

Small is beautiful

Eschewing the trend for mega-ships, one cruise line is sailing against the tide and offering small, intimate luxury. With its new liner *Odyssey* under construction, **Selwyn Parker** examines how Seabourn is redefining high-end cruising.



With mega-cruise ships, such as the Genesis-class, turning into floating towns, Yachts of Seabourn is betting on the nautical equivalent of villages. The company, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Carnival

Corporation, will launch three more 32,000-tonne vessels by 2011. The first of them, the ultra-luxury *Seabourn Odyssey*, under construction at the Genoa yard of T Mariotti, will hit the water in June 2009, with the others following at 12-month intervals.

Though the new vessels will be three times the size of Seabourn's existing fleet of three, 10,000-tonne yachts – *Pride*, *Spirit* and *Legend* – they will carry a full complement of only 450 passengers, or just twice as many as the existing fleet. While small is beautiful in

The *Seabourn Odyssey* will hit the waves in June 2009.



the luxury end of the market, so too is space.

At around \$900 million for all three vessels, the investment is considerable but chief executive Pam Conover is confident the gilded sector of the market is robust enough to justify the commitment.

'Over the last couple of years there's been a significant growth in demand for the luxury product and we see that continuing. We're making sufficient profits on the existing fleet [to justify the investment],' she explains. 'It's a question of demographics. The baby boomers are in their fifties and sixties and they have time to travel.'

Like other cruise ship companies, Seabourn has been pleasantly surprised at the resilience of the top end of the market, which repeatedly bounces back from such traumatic events as 9/11.

'People still travel, and our clients return to cruising because of the value it offers,' adds Conover.

Additionally, Seabourn's research suggests the luxury market, while not exactly untapped, has plenty of potential. 'The percentage of people who have gone on a cruise is still quite low, especially within the EU,' explains Conover. 'But the satisfaction rates among people who have been on a cruise are very high.'

The capital for the new yachts comes from the pockets of US-based Carnival, which last year posted net income of

\$2.4 billion on revenues of \$13 billion. Although Seabourn's existing three ships hardly figure in Carnival's 85-vessel fleet, it delivers a disproportionately high return on tonnage employed.

Redefining luxury

Seabourn has commissioned yachts that it predicts will rewrite the rules for high-end cruising. The expectations of clients happy to spend several thousand pounds on a ten-day cruise – or up to £248,960 per guest on the *Odyssey's* globe-girdling, 108-day inaugural voyage – are always on the rise.

'At Seabourn we're going through a redefinition of luxury,' explains Andy Magowan, director for Europe, Middle East and Africa. 'The bar has to be continually raised.'

For high net-worth guests, the ultimate luxury is a bigger share of the ship and Seabourn's forthcoming, all-suite fleet will boast an average of about 300ft² of space per cabin, up from the 277ft² on its current yachts, making them the largest suites of the luxury cruising fleet.

'The ratio per customer has increased substantially,' explains Conover. 'Our people want more space and are prepared to pay for it.' A bonus will be the 65ft² balcony extending off 90% of the total 225 suites.

For Oslo-based naval architect Yran &

Made in Italy

The \$250 million *Odyssey* is fast taking shape. The 6,000-tonne hull of Seabourn's new flagship was constructed by Cimolai SpA Group, a civil and industrial engineering company. In March, the vessel was shipped to the naval yard of T Mariotti, a long-established repair and conversion company that has specialised in mega-yachts and luxury cruise ships since the mid-1990s.

As T Mariotti's chairman, Marco Bisagno, puts it: 'Mega-yachts and cruise ships are two different production ranges, but they're complementary in the sharing of know-how.'

The two companies merged in April 2007 into a group known as Costruzioni Navali SpA and are sharing the construction process. While the hull was being welded at the Cimolai yard, work on the 3,000-tonne superstructure was simultaneously under way at the Mariotti site.

Designed by the Norwegian naval architects Yran & Storbraaten, the *Odyssey* will be 650ft long with a beam of 84ft and a draft of 21ft. Powered by diesel-generated electricity and operating with twin-screw propellers, the *Odyssey* will have a service speed of 19 knots.

Safety is paramount in Seabourn's new fleet. In the event of emergency, there are two fully independent propulsion systems and all three ships will comply with the 2009 International Maritime Organisation standards for damage stability.

The specifications require Green Star-rated ships, the highest standard in advanced wastewater treatment technology to protect the sea environment. These days most high net-worth guests are becoming more conscientious about the size of their carbon footprint.

Seabourn vessels offer luxury on an intimate scale.



Storbraaten, the Seabourn project could hardly be more different from its role as coordinating designer of the 124,000gt new builds for Disney Cruise Line or, for that matter, as designer of half the public spaces for Holland America's newly-launched *Eurodam*. As partner Petter Yran points out, the Seabourn vessels will take the configuration of space in small, luxury cruise ships in new directions, and will more accurately reflect human scale.

Instead of the impressive but cold open-plan areas that characterised earlier designs, the trend is towards informality reflected in more intimate spaces where passengers can gather in small groups. 'Instead of big, show lounges, small ships are going for piano bars and more cosy places,' Yran explains. This is of course a far cry from the firm's other work on bigger ships where it sets out to dazzle passengers with a 'wow-factor'.

Decor detail

As for the décor, Yran promises that the Seabourn's spaces will achieve the difficult challenge of being both 'timeless and contemporary'.

Although the interior will break new ground, the lines of the new Seabourn ships will make a connection with tradition. It won't be obvious until the *Odyssey* is launched, but Yran & Storbraaten has indicated the hulls will bear a strong relation to the classic look of the original fleet in exactly the same way that the latest models of

luxury cars reflect their heritage. As it happens, this is not entirely surprising because it was the Oslo firm, now 23 years old, that designed the Seabourn ships. The current commission takes the number of vessels it has designed well into the 80s.

Basing the configuration on what it has learned in the past, Seabourn has fixed on a maximum of 450 guests as the magic number. Although that is 50-150 beds fewer than the competition provides on similar-sized vessels, the company believes any more would devalue the luxury cruising experience. 'If we tripled the number of passengers as well as the size of the yacht, we feel we would endanger the product,' explains Conover.

However, the extra beds won't occupy all of the increased space. Like its competitors, Seabourn has found that guests increasingly expect hardware in the form of saunas, treatment rooms (seven in the case of the *Odyssey*), gyms, outdoor pools, sun terraces and other voyage-enhancing but space-gobbling infrastructure than they did in the past.

In addition to the usual luxuries, the *Odyssey* will feature six bars and lounges; five dining venues, including an al fresco grill; a casino with slot machines, blackjack and a roulette table; Wi-Fi access from the suites among other areas; a card room; shops and boutiques; and two meeting rooms with audio and video technology.

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Economies of scale

In an industry based on economies of scale, Seabourn and its competitors are heading in the opposite direction. Not only are luxury vessels more expensive to build because costs are allocated across relatively fewer berths, they are more expensive to run for the same reason. Although berthage is somewhat cheaper, the difference is not significant. Also, contrary to general belief, luxury yachts take just as long to build – two years from the laying of the keel to the launch.

While black-tie formality is not exactly out, informal dining has become more important in top-end cruising. Consequently, the new yachts will feature more outside venues where guests dine against a relaxing backdrop of the sea or the glittering lights of a city. Guests not only choose their own restaurant but, as new friendships develop during the cruise, their own dining companions, due to Seabourn's open seating arrangements. With high-quality, innovative food an essential part of the ultra-luxury package, New York chef Charlie Palmer will design the cuisine.

Seabourn's no-tipping, all-inclusive pricing is considered an essential

Pam Conover profile

Pam Conover became president and CEO of Yachts of Seabourn in late 2006. She previously held similar roles with Cunard and Athens-based Epirotiki.



Before that she was general manager of Citibank's shipping finance division for North America. Along the way she has overseen several landmark projects in the industry, such as the creation and launch of the *Queen Mary II* and engineering the acquisition of Seabourn, Cunard and Costa Cruises, which created one of the largest and most successful cruise groups in the world.

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'Over the last couple of years there's been a significant growth in demand for the luxury product and we see that continuing.'

part of the cruising chemistry. With a staff ratio of nearly 1:1, the crew are expected to 'read the guests' in double-quick time and learn their particular needs in food and drink. 'A genuine rapport between guests and staff quickly develops,' says Conover. 'It really changes the social atmosphere on board.'

Staff are not rewarded for 'up-selling', making for a more relaxed relationship. When Seabourn experimented with non-inclusive pricing a few years ago, it triggered a noticeable decline in the quality of the onboard relationship.

Redefined market

The market for luxury cruising is also undergoing redefinition. Until the last few years, it was dominated by retirees in their mid-60s and upwards. However, the average age of Seabourn's clientele is dropping steadily as the yachts attract middle-aged people who are discovering that cruising offers a genuine alternative to a five-star resort. The company's latest surveys show the average age of its guests now ranges from mid-40s to mid-50s and is steadily falling. In short, people who would rather dance to the Rolling Stones than to Glen Miller. Or, as the company puts it, 'they want to go kayaking or running instead of playing shuffle board.'

The flexibility of the yacht-like configuration exercises a powerful pull on guests. The 10,000-tonne *Seabourn Pride*, which draws only 18ft, ties up at London's Tower Bridge, drops anchor just off Monte Carlo, and steams up the Seine into the heart of Rouen. Despite being three times the size, the new vessels will draw only 21ft.

The new yachts are designed to capitalise on this unique selling point. They are fitted with stern-mounted marinas that, once lowered into the water, allows kayaks to be launched directly into the ocean for passengers to dive off and go snorkelling. Try doing that from a Genesis.

Meanwhile, Seabourn has wasted no time in capitalising on its new flagship. On the day of the keel-laying ceremony nearly a year ago, waiting lists were opened for guests wishing to join the *Odyssey* for her maiden year and they are filling up. [wc](#)