

## Ship Review: Holland America's Oosterdam



I didn't know Janet when she went to college, but she tells me she led a pretty dull life. In fact, her idea of a wild Friday night was ordering a pizza and curling up in front of the TV in her dorm room to watch *The Love Boat*. With a coke. That's what she tells me anyway. I'm not so sure those college Friday nights were as pedestrian as she likes to depict, but I do know *The Love Boat* was one of her favorite shows. The standard itinerary during the early years of the show had Captain Stubbing navigating the ship on a Mexican Riviera itinerary,

and Janet particularly enjoyed the exotic ports such as Cabo San Lucas, Puerto Vallarta and Mazatlan. When we decided to spend Christmas this year with our kids in San Diego we decided to indulge ourselves in a weeklong Mexican Riviera cruise so Janet could finally see those ports for herself.

Our cruise was aboard the Oosterdam, one of Holland America's Vista Class ships with a capacity of just over 1,900 passengers. Let me just say it was a welcome change cruising aboard a medium sized ship after having sailed most recently on megaships that are big enough to require their own zip code and carry upwards of 6,000 passengers. One of the first things we do after boarding a ship is spend an hour or two exploring all that the ship has to offer. I found Oosterdam to be well laid out with 11 decks for passenger access. Public areas are situated on the three uppermost decks as well as the three lowest public access decks. All decks in between were filled with cabins.



Holland America has a reputation of being the cruise line for geriatrics, and while their marketing targets an older crowd, we found plenty of passengers our age and younger on our past cruises with them. On this cruise most of the passengers we encountered were family groups traveling with grown children, and younger retirees like Janet and myself. Probably because it was a holiday cruise. In any event, I only saw a handful of scooters, wheelchairs, and oxygen bottles on this voyage and that tracks with our prior experience cruising on Holland America out of New York and Baltimore.

From the outset I was impressed with the ship's staff. They were attentive, polite and they understand what it means to provide white glove service. The hotel and kitchen staff was made up mostly of Filipino and Indonesian citizens with a wealth of experience working in the hospitality industry, and it showed. The only other cruise line with staff anywhere close to what we encountered on this cruise was when we sailed with Cunard aboard the *Queen Mary 2*.

## Public Areas and Entertainment

Oosterdam has a relatively compact atrium that is attractive if somewhat understated, spanning just three decks in height. Deck 1 is home to Guest Services (the Purser's desk), shore excursions and the future cruise booking desk. It is also the lowest level of the multi-deck main theater which spans decks 1, 2 and 3. Oosterdam offers a fairly typical array of cruise ship entertainment to include a magician, tribute band (Beatles in the case of our cruise), and the usual cruise line music and dance revues. Janet and I like to try new things when we cruise and since we have seen just about all types of shows cruise lines feature in their main theater, we gravitated to Oosterdam's smaller venues and the entertainment they had to offer. We did hear other guests commenting positively about the shows in the main theater.

Decks 2 and 3 are home to most of Oosterdam's lounge and entertainment venues. The ship's casino is on deck 2 and though small, it does offer a nice variety of table games and slot machines. It was sparsely populated throughout our cruise, even during days at sea. Smoking is



not permitted in the casino which is a good thing since there is also an entertainment venue in an adjacent space known as Billboard Onboard with no wall between. Billboard Onboard is essentially a piano bar with two pianos facing each other ala Howl at the Moon. As on most cruise ships, it became a very popular venue as the week progressed. Adjacent to the casino is Oosterdam's Gallery Bar which is an eclectically decorated venue that doubles as the ship's sports bar.

Some years ago Holland America teamed up with Food and Wine Magazine to offer the first at sea Culinary Arts Center, also known as America's Test Kitchen. On Oosterdam the Test

Kitchen occupies space on deck 2, aft of the casino and the Gallery Bar. It offers tiered stadium seating and a resident chef holds instructional cooking classes throughout the cruise ranging from how to make a vegetarian dinner to the proper technique for cooking salmon. I consider myself a fairly decent cook and I make a mean salmon dish, but I had no idea I have been cooking salmon wrong all this time. One of the first dishes I cooked when we got home from the cruise was salmon and I put into practice everything I learned in Oosterdam's Test Kitchen. What a difference! Now I'm kicking myself for not attending more of the cooking classes. Guess I'll have to book another Holland America cruise!



The kitchen portion of the venue is comprised of wheeled carts which can be removed, transforming the Culinary Arts Center into two additional venues, the Queen's Lounge during the day and B.B. King's Blues Club at night. And unless we missed something, it also has the only real dance floor on the ship.

Aft of the Culinary Arts Center on the starboard side of the ship is the Pinnacle Bar, the Art Studio, and an entertainment venue called Lincoln Center Stage. A group of musicians consisting



of four string players and a pianist performed themed music nightly in the Lincoln Center Stage venue. During our cruise the themed performances ranged from Bach to Bernstein and just about every genre in between. The group was one of the most talented we have seen on a cruise ship and we made it a point to hit each of their performances, as did many of our fellow passengers.

After their first performance the Lincoln Center Stage venue was standing room only. By the end of the cruise passengers were showing up an hour ahead of time to

get a front row seat. The group offered a Q&A session towards the end of the cruise, and we were surprised to learn they had only begun playing together as a group the previous month as they rehearsed for their cruise gig. You can check out some of the videos of their performances that I posted on Facebook recently. Aft of the Lincoln Center Stage is another venue known as the Explorer's Lounge which served as an overflow seating area for Lincoln Center Stage, though I don't think that was its intended purpose.

Walking the promenade is one of our favorite activities, especially after dinner. It is hard to find a true promenade deck on today's megaships, and we appreciate any ship that offers one as Oosterdam does. Walking the promenade helps us feel less guilty about eating so much since we can pretend that we are walking off at least some of the calories we consumed at dinner.

The interior of deck 3 is used for meeting rooms, the photo gallery, shops, and an internet classroom known as the Digital Workshop where classes are oriented around Microsoft products. There is a small cinematic theater on deck 3 known as the Screening Room where feature films are run for no additional charge and popcorn is plentiful. Deck 3 is also the location of one of Janet and my favorite spots on prior Holland America cruises, the Ocean Bar. During our cruise they offered specialty seasonal cocktails like a candy cane martini that features crushed candy canes for the rim of the glass. Janet loved them so much, happy hour became a part of our evening routine. Holland America offers happy hour in several of their lounges and they present cruisers with a real value, offering 2 for 1 drink specials. The lounges also host a wide range of mixology classes, beer tastings, whiskey tastings, and in the dining room wine tastings throughout the cruise.



Decks 4-8 are dedicated to cabins, with deck 7 also featuring a concierge and private lounge for the exclusive use of suite guests. The upper three decks on Oosterdam are again devoted to public areas. Deck 9 is the location of the ship's two pools and two casual eating establishments as well as one of the ship's two specialty restaurants. The main pool, also known as the Lido Pool, is situated amidships and has a retractable roof which came in handy during our cruise as it was a bit rainy on our first day at sea. There are also three whirlpools in the Lido Pool area which were quite popular on our cruise. The Sea View Pool is the smaller of the two pools and is located at the aft end of the ship along with two additional whirlpools. Both pools have their own bars and casual eating establishments, the Dive In for the Lido Pool and the Lido Marketplace buffet which exits into the area with the Sea View Pool...more on those in the dining section. Holland America has not designated either pool as an adults-only area, or if they did it wasn't enforced on our cruise.

The spa is located forward of the main pool and boasts a more than ample fitness room with a full circuit of weight machines, free weights, and a variety of aerobic machines like treadmills and spin bikes which were always fully occupied anytime I passed through. You can get a full range of spa services from a couples massage to facial and everything between. The spa also offers hair and cosmetic services for the ladies and barber services for the gentlemen.

Holland America has set aside part of the spa for an area that includes a hydrotherapy pool and what they call their Thermal Suite. The former is essentially an oversized Jacuzzi with an area of



rails positioned horizontally and shaped like a chase lounge where you can lay out but still remain under water to get the most out of the water jets. The Thermal Suite offers a sauna and a relaxation room furnished with heated tile lounge chairs providing a nice view of the ocean. It invites relaxation. Wisely, Holland

America controls access to this area to ensure it doesn't get overcrowded and spoil the relaxing atmosphere. They do so by selling access for the duration of the cruise to just 35 passengers. Additional passengers can gain access during port days by purchasing a spa package or spa services that include a day pass to the hydrotherapy lounge and Thermal Suite. While controlling access is a good idea, both areas suffered from a surprising lack of lounge chairs which tended to discourage lingering. Still, we felt we got enough use out of the two areas to get our money's worth, and at \$149 per person or \$249 per couple it wasn't too outrageous.

Deck 10 is mainly open to the Lido Pool one deck below, and it offers a small number of lounge chairs for those wishing to bask in the sun. While Holland America does offer children's programs, it is limited in comparison to other mass market cruise lines. That isn't a criticism...rather just a reflection of the demographic they are targeting. The kid's programs are hosted in two areas forward of the main pool, Club Hal and The Loft. Aft of that area you'll find the Crow's Nest, a popular lounge that offers plenty of windows with a panoramic view of the sea. Oosterdam's coffee bar, the Explorations Café, is located next to the Crow's Nest. It is a

nice place to satisfy your craving for a specialty coffee preparation. Including spiked coffee if you prefer. In addition to the café, the area accommodates a spacious library and internet enabled computers for those cruisers wanting to go online without having to bring their own laptop or tablet.

On the uppermost deck (deck 11), Oosterdam offers an enclosed sports court amidships and behind the funnel stack. Netting along the sides and over the top of the court meant volleyball and basketball fans could play to their hearts' content without fear of an errant shot sending the ball overboard. Forward of the funnel stack you'll encounter the Observation Deck which allows cruisers an unimpeded view of the ocean.

## **Dining**

There is a single main dining room servicing Oosterdam's passengers, the Vista Dining Room. It is a two story affair with ample seating and a design that minimizes noise and clatter. Holland America is one of the few mass market cruise lines that still offer sommelier service in their main dining room, and ours was knowledgeable and helpful without being pushy. Tables range in size from 2 to 12 with most of the smaller tables located together and larger tables positioned in another portion of the dining room. I feel this tended to limit the noise that can frequently accompany larger tables and that suited me just fine. I like to have a good time when I cruise, but in the past sitting at a table for two that is situated right next to a larger table filled with 10 or more drunked-up cruisers hasn't been an entirely pleasant experience. Menus changed nightly and the food was quite good if somewhat uncreative.



Holland America is following the lead of other cruise lines by offering three courses instead of the traditional five or six. They break it down into a combined soup/salad/appetizer course, an entrée and a dessert/cheese course. It tends to discourage waste since diners tend to order less, though you can still order as much of each as you wish. You can even order multiple options for each course if you just want to try something out but aren't sure you'll like it. Dress is generally country club casual, with one or two nights designated as formal but that is just a suggestion. I didn't notice very many tuxedos on our cruise, but neither did I see any shorts, blue jeans or t-shirts in the main dining room as is becoming all too frequent with other mass market lines.

Casual buffet dining is available throughout the day on deck 9 in the Lido Marketplace. In addition to ample indoor seating, the Lido Marketplace offers al fresco dining adjacent to the Sea View Pool. In the morning Lido Marketplace offers an omelet station where you can get eggs to order, or you can select from a variety of pre-made egg preparations such as frittatas and

quiches...a nice touch. The egg station also had traditional American breakfast main and side dish items such as scrambled eggs, pancakes, French toast, waffles, bacon, sausage and hash browns. Fresh fruit, yogurt, and European styled breakfast foods like lunchmeats and fish were available, though somewhat limited. Smoked salmon was available along with fixings such as bagels, cream cheese, onions and capers. A bread bar provided a wide range of bakery products. Sorry...you won't find any Krispy Kreme or Dunkin Donuts. Just the standard cruise ship bakery donuts and pastries which are far healthier than the sugar filled globs of deep fat fried dough American palates have become accustomed to when we think of donuts.

Lunch featured a sandwich station where you could choose from a variety of pre-made sandwiches, a carving station where you can get an ample serving of the meat of the day, and stations for prepared dishes typical of buffets. Lido Marketplace also offers three stations during their luncheon service where you can get food made to order and I found all three to be superb and a nice addition to the standard buffet fare. The first is a salad bar where chefs will prepare and toss your salad as you like it from a wide range of ingredients. This is an idea more cruise lines should adopt as eating from the self-serve salad bar is one of the primary ways norovirus and other food borne illnesses are spread. The second area is a pasta station where once again a chef will prepare a white or red sauce using a wide range of additions you select such as onions, mushrooms, bell peppers, sausage and more, and then cook it up with a serving of your preferred type of pasta. You can also get pre-made dishes of the pasta of the day which ranged from macaroni and cheese to lasagna, as well as pizza by the slice. The premade pasta of the day tended to get dried out so be sure to ask if it is fresh before you get it. The pizza was nothing special...typical cruise ship pizza. The third specialty area available during lunch serves sushi made to order, and you can also get a side dish of noodles cooked Asian style.

We didn't eat in the Lido Marketplace for dinner, but based on their breakfast and lunches I am sure it was fine. Nothing gourmet to be sure, but if you want to avoid the stuffiness of the dining room it serves as a reasonable alternative, and you can stay casually dressed even on the formal nights. And of course there is room service available almost anytime of day and night.

The Dive In, located next to the Main pool, is an elevated made-to-order burger and hotdog joint. You can get some pretty creative made to order burgers and dogs along with fries. Just beyond the order area for the Dive In, Oosterdam offers a self-serve taco buffet with an extensive array of taco ingredients. The taco station was one of my favorite lunchtime venues.

There are two specialty restaurants aboard Oosterdam that charge a fee in exchange for a more intimate setting and an elevated food experience. At least that is what they promise. We didn't try them since we felt the food in the main dining room was quite good. Holland America's signature restaurant, the Pinnacle Grill, is the first of the specialty restaurants and is located next to the Pinnacle Bar on deck 2. The cost is \$35 per person for dinner, but if you want to try dining in the Pinnacle Grill without such a high premium they offer a lunch service for \$15. Once per cruise during the dinner service the Pinnacle Grill is transformed into a seafood themed establishment and renamed Rudi's Sel de Mer. It is billed as a pop-up restaurant at sea offering a special menu full of...wait for it...seafood! The second specialty restaurant, Canelleto, is an Italian themed venue located on deck 9 next to the Lido buffet and the cost is \$15.

## **Accommodations**

Oosterdam offers cabins in 29 categories. In addition to standard inside, oceanview and balcony cabins, Oosterdam has 3 different classes of suites. Cabins are spacious...not as spacious as some lines but more so than others. The smallest inside cabins offer 151 square feet of space, and the Pinnacle Penthouse Suite offers a staggering 1150 square feet of elegance. Oosterdam has transitioned to 50 inch flat screen monitors for their in-cabin video entertainment which contributes to the sense of a more spacious cabin. Our cabin offered plenty of storage space in the closets but we would have preferred more drawer storage. We opted to book an aft facing balcony cabin and were pleasantly surprised to discover full sized chaise lounges on our balcony. These aft facing cabins come with plusses and minuses. Our cabin was well appointed and surprisingly quiet most of the time. On the negative side, we were situated one deck below the aft pool and each morning for about 15 minutes starting at about 4AM you could hear the staff moving chairs around for the morning breakfast service in the Lido al fresco dining area. Fortunately it was brief and easy enough to fall back to sleep. The other negative aspect of the cabin was the occasional waft of cigarette smoke that drifted down to our balcony from the smoking side of the aft pool.

## **Disappointments**

This was an enjoyable cruise and was our first sailing of the Mexican Riviera itinerary. As enjoyable as it was, if I am being honest there were some aspects that were disappointing to us. Oosterdam entered service for Holland America in 2003 which is about average for cruise ships today, and she looks her age. That surprised me since she just went through a major dry dock earlier in 2017. I expected to find a nearly new look throughout the ship and was surprised at how much wear was evident in some of the public areas. My overall impression was that Oosterdam was a nice ship that has seen better days.

Janet and I love to dance when we cruise...ballroom dancing. On past cruises with Holland America we knew to look for the Ocean Bar where live music would allow us to dance the night away. The only space we found that offered a dance floor was B.B. King's Blues Club...the Ocean Bar didn't have the dance area other Holland America ships we have cruised aboard offered. I am guessing it fell victim to the refurbishment and was given over to more space for seating. Even though the dance floor in the B.B. King's Blues Club was decent, we didn't see where they offered music we could dance to. There were Latin dance classes offered on a couple of days but we were disappointed that we couldn't sneak in a good foxtrot or waltz. Live music was also more limited than we were expecting with the string group and the blues group being the only ensembles along with the two piano players in the Billboard Onboard lounge. I think this is one area the megaships have spoiled us with the diversity of music they offer in their more numerous public venues.

Another disappointment was with the state of Oosterdam's technology. Holland America is getting left behind in the tech area with an internet system and package approach that is a throwback to cruising 20 years ago. There is no option to purchase an unlimited or multiple device package so we purchased one package based on usage minutes and shared it. What I

dislike about this approach is that you must follow a specific process for logging out otherwise your minutes will continue to be charged, even when you aren't online. It would be one thing if the logout procedure worked, but trying to log on and off with multiple devices resulted in failed log-outs several times. The ship also suffers from lack of bandwidth. Internet access is slow and spotty at times, and television reception came with frequent signal drop outs, both in-room and in the lounges. It was frustrating to watch Navy kicking UVA's butt during the Military Bowl when key plays were lost to signal drops. I could understand if the waters were rough but they weren't. Live in-room television programming was limited with just the major cable news channels and ESPN, but that was somewhat mitigated by the wide range of pre-recorded free in-cabin shows and movies. My sense is the video programming is more a reflection of the age demographic Holland America is targeting than anything else. And while it was nice to go unplugged for a time, I would have preferred that be our choice rather than the result of the ship's limited internet.

### **Summary**

This was a different experience for us compared with our most recent cruises, one which we enjoyed perhaps more than we expected in spite of the few disappointments I just noted. We loved the more attentive and professional service Oosterdam offered over other mass market cruise lines. Though we enjoyed some aspects of cruising aboard a medium sized ship, at the same time we did find ourselves missing some of the amenities and features that have become commonplace on newer ships. On balance, if you are looking for a cruise experience that delivers stellar service, great food, a different but elevated program of entertainment and activities, Holland America is a great option. Just don't expect to find full length Broadway shows in the main theater or parachute free fall simulators on deck.