

High-end cruising, with lots of sparkle

By Tracy L. Brown

ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

BARCELONA, Spain — Frank Del Rio won't use the L word to describe his cruise ship the Riviera — or its almost identical two-year-old sister, the Marina.

He prefers the term *upper premium* over *luxury* to describe the experience of a transatlantic voyage on one of Oceania Cruises' newest 1,250-guest vessels. "We underpromise and overdeliver," said Del Rio, chairman and chief executive officer of Oceania parent company Prestige Holdings.

The Miami-based Oceania Cruises, which caters mostly to active baby boomers, prides itself on providing a luxury experience, even if they won't call it that. Indeed, it can be difficult to bypass that intention as soon as you walk into the foyer and are greeted by the sleek, grand Lalique staircase and sparkling crystal chandeliers — not to mention the eclectic art collection throughout the ship.

But with cruise ships in general getting bigger, better, and more sophisticated, how is this newest ship — which took its maiden voyage in May — able to set itself apart from the pack?

The Riviera and Marina specifically target epicureans and food lovers. Oceania went as far as to anoint Cat Cora, the Food Network's *Iron Chef*, as Riviera's godmother.

"As the mother of four boys, I finally got a girl, and isn't she beautiful," Cora said of Riviera during christening ceremonies in Barcelona, moments before launching an oversized bottle of champagne into the ship's hull.

While it's unlikely you'll find Cora in the ship's Bon Appetit Culinary Center, other master chefs from around the world are brought in to help chef Kathryn Kelly lead classes at this state-of-the-art, hands-on cooking school. The classes cover all types of cooking, last up to two hours, and cost extra.

But most travelers intend to eat, not cook, during their vacation, and as such there are 10 venues to choose from, including: the Polo Grill steak house, Toscana (an Italian eatery that has a separate olive oil menu), Red Ginger (Japanese), Jacques (a French bistro led by chef and author Jacques Pepin), La Reserve (which offers seven-course wine and food pairings), and Privee (a decadent private dining room).

While reservations are required at those restaurants (La Reserve and Privee have additional costs), the stately Grand Dining Room and more casual Terrace Cafe and Waves are just as popular with guests.

For its debut season, Riviera spent the summer in the Mediterranean, with 10- and 12-day voyages that included sailings from Barcelona to Lisbon, Lisbon to Rome, and Rome to Venice. Each voyage included almost daily stops at ports such as the Canary Islands; Casablanca; Monte Carlo; Valencia, Spain; Florence, Italy; and Corfu, Greece. For the 2013 season, Riviera will venture out farther to Istanbul, Turkey, the British Isles, and the Baltics.



Oceania Cruises' ship Marina arriving in Miami in 2011 after its maiden voyage from Barcelona, Spain, carrying 1,250 guests. It features 10 dining venues among other highlights. DAVID ADAME / AP Images for Oceania Cruises

bul, Turkey, the British Isles, and the Baltics.

With arrivals as early as 8 a.m., and some departures as late as 10 p.m., guests have time to do shore excursions or explore the cities on their own. The cruise line provides free shuttles into town anytime the port is not within walking distance of the city's center. While the excursions offer the opportunity to catch many of the city highlights, self-exploration can be just as satisfying.

One exception may be special excursions such as one offered during the Barcelona stop in which a small group tour included tapas cooking lessons at Aula Gastronomica, followed by olive oil and wine tastings and a visit to the Santa Catarina Market.

Most of Riviera's cruises originate outside the United States, but their free airfare program provides flights from more than 25 U.S. cities at no additional charge.

Still, a trip on Oceania's Riviera is not cheap, with full rates starting at around \$5,000 for the spacious 242-square-foot inside stateroom on shorter voyages to \$14,000 for the 282-square-foot concierge-level veranda stateroom on a longer trip. Of course, many people take advantage of frequent fare specials.

For instance, promotional fares for an 11-day voyage in November from Miami to Miami (with stops that included St. Maarten, Antigua, and Puerto Rico) started at \$2,900. And that included food (alcoholic beverages are extra).

At the core of any cruise experience is service provided by its staff, which Del Rio calls "the soul of the ship."



A foyer in a high-end suite on the Marina, a new cruise ship. Marina and its sister ship, the Riviera, specifically target epicureans and food lovers. Oceania Cruises

With just 625 cabins (or 1,250 maximum guests), Riviera boasts a staff of more than 800, with 24-hour free room service and butler service for every suite.

While guests are lounging on the pool deck, it's common for staff members to offer a cool towel or cocktail. Enrichment programs at Artists Loft include lectures and hands-on demonstrations, and you'll find acupuncture seminars at Canyon Ranch Spa.

Want to just relax and read but forgot

to bring your book? Adjacent to its coffee bar, Riviera has an impressive library with cozy seating areas and shelves of best sellers and reference materials.

And if you're into high tea, the 15th floor Horizons (it's a dance club at night) hosts an hourlong tea with finger sandwiches, scones, petit fours — all while you're being serenaded by a string quartet.

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Personal Journey

A vacation spent building homes, ties



E. Graham Robb of Mount Airy with his new best friend, Diego, the youngest child in a family of five that was living in a one-room house in Santa Fe, a city 300 miles north of Buenos Aires. A team of 14 expanded and repaired the house and two others on a weeklong Habitat for Humanity Global Village trip. Courtesy of E. Graham Robb

By E. Graham Robb

FOR THE INQUIRER

Early on a chilly morning, my 25-year-old son and I could detect the odor of burning garbage as we walked down a dirt road in a poverty-stricken section of Santa Fe, Argentina, bordered by ditches full of stagnant water. Ahead of us lay a day of construction work with a group of volunteers and local families, most of whom we had met only a few days earlier. We could not have been happier. Such is the experience you can expect on a Habitat for Humanity Global Village trip.

I was the team leader for our group of 14 during a week in which we worked hand-in-hand with three "partner" families to repair and expand their homes. Our group ranged in age from 16 to 61. Though most had little construction experience, everyone found tasks they could readily handle, including mixing cement, digging holes, and laying bricks. Despite living conditions most of us would consider deplorable, each family had an irrepressible optimism that their efforts and our help could dramatically change their lives.

Each member of our group had paid and/or raised \$1,650, in addition to airfare, to participate. A portion of those funds was a donation to Habitat to help pay for construction supplies, while the remainder covered our expenses. We stayed in a small family-run hotel in the center of Santa Fe, a city of about 350,000 located 300 miles north of Buenos Aires.

While most of our days were spent building, we had plenty of opportunities to experience other aspects of life in Argentina. We spent a half-day at a local school, visited a community health clinic and day-care center, and even toured a local

Information

■ For information on the Habitat for Humanity Global Village Program, visit www.habitat.org/gv.

■ For information on E. Graham Robb's Zambia trip July 26 to Aug. 7, e-mail him at g.robbs@verizon.net.

brewery, where we enjoyed several of its products. We also spent several days exploring Buenos Aires.

The work was sometimes hard, and communication was not always easy, as most in our group did not speak Spanish, but seeing the appreciation of the parents and children with whom we interacted and the impact we could make in a short time was more than enough to carry us through.

As the week progressed, we felt the camaraderie building within our group and with our new friends. Lacking in material comforts we take for granted, these three families displayed an overwhelming devotion to one another and their community that left us deeply moved and grateful for the opportunity to provide a small hand up to people who were working hard to help themselves. Though our journey lacked beautiful beaches or glitzy hotels, my son and I left Argentina with a greater sense of satisfaction and gratitude than we could hope to experience on a more traditional "vacation."

And so it is with considerable excitement that I am preparing to lead a Habitat Global Village team this summer on a two-week trip to Zambia.

E. Graham Robb writes from Mount Airy.

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