

# **In Praise of TOPAZ:** **Developing an All-inclusive Product** **for the British Holiday Market**



BY PHILIP DAWSON

*Maritime Leisure Group's work with Thomson Holidays in developing a classic liner-era ship as an all-inclusive contemporary three-star cruise product with a unique entertainment experience for the British holiday market, proved to be highly successful in itself, asserting THE TOPAZ as a veritable trend-setter for the entire cruise industry.*



**T**homson Holidays, one of Britain's prominent vacation travel groups, took the initiative during the 1990s to assert themselves also as leaders in the United Kingdom's cruise market. Before any tonnage was acquired or voyage itineraries created, the market was carefully studied to determine what type of product would best suit Thomson's targeted market. An early decision was made for this to follow the general travel and leisure industry trend of being "all-inclusive." This approach was by then already well established ashore and was being offered in many of the company's resort holidays and other land-based packages. There were only a few all-inclusive products in the high up-scale sectors of the cruise industry, while a quasi-inclusive offering was also being introduced at the time in the German-speaking cruise market as the unique sport hotel- and spa-oriented Clubship concept of Deutsche Seereederi's original AIDA.

Guests of other all-inclusive products were interviewed to find out what they thought the strong and weak points were of these. Least appreciated were mediocre and repetitive entertainment features, excessive loudspeaker announcements in multiple languages and overly formal dress codes. Those questioned indicated that they especially wanted the opportunities of visiting a number of countries without having to pack and re-pack their luggage to

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go from place to place, and to enjoy the sensation of being at sea aboard a ship.

Once these customer criteria were established Maritime Leisure presented a detailed concept of the product to Thomson Holidays. A consensus was reached with the client that the new cruise product needed to be modern, informal and resort oriented, but also to retain key service elements such as ship's officers in uniform and some of the classic institutions of shipboard living. Only at this point could the quest be undertaken to find a suitable ship that could

be adapted specifically to meet the new Thomson product's specific requirements.

The ship ultimately chosen was the Fairfield-built former Canadian Pacific liner EMPRESS OF BRITAIN of 1956, perhaps best known from 1975 to 1994 as CARNIVALE in the

Fun Ships fleet of Carnival Cruises. The vessel was originally built with a fairly high standard of two-class accommodation for North Atlantic line service between Liverpool and Montreal, with nominal provision also made for cruising. When sold to Transoceanic Navigation Corp. in 1964 for service as QUEEN ANNA MARIA for Greek Line, the accommodations were substantially upgraded for service between Piraeus, Haifa and New York, as well as for a more ambitious cruising role. Most notably, the promenade deck suite of public rooms was extended fully aft, with the

addition of a glassed-in stern gallery. After being acquired by Carnival eleven years later, the passenger facilities were again improved, with the original enclosed promenades being upgraded as fully climate-control-



Photo: Ralf M.G. Sá

led circulating spaces among the various public rooms.

Following her career with Carnival Cruises, the ship became FIESTA MARINA in 1994 for a short-lived Spanish- and Portuguese-language cruise operation, before later becoming Epirotiki's OLYMPIC. She was sold in 1997 to Paris Katsoufis-owned Topaz International Shipping of Panama, renamed TOPAZ, then chartered for five years by Thomson Holidays as THE TOPAZ. The ship's public areas and catering facilities were refitted to provide the flexible "eat when you want, where you want" dining approach and the Le Cabaret dinner theatre concept developed uniquely for Thomson. Following on its role in the product's development and acquisition of the ship, Maritime Leisure Group were engaged to operate the hotel and entertainment operations for THE TOPAZ for the duration of the charter.



The ship as she appeared during her days with the Fun Ship fleet as CARNIVALE (above). As THE TOPAZ (below) she is seen at her homeport of Palma de Majorca, with her attractively classic lines set against the more modern expression of COSTA VICTORIA in the background.

### Flexible approach

One of the greatest challenges in developing this product involved adapting the ship's existing liner-era two-sitting dining arrangements to the open-seating flexible-hours approach Thomson and their clientele wanted. The service- and passenger-flow logistics were optimised within the ship's existing overall structure, and these objectives met without resorting to extensive conversion and rebuilding work. This was achieved in three ways, with the simultaneous restaurant service capability being effectively increased from 50 to 70 per cent of the ship's passenger capacity, allowing passengers to dine as and where they please without capacity difficulties and service bottlenecks:

- The existing restaurant, originally EMPRESS OF BRITAIN's tourist-class dining room, remaining after its first-class counterpart was appropriated for additional cabin space in Carnival's time, was operated on an open-seating basis, with passengers free to dine at their leisure over a longer time-frame;
- The alternative Yacht Club Café would be open 24 hours a day, with English breakfast available around the clock, and with various specialties prepared at different hours of the day and night; and throughout the cruise.
- The ship's original cinema was converted into the Le Cabaret theatre, open during the evening hours, with a fixed-menu being served during, and as part of, the nightly entertainment feature.



Photo: Mike Louagie

The ship's original cinema, centrally located among the promenade-deck public rooms, provided the ideal venue for creating maritime Leisure's dinner theatre concept. The small existing stage was enlarged, and the auditorium itself fitted out for cabaret-style restaurant service. Shops and other services located at either side of the auditorium were relocated nearby, and these spaces rebuilt as the service pantry, plate house and production backstage facilities. The existing promenade deck plan and passenger flow logistics were thus retained, with the new dinner theatre and its support services fully contained between the principal circulating spaces provided by the enclosed promenades.

### Clever choreography

Le Cabaret combines the show with a set-menu dining experience in a way that both the on-stage and culinary presentations are choreographed together so that the audience in effect becomes part of the show as well as being the dinner guests. The players on stage also wait on the audience at table. The meal is served from a pantry on one side of the auditorium and the tables are cleared to a plate house on the other. Movements of those serving are sequenced so that they all do the same thing at the same time, and are choreographed to the show on stage. There are video monitors and loudspeakers in all service areas and backstage so that everyone knows what is going on and the director can manage and co-ordinate everything. The serving cast, for instance change their outer clothing several times during each dinner show.

*Maritime Leisure CEO Jürgen Scharkosi, John Bywater, Managing Director, London, and Liudmilla Koplaykova, Commercial Director, Salzburg, pose for the camera on the occasion of receiving the Thomson Gold Award for THE TOPAZ.*

The show itself is a unique and memorable ship-board production setting THE TOPAZ quite apart from many other cruise products in her category. The professional players were hired in Russia, where they came from the Mirinski Theatre, formerly the Kirov during the Soviet era, and are today the only cruise ship entertainers who dance "en point" (on the points of their toes). One of the several shows they present on each cruise is a beautifully presented classic ballet production.

Le Cabaret's performers, especially those among the food-and-beverage staff enjoy the experience, despite the extra work it entails. This gives many bidding entertainers among the crew an opportunity to perform for an audience and to build their skill and confidence. The approach actively supports Maritime

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Leisure's commitment to stimulating crew career development, cross training and flexibility of movement. "Give them the chance to perform - After all serving is performing." THE TOPAZ's dinner theatre has already produced a number of full-time cruise ship entertainers in the industry. It is a mark of THE TOPAZ's success that the ship has a very low crew turnover rate. THE TOPAZ has in fact set a standard for all ships run by



Courtesy: Maritime Leisure Group

Maritime Leisure, where multiple talents are encouraged, and those among the crew who can do something special or different are given a chance to try out and to develop these skills.

### Late-night breakfast

The Yacht Club is very successful, being quite busy in the *wee hours* of the morning, after the night club closes and people go for breakfast before retiring to bed. A *smart casual* dress code is accepted here during the evening dinner hours, allowing passengers to dine in shorts and deck attire if they wish to, also providing outdoor service weather permitting. Additionally the Yacht Club offers various local specialties during the cruise as well as spicy items such as curry.

THE TOPAZ is a bright and cheerful contemporary product, with a distinctive touch of the traditional thanks to the many enduring features of the ship, including much of her original interior woodwork and fittings. The Mediterranean and Atlantic Islands itineraries include calls at a number of the more interesting and infrequently visited ports in these waters. The all-inclusive pricing includes beverages and soft drinks and most bar service, with the exception only of champagne and some *premium-brand* wines and spirits, as well as basic gratuities to the ship's crew. Shore excursions, laundry, dry cleaning, hairdressing and beauty services are charged at competitive rates.

Maritime Leisure's Operations Manager, Christian Verhounig, who served as assistant Food & Beverage Manager aboard THE TOPAZ, explains that staff motivation is an especially important concern in an all-inclusive cruise product with pre-paid tipping aimed at the budget holiday market.

This was handled by way of an "Oscar System," originally developed by Maritime Leisure for an earlier project. Going beyond the rating system used by many lines where forms are circulated to the cabins to be filled out at the end of the cruise, this approach gives passengers the opportunity to vote an Oscar Award to those who deliver outstanding service. The Oscar carries a financial reward to its recipient, proportional to the level of satisfaction voted by the passengers. Exceptional achievers stand to make quite a lot of money through the system - enough that the crew and hotel staff are truly motivated. Oscar has shown itself to offer at least the same type of performance incentive of traditional discretionary tipping, yet without the incumbrance to passengers of having to shell out cash for good service at the end of their holiday. The chance to gain the peer kudos and recognition of being an *Oscar winner* adds to the system's effectiveness.

### Satisfied customers

Since her 1998 inauguration, THE TOPAZ has proven to be highly successful in her market sector, netting Thomson a 92 per cent passenger satisfaction rate. In recognition of this, Thomson Holidays presented its Cruise Department Gold Award for the year 2000 jointly to Maritime Leisure Group for the hotel and entertainment services and Kyma Shipping Inc, the company responsible for THE TOPAZ's marine operation, deck and engine departments. The awards

are presented by Thomson Holidays to those of their suppliers that provide outstanding quality of service. The criteria for the accolade's presentation is based largely on response gathered from the survey and customer satisfaction forms filled in by guests or passengers at the end of their holidays.

The product has also asserted itself as a valuable industry reference for other all-inclusive, flexible and informal cruise development. It has proven the original concept's viability in the mainstream of English-speaking and British cruising, and has shown that it has a broad public appeal beyond the sport and spa-hotel oriented concept of the original AIDA Clubship idea.

*The former Holland America NIEUW AMSTERDAM of 1983 seen here, now takes up a new role as THOMSON SPIRIT, following in the wake of THE TOPAZ's success.*



Photo: Tom Edberg

THE TOPAZ can clearly be seen to have influenced the development of NCL's Freestyle Cruising concept and P&O's new Ocean Village brand. The trend has also stimulated a general move towards de-formalising and "lightening up" other cruise products, as these respond to a generally younger clientele and a more relaxed style of onboard living. Remarkably, as in the case of THE TOPAZ, Freestyle and Ocean Village, along with the German-market A'Rosa BLU, were created using either converted existing tonnage, as in ARCADIA's case, or

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newbuildings such as NORWEGIAN STAR originally designed for other services and adapted in the course of construction and fitting out.

At about the time *Statistics 03* is published, THE TOPAZ's charter will have expired, with the ship returning to her owners as planned. In the meantime, Thomson has taken a full-service charter of the former Holland America NIEUW AMSTERDAM of 1983 for service as THOMSON SPIRIT. In line with the company's business and operational approach, this is being handled as a new product rather than as a direct replacement of THE TOPAZ. The new THOMSON SPIRIT, which sailed

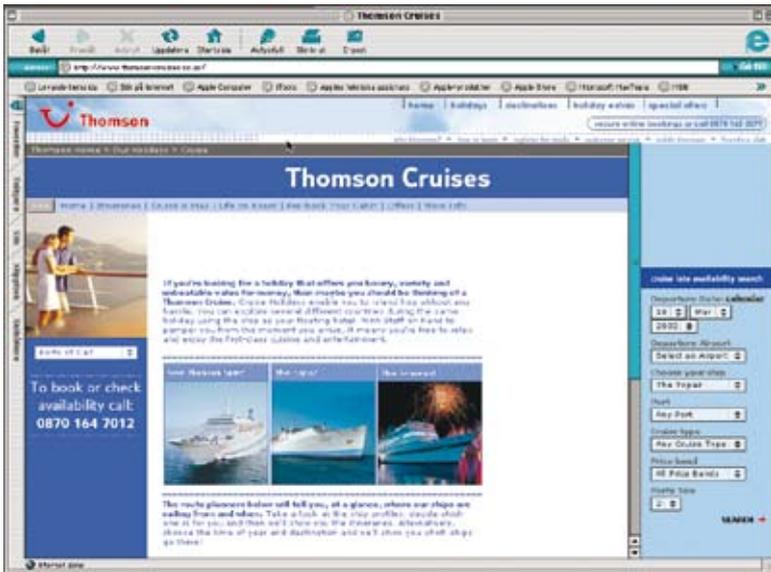
as PATRIOT for American Classic Voyages, is currently on a ten-year bare-boat charter to Cyprus-based Louis Cruises, who are in turn sub-chartering the vessel to Thomson.

with THE TOPAZ as an underlying product and service reference.

### Ship's character

In this way Thomson is able to offer their passengers something new and different every five years or so, where their overall product profile is adapted to the character of the ship being chartered. Thus the high capital costs of newbuilding are avoided, as well as the long-term commitment to designing and building something with a probable life-span of 25 years or more. THOMSON SPIRIT is an altogether newer ship than THE TOPAZ and THE EMERALD, already with a broader range of dining and entertainment facilities, including a two-deck show lounge and alternative restaurant. There is thus no need to replicate the Le Cabaret dinner theatre concept per se. Yet the essence of its service, passenger and staff satisfaction, has become a part of the Thomson Cruises product profile, and will manifest itself in other ways through the character of this particular ship and product.

Indeed the success of Thomson Cruises and of THE TOPAZ herself are valuable references for the entire industry and towards the move to more all-inclusive, informal and free style products. For Maritime Leisure Group this asserts the ultimate kudos and recognition of being innovators and trend-setters with the experience, confidence and vision to move in new and different directions. Charters have a limited life-spans, Maritime Leisure's style of leadership gathers momentum and lives on.



Family portrait - The Thomson Cruises website home page as it appeared at the time of writing, showing THOMSON SPIRIT, THE TOPAZ and EMERALD.

Since THOMSON SPIRIT will be fully crewed and operated by Louis for Thomson, Maritime Leisure had no direct involvement in her operation. Yet the product style and levels of service for this ship, as well as for THE EMERALD, originally the US-flag Grace Lines SANTA ROSA of 1957, also under charter from Louis, clearly show the influence of Maritime Leisure's work