

A moving experience

Cruising may promise consummate service and complete relaxation, but a longstanding complaint of many holidaymakers is that the embarkation and disembarkation processes are an exception to that rule. However, new strategies and innovations could make extended wait times and impersonal handling a thing of the past. **Phin Foster** reports.

Long queues, generic tannoy announcements, and an air of confusion and anxiety can have a deeply damaging effect on a passenger's first and final impressions of the cruise experience. Critic Jane Archer was so exasperated by repeat disembarkation horror stories that she recently penned a

column in the UK's *Daily Telegraph* calling for operators to take a good, hard look at the way they treat their passengers when ferrying them on and off ships.

'Public rooms start to look like something out of a disaster movie,' Archer wrote, 'with people filling every bit of available floor space, clinging to their belongings

and waiting aimlessly to be called. Factor in families with young children who are either bored or tired, plus the endless announcements calling groups to go ashore, and it all becomes a most unpleasant way to end your holiday.'

Thankfully for Archer and her fellow holidaymakers, it is a complaint that

operators seem to be increasingly sensitive to and the last 12 months have seen a number of innovations and restructuring programmes introduced to make the experience of boarding and departing a vessel relatively painless.

In November of last year, for example, Royal Caribbean implemented significant improvements to its Gold Anchor Service, bringing in new systems across the fleet to ease the departure process. Guests now have extended access to staterooms, as well as continued in-room TV services, and receive an As You Depart notice breaking down the departure process and highlighting the location of departure lounges. All lounges offer refreshments and light entertainment and a Family Zone has also been introduced, with toys, games and activities geared towards younger vacationers.

Those travelling in staterooms receive the added benefit of a continental breakfast hosted by either guest services or concierge, and it has become onboard policy to keep public announcements down to a bare minimum, with almost all communication limited to departure lounges and TV programming. The idea is to create a far more relaxing, serene atmosphere, more in keeping with the overall experience of the rest of the trip.

'We listened to our guests' feedback regarding the opportunity to transform the departure experience and responded with the relaunch of a fresh process fleet-wide,' explains Lisa Bauer, Senior VP, hotel operations for Royal Caribbean. 'Early testing aboard *Freedom of the Seas* yielded a very positive response and the enhanced communications tools were cited as one of the most helpful tools for our guests on departure day.'

Express delivery

Royal Caribbean was also one of the first operators to introduce an 'express departure' process, allowing those passengers prepared to carry their own luggage ashore to depart almost immediately upon docking.

This is an option that Princess has also rolled out as part of a more streamlined



Princess has been trialling its check-in kiosks in Miami since July.

disembarkation experience. Those unwilling or unable, haul their bags shoreside now receive a letter on the penultimate day of the cruise outlining their dedicated departure time and designated location. Guests are then personally escorted to the gangway by a member of staff.

Senior VP of customer service Jan Swartz admits that the 'hurry up and wait' disembarkation process has long been a cruise industry tradition, but insists things are changing. 'We've been praised for our innovative embarkation programme that enables passengers to board the ship without long delays, check into their cabins early and start enjoying cruise amenities,' she says. 'With the addition of the new disembarkation process which gives guests a more gracious send off, we believe we're offering the best passenger experience both at the start and end of their vacation.'

The programme has been rolled out over the past 12 months to great success. 'Passengers have told us that they're enjoying their final morning onboard much more since we've started the programme,' Swartz confirms. 'It gives the departure a much more personal touch and creates a great beginning to their onward travels.'

Shoreside, another innovation being tested by Princess promises to revolutionise

the embarkation process. In July of this year, its first self-service check-in kiosks were installed at the Port of Miami. It is an area in which the cruise industry has long lagged behind airlines; Princess is only the second major operator to go down this route following Costa's trialling of a similar system at the Port Everglades cruise terminal in Fort Lauderdale last year.

Passengers using the service must be citizens of the US, Canada or a visa-waiver country and need to pre-register online. They can then access their reservations and check-in merely by swiping a passport or credit card. The printed receipt is exchanged at a specially appointed desk for a stateroom key. If the pilot scheme is successful for port and passengers alike, Carnival hopes to introduce the desks at other year-round ports.

Having led the way in electronic check-in desks, Costa has continued along the tech-savvy route with its announcement two months ago of

a new web check-in system available on all itineraries worldwide. Guests access the programme through the company website and first enter a seven-digit booking number and last name. This brings up the boarding form, which they fill in with all relevant information required for sailing. Once that process is complete, boarding documents are ready to print and access to the ship is fast-tracked. Passengers can log in and go through this process from any point after the cruise has been booked and paid for.

'Our web check-in system offers guests an additional ease of travel by allowing them to conveniently check-in from the comfort of their home,' explains senior VP of guest services and revenue management for Costa North America, Ruben Perez. 'We're always looking for ways to make the entire cruise experience more pleasurable for our guests and this is an extension of that.'

The efforts being made industry-wide to ease the passage of guests on and off ships is a clear acknowledgment of that need to make them as comfortable as possible from the beginning to the end of their stay. As operators continue to find innovative ways of improving the overall experience, perhaps the 'disaster movie' scenes described by Archer will soon be a thing of the past. [wc](#)