



Happy families

The numbers of multi-generational groups taking cruises has never been higher and this new demographic is dramatically altering the activities available on board. Royal Caribbean's **Lisa Bauer** and **Rick Meadows** of Holland America Line talk to Phin Foster about the challenges of catering to young and old alike.

The days when parents considered setting sail upon a cruise only once the children had flown the nest are long gone. Seafaring escapism has become a family pursuit, with operators investing fiercely in a bid to engage the younger demographic and convince the public of the benefits of taking to the seas *en famille*. Alongside the ballroom dancing, fine dining and casinos, one now also expects to find pyjama parties, finger painting and treasure hunts.

The growing trend of multi-generational groups poses some significant challenges: offering guest programmes that appeal across the ages; keeping the more traditional

guest demographic onside, and that perennial puzzler, how does one keep a teenager happy?

'I am a perfect example of this multi-generational trend,' chuckles Lisa Bauer, senior-vice president, hotel operations for Royal Caribbean International. 'When we take a cruise, it's with everyone: my mum, dad, brother, sister-in-law and nephews. We're seeing more and more extended family groups coming onboard.'

Bauer appreciates that Royal Caribbean International, which carries several hundred thousand children a year aboard its fleet, has seen a major change in the way operators design their ships to meet this

changing demographic. 'I was talking to Charlie McDonald the other day, our director of guest vacation and leisure activities,' Bauer tells me. 'When he started on *Legend of the Seas* back in 1995, there were two youth staff onboard. We launched *Independence* in 2008 with 18, and there are 28 on *Oasis of the Seas*. You only have to look at the numbers to see how much of a commitment is required.'

As well as the multi-generational group, Bauer cites families with children under three as a relatively recent phenomenon. What accounts for this development and why do so many parents now see the cruise holiday as such an attractive option?

‘A family’s discretionary time has never been more precious,’ Rick Meadows, Holland America Line (HAL) executive vice-president of marketing, sales and guest programmes, explains. ‘People are looking for opportunities to spend quality time together and a cruise provides that perfect opportunity. A lot of work has gone into having something for everyone, whether that is for the child, the classic baby boomer, or the grandparents. The larger the group, the greater the added value.’

A cynic might assume that parents would choose cruising because those activities might promise a week of child-free bliss, but quite the opposite is true. ‘We’re seeing more and more two-income couples coming aboard,’ Bauer explains. ‘They want programming that enables them to spend time with their children: family-intensive activities are hugely popular. It is not seen as a chance to hand the kids over and forget about them for seven days.’

A prime example of multi-generational programming comes in the form of HAL’s Culinary Arts Centres, the result of a partnership with *Food & Wine* magazine and an investment of close to \$1 million per ship. ‘This is a growing trend internationally and across the generations,’ Meadows says. ‘It’s a complimentary programme, with cookery demonstrations and classes. There is a children’s programme, but it’s certainly not unusual to see grandma, mum and daughter all taking part side-by-side.’

Microsoft Digital Workshops have also proven hugely popular and offer the opportunity for a degree of role-reversal. ‘You go into a learning lab and really delve into some very interesting areas surrounding digital photography, blogging, building virtual scrapbooks and so on,’ explains Meadows. ‘Kids are so comfortable with using social media and new technologies that it offers a great opportunity for them to expand that knowledge and to help the older generations in their family along.’

As both parents and children well know, time apart can be just as valuable as that spent together and vast amounts are being invested by operators into developing and maintaining child-friendly facilities. Royal Caribbean’s *Oasis of the Seas* has over 28,000ft² dedicated to Adventure Ocean, a fleet-wide complimentary programme for children aged three to 17. Kids are separated into five groups – three to five, six to eight, nine to 11, 12 to 14, and 14 to

17 – and all staff hold a college childcare degree in education or have qualified-equivalent experience working with children.

‘Kids need to have their own space,’ Bauer acknowledges, ‘but it must be authentic and be a place that genuinely excites. A great emphasis is placed upon keeping things fresh and not treating them as one large group, regardless of age.’

Younger guests are also catered for, with offerings such as the Fisher-Price Aqua Babies and Aqua Tots programmes for children aged six to 36 months old, developed by the toy producer in an exclusive partnership with the cruise line.

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Holland America offers a similar service, engaging kids aged three to seven and ‘tweens’ of eight to 12 through Club HAL, while teenagers can use the Loft and the Oasis, an ‘adult free zone’ complete with a disco, karaoke sessions, video games, sports tournaments, card games, trivia contests, bingo, movies and videos.

‘The core of our brand is about being premium and that should be as applicable to our young guests as it is to the adults,’ Meadows explains.

‘No members of a multi-generational group should be forced to sacrifice that premium experience when they board one of our ships. It should not be a kids’ cruise where the adults don’t get what they want, nor should it be an experience where children are a mere afterthought. You need a designed, contemplated, pro-active effort that ensures every group onboard is receiving the same standard of service.’

Know your audience

The acknowledgment that different age groups have different needs has been a key driving force behind the success both operators have had in attracting family groups in recent years. Such efforts can all be for nothing, however, if you do not know your audience.

‘You must always listen,’ insists Bauer. ‘We sat down and said: “Teens, the hardest people in the world to please, how on earth do we get it right?” Well, we went

out and asked them. A teen advisory board was formed and they helped us design programmes and helped formulate a lot of what now goes on.

‘We also have comment cards for kids and take their suggestions very seriously. Serving food within Adventure Ocean was introduced as a direct result of the feedback we’d received.’

An ability to address youth trends is fundamental to legitimising any programme. Youth preferences change so quickly that keeping up can be quite a challenge. ‘A lot of work goes into tracking what kids are interested in today and what they’ll be into

tomorrow,’ says Meadows. ‘Also, so many of us have kids ourselves, that, whether we know it or not, we are pretty aware of what is going on.’

Bauer agrees that staying still cannot be an option. ‘People who sail with us regularly want all the traditional stuff,’ she says, ‘but they also want to see a fresh, innovative spirit. We have to always be keeping one step ahead.’

But surely it is the large group of regular travellers who stand to lose the most from cruise operators becoming increasingly family focused?

‘The key thing is to have dedicated spaces that are sizeable and not overcrowded,’ Meadows counters. ‘Some other operators might take between 800 and 900 children onboard at any one time and I can see how that could become a problem.’

‘Even on our Alaska sailings at the height of summer, there are typically only between 200 and 300 kids onboard. That is perhaps 10% of the total guest number. We monitor guest feedback carefully and it hasn’t proved to be a problem.’

Bauer acknowledges the need to ensure certain areas are child-free zones. ‘We’re very mindful of making each space appropriate for its target market. But you also can’t stereotype by age,’ he says.

‘On any given day aboard a Freedom class-ship, one can walk out on deck and see a grandfather surfing. Kids come in all ages.’ **wc**