that enables adequate payment to the crew just doesn't hang together any longer.

Sadly, when we went to reception to change our disembarkation time, the receptionist immediately asked if we wanted to take the tips off our account. Which reflects the number of requests they receive ?

On this trip the daily gratuity was \$7.50 per adult per day with no gratuity added to bar drinks, which I thought was more than fair and a fraction of what we sometimes pay.

Other Passengers ..

On the last cruise to nowhere that we took, there was a lot of heavy drinking and associated behaviour and happily this one really didn't follow the same pattern.

There were a lot of families and children, more than I expected, and a lot of first time cruisers trying it out to see if they liked it.

We took lunch and dinner in the dining room each day and the folks that we met were very nice, Jennifer was quite taken with Sean and spent most of one evening playing cards with him [switching between Jennifer's rules and Sean's rules]. Similarly Sean engaged a couple of ladies whilst we were waiting to disembark with his card wizardry.

Cruising with Sean ..

It was always meant to be a cruise about Sean, to see whether he would be a good traveller ? To see if he liked it ? To be the grand parents that did something special with him and to that end it was hugely successful and he has told everyone what a wonderful time he had.

- He went to the Kids Club and to the Kids Show
- He swam in the pool and soaked in the spa
- He went to the shop and successfully charged about \$60 of gifts to his cruise card
- He ate whatever he wanted whenever he wanted
- He sat in the window watching the ocean

From our perspective it was a bit of a roller coaster ride and in truth he's probably a bit young for such a different experience. But it was only 4 days and we took it in our stride. Just being on a ship energised both Robyn and I.

Conclusions ..

P&O Australia is enjoying tremendous success presently, which is great for the cruising industry as a whole. First time cruisers eventually decide to look farther a field and to try different products which self perpetuates with *newbies* continually 'trying' a cruise.

Their current fleet comprises the Pacific Sun [ex Carnival Jubilee], the Pacific Dawn [ex Regal Princess], and the newly arrived Pacific Jewel [ex Ocean Village 2 / Crown Princess, sister ship to Regal Princess]. <http://www.pocruises.com.au/Pages/default.aspx>

The Pacific Sun is the oldest ship and has fewer facilities than the Dawn and the Jewel. They started life as better ships, which make it hard to get worse, and as Princess vessels would have better basics, such as their buffet layouts and public areas.

If you've never cruised with P&O Australia, I think that you'd be better off with the Dawn and the Jewel.

The Pacific Pearl is also on sale from the end of 2010 but she is still sailing as the Ocean Village 1 [ex Arcadia]. <http://www.oceanvillageholidays.co.uk> The Ocean Village brand is being closed down completely and I'm sure there's a good story behind this decision, but I don't know it.

As for Robyn and I, well we love any opportunity to get away, even if the ship goes nowhere. And spending quality time with Sean was something we both wanted to do. As grand parents we believe that we can help to teach him some life lessons, and expose him to greater ideas and concepts than he might have otherwise.

And then we give him back to his parents, until the next time.

