

Ship Review: Cunard's Queen Mary 2

There is no getting away from the fact that the Queen Mary 2 is a lovely ship. Sailing aboard her across the Atlantic represents a level of luxury cruising that is a step above the cruise lines I have sailed aboard to date. I will attempt to capture the high points, and



some of the negatives few though they were, but make no mistake....there is so much luxury associated with sailing aboard QM2, one article can't possibly capture it all. The fact that QM2 is different from most other cruise ships is evident even before you board. QM2 was designed from the keel up as an open ocean vessel. She offers a deep cut through the water which enables her to provide a more stable ride at top speed through rough open ocean waters. While other cruise ships can and do make the transatlantic crossing, they can't provide the

same level of comfort as QM2, and their facilities and public areas may be of more limited use in stormy weather.

QM2's elegance begins as soon as you board and doesn't end until you leave the ship. Passengers enter on deck three into a multi-level atrium. Deck 3's main hallway is impeccably decorated and is actually two decks in height, giving one the sense of being in a fine English manor.

QM2's designers had to resort to some very clever trade-offs to offer this space without sacrificing an entire deck to aesthetics. To maximize usable space while offering the two deck hallway, they created a mid-deck towards the aft to house the photo gallery on the port side and the art gallery on the starboard. The normal two deck layout resumes at the aft end with the two-deck Britannia restaurant. This layout can be confusing, but once you understand why it is in place, it makes sense.



QM2's public areas are very much in keeping with the luxury style of the ship. The best thing for me was the fact that the ship has a real ballroom with a real dance floor. In fact it is the largest ballroom on any ship at sea. Let me tell you Jeff and I took full advantage of



it. By the end of the cruise we both ended up with sore muscles and blisters on our feet from all the dancing. The ballroom offered prerecorded dance music nightly, and that was followed most nights by live music from either the QM2 orchestra or on one occasion the pool band playing Rat Pack tunes. The latter was surprisingly fun to dance to. Another interesting feature in the ballroom was the presence of dance hosts. If any of you have seen the movie "Out to Sea" you may remember the premise of the movie focused on Walter Matthau roping Jack Lemon into serving as a dance host

aboard a Holland America ship. I have sailed Holland America three times and have yet to see a dance host, but the QM2 offered four elderly gentlemen nightly. They worked hard to ensure every unaccompanied lady got her share of dances. I have to say the quality of their dancing skills was somewhat questionable, but I didn't hear any complaints from the ladies.

The shows aboard the QM2 are on par with the better main stream cruise lines both in terms of quality and variety, at least the few we made it to. In addition to the production shows there was a comedian, a vocalist and a concert pianist who performed three recitals. Music throughout the ship was top notch. A string quartet offered easy listening classical music several times each day, the ship's orchestra played throughout the day in different venues a wide range of musical styles from big band to Dixie Land Jazz, a pianist played in the main lobby as well as several of the bars, and of course they have the obligatory Caribbean reggae band that played mostly up on the pool deck. Speaking of the pool deck, activities notably lacking on this cruise include the belly flop and best bicep contest. I didn't miss them.

QM2 offers a number of bars, lounges and entertainment areas styled in various themes. The Golden Lion is an English-style sports pub that was packed each evening. A nautically themed lounge known as the Chart Room offered a quieter retreat and featured comfortable seating along a row of windows providing a nice view of the sea. Other areas include a specialty coffee bar, several pool bars, and the Winter Garden retreat. QM2's main theater is the Royal Court Theater, a two-tiered venue where the nightly feature shows are presented. Additionally, QM2 features Illuminations which is a venue where lectures at sea are presented. Illuminations does double duty as the only planetarium at sea with a domed screen that descends from the ceiling. The seats below the planetarium are specially configured to lean back, allowing viewers a comfortable view of the entire screen where IMAX-like movies are presented. Several different shows were offered during our Atlantic crossing.



Dining is a real treat on most cruise ships, and QM2 offers a range of fine dining that is keyed to the class of cabin you book. Most cruisers will dine in the two-story Britannia main dining room at one of two fixed dining times. The Britannia seats close to 1100, but is configured to minimize the noise level and maximize diners' sense of private space. The next level up in accommodation and dining, which is what we were booked into, is the Britannia Club. Britannia Club cabins are balcony cabins, all located on deck 12. The Britannia Club dining room is situated at the rear of the Britannia's lower level in a separate, "private" room seating fewer than 150 diners. This dining room is further configured as two separate rooms, and we dined in the smaller and more intimate of the two rooms at a table for two with a nice view of the Atlantic Ocean. The nice thing about the higher levels of dining is that each table is only assigned one set of diners for the duration of the cruise.



That allows cruisers to decide when they dine, knowing they will go to the same table and be served by the same wait staff each meal. In short, it offers the best of fixed and flexible dining. And this feature extends to breakfast and lunch. If you want to opt for an even more exclusive level of fine dining, QM2 offers two additional options: the Princess Grill and the Queen's Grill which are reserved for passengers booking the highest end suites. Both are small, private dining rooms with their own dedicated galleys and chefs. They also offer a different menu than the Britannia and Britannia Club. And if you want a truly unique dining experience, QM2 offers the exclusive Todd English specialty restaurant where you can enjoy Chef Todd's creations prepared to your specific tastes in an intimate setting. As with most cruise lines, QM2 charges a premium to dine in their specialty restaurant. Unlike most cruise lines, the premium associated with dining in this specialty

restaurant is charged on an a la carte basis versus a flat fee. That means eating in the Todd English restaurant may set you back three figures. Ouch! Even though Jeff is a foodie, he chose to pass on this opportunity. We both thoroughly enjoyed the meals in the Britannia Club dining room. And for those who would prefer not following the nightly dress code, which by the way was actually enforced, the King's Court offers buffet dining that is still a notch above other cruise lines.

Most ships offer a tour of their galley at some point during the cruise. We usually skip this activity, but the dining options on QM2 are so unique we wanted to see where the magic happens. QM2 has a large kitchen to serve the Britannia and Britannia Club dining rooms, and smaller dedicated kitchens to service the Princess Grill, Queen's Grill, and the Todd English specialty restaurant. To give you some idea of the scope of food preparation onboard the QM2, they dedicate four chefs just to scoop ice cream at dinner! All of the QM2 kitchens cater to a full range of dietary needs including gluten free, kosher, halal, and a range of vegetarian regimes. Additionally, the main kitchen has a crew of four chefs assigned to cook meals to order for people with food allergies. As a parent of a child with food allergies, this is very important to me. To be fair, one of the things I have appreciated about cruising is that the chefs have gone out of their way to accommodate Rob's food allergy once we made them aware. In some cases it was almost as though they relished the challenge, and they invariably delivered. Over the past decade I have seen cruise ship kitchen staffs become much more sensitive to the dangers associated with food allergies, but I am impressed that QM2 takes the extra step of a dedicated crew of chefs with their own cooking space.



QM2 offers a fitness center, a bit smaller than I expected but well appointed. Jeff managed to hit the gym twice, me only once. We found a full range of aerobic and weight-bearing equipment, to include a nice set of free weights. It was jam packed and getting in a good workout required patience. For those wanting a quieter setting, QM2 has a nice library with the largest collection of books to borrow of any ship at sea. The books are stored in solid wood cabinets that keep them on the shelves during rough waters while giving the library the atmosphere of an exclusive English club, and prime seats that overlook the bow of the ship allow readers to enjoy their book as well as a stunning view of the Atlantic. The ship also offers a kids area, though from our experience there weren't many kids aboard to take advantage of it. For the young adults and active older generation,



QM2 offers a golf simulator, ping pong tables, five pools and a number of whirlpools throughout the ship. QM2 also offers the well-appointed Canyon Ranch Spa.

I would be remiss if I did not point out the negatives, few though they were. First, the bars were a bit lacking in the variety of liquor they offer. I like an occasional martini, and in spite of the fact that QM2 offered a martini mixology class, they didn't have the ingredients necessary to make a Washington Apple Martini. I ended up with a traditional apple martini, which was quite good. The champagne bar only offered Veuve Clicquot at various price points. Now don't get me wrong, Veuve Clicquot is an amazing champagne, but it won't be to everyone's palate. There were surprisingly few public restrooms as compared with other

cruise ships of similar size and they were hard to find. Amazingly, few though they were, there was never a wait. The irritations were few and short lived, and I had the opportunity to chat with a number of friendly and interesting people over the course of the cruise. One of the nicest things I noticed from the outset of our cruise was the lack of persistent salesmanship trying to get us to purchase everything from a specialty coffee package to the water package, as well as the incessant announcements for Bingo and other daily activities. Don't get me wrong, Cunard takes every opportunity to offer special "packages" designed to part you from your money, and they do offer Bingo. But they aren't "in your face" about them as mainstream cruise lines seem these days.

There is no way I can convey the sense of pampering and luxury we experienced throughout this cruise. Let me just say it was the most relaxing cruise I have ever enjoyed. If any of this interests you, let me know and we can explore the possibility of booking your own cruise aboard the QM2. And if crossing the Atlantic doesn't appeal to you, Cunard offers New England and Canada itineraries during the summer and fall months.