

Ship Review: Anthem of the Seas



Janet and I were invited to sail aboard Royal Caribbean's Anthem of the Seas' during one of her two day inaugural sailings open to press and travel agents. The purpose of these jaunts is to (hopefully) generate positive press surrounding a new ship's first year of sailings. For us, that meant loads of walking, pictures of public areas and rooms, trying things we wouldn't dream of doing on our own vacations, and attending

entertainment events that we might otherwise take a pass on. Which translates into work, though the drinks were free and free flowing. We cruised aboard the first ship in this new class, Quantum of the Seas, less than a year prior and reported extensively on that experience which was less than ideal in many areas. The Anthem's inaugural sailing gave me the opportunity to revisit some of the Quantum's trouble areas to see what steps Royal Caribbean took to make things better. This review will focus in just how well Royal Caribbean adjusted to feedback from the Quantum's sailings to make Anthem the cruise experience they intend for all cruisers, but in particular for the millennials. I will say that over all Janet and I continue to be impressed by the ship, and we are planning a full week-long sailing in the fall of 2016 where we can get actually enjoy Anthem as cruisers more so than travel agents.

The WOW factor which is a Royal Caribbean tag line for their cruise experience is still there on Anthem. The décor, public space layout and cabins all continue to impress. This class of ship is intended to be a bridge between the mainstream Royal Caribbean behemoths like Oasis and Allure, and the more exclusive (and expensive) Royal Caribbean brand Celebrity Cruise Lines. In that, both the Quantum and Anthem are a smashing success. The decor is warm, elegant and very much what the millennials want to embrace in what they view as a high end cruise experience. It works for us post-boomers as well. The main point is that the WOW factor we were so impressed with on Quantum has been replicated completely with the Anthem, locking this class of ship into a category all its own when it comes to mainstream cruising. It is priced accordingly, on average coming in at easily 30% higher than the rest of Royal Caribbean's fleet.



The Royal Promenade is flat out the best aesthetic design feature of this ship. It is what I think Royal Caribbean's design team had in mind when they first built the Royal Promenade into the Navigator class ships. Many of the design features of the Royal Promenade are common to other ships, but the differences are important and are what make it work on Quantum and Anthem in a so much more aesthetically pleasing way. Let me just say I have never been a fan of the Royal Promenade as it has been realized on either the Voyager or Freedom classes of ships. It has seemed to me like the ship builders just cut a ship in half, stretched it width-wise and left the middle open for stores and a walkway. The design works well for the evening parties and revelry that have become a staple of Royal Caribbean ships, but it has always felt artificial and even a bit cheesy to me. On Quantum and Anthem, Royal Caribbean has

abandoned the six and seven story high atrium and Promenade section, to include the Promenade-facing cabins. For me that represents a huge improvement. Quantum and Anthem keeps the Promenade as public space, but limits it to two decks well integrated in décor and oozing warmth and luxury. I think they finally got it right and hope they don't change it on this class of ship.

And now for a detailed review of Anthem as compared with our experience aboard Quantum:

Embarkation

Quantum – So-so; Anthem – fabulous.

Royal Caribbean worked out all the bugs we noted in embarkation last year and our experience aboard Anthem met Royal Caribbean's goal of curbside to ship in under 10 minutes. We were met by a small army of check-in agents from the moment we stepped out of the parking garage in Port Bayonne, NJ. The only reason anyone would have to wait is if they failed to fill out the necessary forms online, and every cruise has its share of "those" people. They are detoured off to a separate area to ensure they don't slow down the rest of the passengers that did things the proper way. Well done Royal Caribbean.

Smart Ship Concept

Quantum – Fail; Anthem – Not Much Better.

When we cruised Quantum the RF ID tags in our luggage were never tied to our account, so that trick failed. Unfortunately our cruise on Anthem was so short we didn't check any bags so we were unable to evaluate whether the problems were fixed. The WOW bands that were supposed to eliminate the hassle of using cruise cards were equally problematic on both Quantum and Anthem, which means this is a technology problem and the fix won't be easy, nor will it come soon. I'll address other aspects of the smartship concept more directly below but overall Royal Caribbean has much more work to do to deliver on this marketing promise.

Bionic Bar

Quantum – Fail; Anthem – Cool...once.

The bionic bar on Quantum didn't work properly for much of the cruise. It was a novelty which people used, but with all the botched orders and robot-spilled drinks the ship ended up comping more drinks than were paid for. On Anthem the robots worked like the fine-tuned instruments they are and drinks were delivered as ordered and without spillage. The ordering process for any drink not preprogrammed (the list of preprogrammed drinks is surprisingly sparse) continues to be quite the ordeal. With prices higher than any other bar on the ship the novelty of the Bionic Bar lasted exactly one drink, one Instagram-appropriate snapshot or video clip, and then cruisers moved on to a more reasonably priced bar.

Featured Activities

Quantum – Great and Not So Great; Anthem – Same

The North Star was so unimpressive on Quantum that we didn't bother to even try getting a ride on Anthem. The parachute free fall simulator was one of Janet's favorite attractions on Quantum and the experience promised to be just as exciting aboard Anthem. Unfortunately we couldn't get onto the list with the high demand from the press, so we took a pass. The SEAPLEX multi-purpose center operated similarly on both ships, with bumper cars and roller skating at pre-set times. The circus school on Quantum was not repeated that I noted on Anthem, probably because of the short duration of the cruise. My issue with the event on Quantum is that it wasn't much more than a carefully staged photo-op where the ship's photographers are precisely positioned to take your picture during the trapeze "lesson." The lesson consisted of basic safety instruction on the ground, and then two swings on the bar which gave the photographer two chances to make sure they captured the money shot.

Two70 Lounge

Quantum – WOW; Anthem – Double WOW



The wizards at Royal Caribbean's contracted tech design skunk works continue to advance the art and science of 16,000 pixel projection and the robotic screens that are the main feature of the Two70 Lounge. The feature show is well worth the time, though it is quite avant guard. It is tailor made for the millennials and for those who fancy themselves as technophiles in the world of sound/visual/digital graphics. The lounge continues to be our favorite hang-out for quiet time and during at sea days.

Ubiquitous Wifi

Quantum – Fail; Anthem – Passed

On Quantum my main issues involved loss of signal, internet interruptions, and a less than clear cost menu. Our experience on Anthem makes it clear to me that you have to be careful to separate out Wifi from internet access. The two are not synonymous as the experience aboard this class of ship demonstrates. Wifi access is indeed ubiquitous. Throughout all public areas of the ship as well as in all categories of cabins, I received a strong Wifi signal. What I did not get was a steady and continuous connection to the internet. While bandwidth was adequate for me, the system continued to operate clumsily when switching from one device to another. Since the price of your internet access depends on how many devices you pay to connect simultaneously, hot swapping becomes an important feature. Neither Quantum nor Anthem excelled in this category. It often took quite a bit of manipulating device settings and a full day of one device being disconnected before the system would allow you to connect with a different device, making the pricey multiple device option pretty much useless. The ship's tech support people advised us the problems were limited to the Apple operating system, and a little bit of internet research would seem to bear that out. None-the-less, the line should be up front about those issues before they take your money. In both cases they were not. We didn't have pay for our internet access on the Anthem two day cruise, but if we had to I would have been first in line at the Purser's desk for a credit. Android and Microsoft device users seemed to have a more seamless experience.

Guest Relations

Quantum – Fail; Anthem – Great Improvement

Royal Caribbean's thought process with their approach to the Purser's desk and staff as well as shore excursions and the photo shop is much clearer now than on Quantum. As I suspected, their reliance on technology and use of the Royal IQ app now that all the bugs have been worked out enables Royal Caribbean to get by with a significant reduction in staff. This was a disaster aboard the Quantum, but now that the crews have put more than a year of experience under their belts and no doubt tweaked a number of things, it all ran more or less smoothly. The only exception I noted was the photo shop. Neither Quantum nor Anthem has the traditional photo lab and display area that other ships offer. Instead they offer a row of ipads where cruisers use their key cards or WOW bands to bring up photos of them that magically get attached to their accounts. The "magic" is in the WOW band technology. When the photographers take your picture somehow they get attached to your account, presumably through your WOW band. To order, you just scan your WOW band at one of the photo ipads and it brings up all pictures associated with your account. Or at least that is how it is supposed to work. Pictures were complimentary on our two night Anthem cruise to nowhere, so we sat for three. None of the three got attached to our account, and it took the photographer quite a bit of work to get them attached. Once we worked out those bugs, the photos themselves were fairly typical but pricey, even by cruise line standards. Since the idea for most people is to purchase the digital version of your photo instead of a print, you are also purchasing all the rights to future copies. I thought it was a rather pricey approach, but I rarely buy photos from the cruise line anymore.

Dynamic Dining

Quantum -- Jury is out; Anthem – Better, but the jury is still out

Dynamic dining was an epic failure on Quantum and I don't want to revisit my scathing review here. Anthem corrected a few of the problems, but the dining experience still leaves quite a bit to be desired. My biggest complaint is still the overall quality of the food in the complimentary restaurants. When a restaurant puts Maryland Crab Cake on the menu, I expect it to contain at least SOME crab. I also expect it to be a real Maryland crab cake style, which includes Old Bay seasoning. On both Quantum and Anthem the "Maryland Crab Cake" was actually a pressed fish product that was suspiciously similar to the kind of hors devours you can purchase at a warehouse club. They are made with "Snow Crab" (in this case Pollock), no Old Bay seasoning, and are pressed into pre-formed microwave ready medallions. Don't get me wrong, they were tasty. But they were in the Maryland style and they were fish cakes vs crab cakes. Janet thinks I am being a food snob about this, but honestly it is just a label. If you can't get that right I have to wonder about the things that really matter.

The other issue on I had an Anthem was similar to Quantum: many of the appetizers intended to be heated seemed to be of the preformed microwave ready variety vice freshly made. That may seem harsh, but just take a look at some of the food products that get loaded onto the ship on turnaround days and you'll see what I mean. That is in contrast to other ship in the fleet where the appetizers appear to be freshly made and cooked to order.

One major improvement with the Anthem's dining experience was abandoning the i-pads that so slowed the ordering process aboard Quantum. By returning to the tried and true written order pad approach the dining staff cut the time from order to deliver of food in half or more. That certainly made things go much smoother and should help make the dynamic dining process a bit more palatable for even diehard fixed seating cruise fans.

Overall -- Still WOW

This is a unique cruise experience that first-time cruisers in the millennial demographic will absolutely love. It is also quite appealing to old timers like me with all of its new approaches to make the complete cruising experience fresh.