

Ship Review: MSC Divina



Janet and I were fortunate to be invited along on a cruise aboard a European based cruise line that is making steady inroads into the U.S. cruise market, MSC cruises. MSC is a mass market cruise line that caters to the European and Mediterranean markets. Looking for growth potential, MSC decided a couple of years ago to take on mass market giants Royal Caribbean, Carnival, and Norwegian in the lucrative U.S. market with Caribbean cruises sailing roundtrip out of Miami. In fact they dedicated their then newest ship, MSC Divina, to the U.S. market. I suppose you could say it has worked out well for them. Divina is full on just about every sailing, and MSC is allocating their newest ship, MSC Seaside, to augment Divina in the Caribbean market.

MSC Divina will have a decidedly familiar feel to it for cruisers who enjoyed the Royal Caribbean brand of about 10-15 years ago. The reason is that MSC's Executive Vice President, Ken Muskat previously spent 18 years with Royal Caribbean in a variety of senior leadership positions. Muskat was specifically brought onboard to expand MSC's penetration into the North American market and brought much of what made Royal Caribbean popular in the 80s and 90s over to MSC. The Circle of Life in the cruise industry. I found it a refreshing step back into cruising before all the megaships hit the market with all of their specialized physical activities, Broadway shows, and specialty dining...all for an extra fee of course. Divina has two modest specialty restaurants, but none of the rest of the for fee extras...just a refreshing throwback to cruising as I remember it when we started. It will be interesting to see if that trend continues as Muskat recently announced he will be leaving MSC to join another (as yet unnamed) cruise line.

Public Areas

Divina's interior design is themed along the lines of Greek mythology. The decks and public areas are named after Greek gods and goddesses in keeping with the MSC brand. One of the most prominent features is the grand staircase in the central atrium. The steps are clear and filled with Swarovski crystals. Don't worry...you won't break them. We tried with our dancing and managed not to leave even a smudge.

There are three pools on the ship, one covered, and they are crowded during sea days. If you are just interested in sunning yourself there is ample additional deck space and chairs a deck up from the pools and these areas never seemed over crowded during our cruise. There is also an aqua park for the kids. MSC Divina offers a gym, spa and casino, none of which we visited during our cruise. There are 12 themed lounges and bars, and the only thing that was memorable about them was MSC's use of a paper coupon system for their drink packages. The coupons offer a substantial discount on the regular drink prices, but you have to



mess with a coupon book each time you want a drink. And one coupon book is not enough to last the entire cruise for most people. Of course with coupon books you can scale your cash outlay to the amount you want to drink (there is a separate soda program that is also coupon based) so you don't have to drink yourself silly to get your money's worth. As long as you use up all of the coupons, you are ahead of the game. You can book a traditional drink package that doesn't require the use of coupons, but only as part of an overall cabin and cruise experience upgrade. I think on balance the drink coupons offer the greatest value, but I just wish MSC could find a way to credit your cruise card rather than making you mess with coupon books. Drink pricing for alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks is comparable with the other mass market cruise lines with a well drink or glass of house wine running about \$8 and premium offerings going for \$11-14.

Cabins

MSC Divina offers eight cabin categories. In a nod to the American family market, Divina offers something no other cruise line does, a super family category of cabins that fit up to six people. The super family cabins are actually two adjoining three person cabins each with its own bathroom. They are priced the same whether occupied by two passengers or the full six person capacity. There are four suite categories of cabins, and the remaining three categories are standard balcony, oceanview and inside cabins. The base cabins are small with the smallest inside cabin offering a meager 140 square feet of room and the smallest oceanview even less room at just 120 square feet. The one positive I can offer is that unlike other cruise lines, I found Divina offers plenty of room to store things which helps keep down on the clutter. As with most new ships Divina offers a fair number of balcony and suite cabins. In fact she has so many that on some sailings inside and oceanview cabins, which are normally priced significantly lower than balconies, are in short supply.

Yacht Club



With a top capacity of over 4300 passengers, MSC can get crowded. In an effort to appeal to more demanding cruisers, MSC has borrowed a concept most of the mass market cruise lines are adopting by offering a ship within a ship through their Yacht Club program. In exchange for a higher price, it offers cruisers spacious suites and an exclusive pool, restaurant, and lounge. Suites booked into the Yacht Club come with butler service and a host of premium amenities that secure its spot as the highest of the MSC passenger classes.

Food

For the most part I found the food to be just OK...not really memorable. Cruisers are assigned to one of two main dining rooms, and have the option of eating in one of two buffet dining areas, or one of two specialty restaurants. The specialty restaurant, cleverly names "Eataly" is divided into two sub-restaurants: the Italian themed restaurant and a steak house. The



other specialty restaurant is Galaxy and offers upscale food and wine, for a premium price. The one highlight aboard MSC Divina is the pizzeria. We heard about it before boarding and made a beeline to the pizza shop at our first opportunity. The pizza is thin crust, made from the freshest ingredients, and as authentic as you can get outside of Italy. If you go expecting Papa Johns or Dominos style pizza, or even pizza like it is made on other cruise ships, you are in for a surprise. A very pleasant culinary surprise, as this pizza is amazing.

Entertainment

The entertainment is where the throw-back nature of MSC Divina really stands out. There were no Broadway style productions...entertainment is strictly Vegas style with the usual line-up of actors, acrobats, singers, and dancers taking the stage together in a themed production show. And of course they offer the usual cruise entertainment fare of jugglers, comedians, magicians and illusionists. Don't get me wrong, that stuff is great...if you have never cruised before. For me, with 40 cruises under my belt that style of entertainment got old about 30 cruises ago.

Overall MSC Divina offers a nice alternative to the mass market megaships that are populating the cruise industry today. MSC Divina is the perfect ship for first time cruisers, and comes value priced. The throw-back nature of the ship is quaint and while I wouldn't want a steady diet of it, it was a nice change of pace for me as an experienced cruiser. Overall I think this is a hit for MSC...whether or not the market will support two ships along these lines remains to be seen.