

Cruise Report

Ship: Cunard RMS QE2 [Royal Mail Ship]
Dates: 20 December 2000
Itinerary: New York – Caribbean – New York
Duration: 16 Days
Add-ons: Stopovers in New York, both ways

Charles Dickens wrote of ghosts of Christmas past, a tale of poverty and hope. I'd like to take you on the Cruise of Christmas Past, a tale of luxury and adventure on board Cunard QE2, perhaps the most famous ocean liner in the World.

But let's start at the beginning.

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.

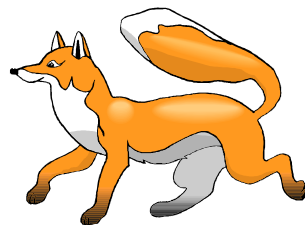
New York in winter is every cliché that you see on the movies and it's wonderful. Christmas trees for sale on the sidewalk. Santa Clause ringing his bell in the street. Chestnuts roasting in open braziers. Horse and carriages in central park. Ice skaters and hot chocolate.

New Yorkers enjoy their reputation of being loud and brusque. They are in fact very funny, very obliging and capable of incredible acts of kindness, even to tourists.

The Port of New York is literally in the city itself, and from most of the cities landmarks you can see the liners at dock. So it was the morning before we boarded, we would look out and there was the QE2. Between the sky scrapers or towering over the docks she was omnipresent.

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.

The boarding formalities were painless, credit card details for the cashless society, smile for your cruise pass, and follow me to your cabin please Sir, Madam. We had made it, instant landed gentry.



The QE2 is a magnificent cruise ship, of the old school. She was built for Atlantic crossings, which means that she has solid sides, lots of places to sit and watch the ocean through picture windows without catching the cold Atlantic spray and open deck space across the top of the ship.

She had arrived that day from Southampton and many of our cruise mates turned out to be from the ‘old country’, looking for a bit of winter sun. Ironically so were we, but we had started our journey in the sun.

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.

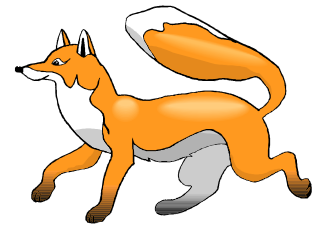
How can one describe so many experiences in so little time? Difficult, but let’s try anyway.

Fort Lauderdale is a wonderful place to sail into. There is a narrow entry channel where people live along the banks on either side. They have flag pools and deckchairs and they wave to you and blow trumpets.

Montego Bay is also known as the ‘no problem’ island. If the locals were any more relaxed they would be comatose. Great beaches and resorts but don’t wander too far off the main streets.

Bonaire is a divers’ paradise. The island is rocky and dry, with donkeys and goats roaming in the natural scrub and flocks of pink flamingos strutting their stuff.

Curacao is that place where they make the fancy liqueur Curacao. I know this to be true because I went there and I tasted. It’s also incredibly colourful with red and yellow and blue buildings being the norm.



Bridgetown is another laid back Caribbean location and the perfect place to go on a 4 wheel drive Island Safari tour. Barbados is what happens when colonialism meets sugar cane rum.

St Thomas has a history of pirates and piracy which goes some way to explaining why vehicles made in the USA are being driven on the wrong side of the road – our side. The blue sea and the white sands are amongst the best in the world.

Cape Canaveral is the home of the Space Station and when it comes to toys for the boys they don't come and bigger or better than these. We were lucky and saw the space shuttle begin its 3 day journey to the launch pad.

Finally, if you ever visit **Miami** don't miss the art deco district where the Versace mansion is located. It all seems so wonderfully familiar, because of the Miami Vice episodes they filmed there?

Meanwhile, on board, 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. So much Christmas spirit on a single ship.

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.

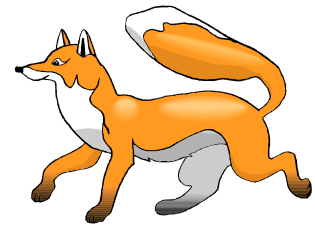
Cunard are one of the few remaining cruise lines to follow a formal dress code.

- If you are at sea it is Formal: Tuxedo for men, evening gown or other formal attire for women.
- Every now and then they declare an evening to be Informal: Jacket and tie for men, cocktail dress or similar for women.
- If you are in port the dress code is Casual: For men, slacks and a sweater or shirt. For women, skirt or slacks with a sweater or blouse.

Thankfully the daily news sheet includes a notification of that day's dress code and if you fancy a change from the black tux, why not pop to the shop and hire a white one for the evening?

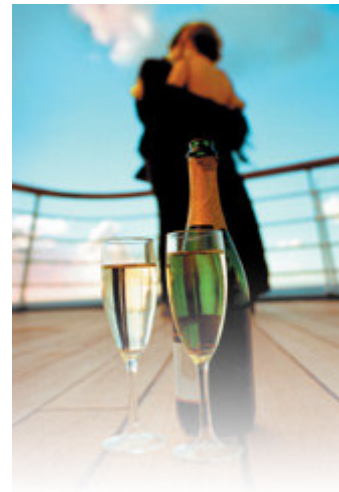
The dining style on board is classical European cuisine, and you can have as much or as little as you like. An alternative menu is provided for those that prefer not to eat too 'heavy', whilst at the Lido buffet you can grab a late breakfast, an alternative lunch or perhaps an evening snack.

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 reportedly 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. The huge thalassotherapy pool has an array of water spray features to pulse against the muscle of choice. 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".

The QE2 sailed on her first Atlantic crossing in 1969 and at that time she was a 3 class vessel. Later converted to a single class, there are a number of curious stairwells and lifts that don't go where you expect them to. Put simply nothing goes up and down through every deck the way a modern day liner does. However, this turned out to be the source of much pleasure and delight as we explored the ship.

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'.