

Oceanography

A pro studies the luxury cruise lines
by Ann Wilson

When you ask Gary M. Pollard, the vibrant and—in his own words—“restless” president of family-owned-and-operated Ambassador Tours, about his priorities, he is quick to respond: He is forever on the lookout for the best deals for his customers. “When my parents opened our doors in San Francisco in 1955,” Pollard says, “they saw a niche for a business focused on service—understanding our customers and finding an affordable vacation to meet their needs and

desires. That has been the foundation of our business from day one.” And that priority hasn’t changed. With the emergence of luxury cruises over the last decade, Ambassador has become one of the leading brokers of the four high-end cruise companies that covet affluent travelers and offer sailing experiences that suit their expectations. The challenge, he says, is to convince his well-to-do customers that although the fares are tangibly higher, the opulence— butler service, spacious living areas, five-star dining in their stateroom or on their private verandah—is worth it.

Donald and Catherine DeCoss, who live in the San Francisco Bay Area, have been cruising for more than 35 years. “What people don’t realize,” Donald says, “is that if you add up all of the items on the all-inclusive ships and compare them with what you purchase on other ships, the price gap between the two is not nearly as great as you might think. And it seems like the entire crew knows us by name.”

Pollard is able to deftly delineate each of the top-of-the-line companies. He calls Yachts of Seabourn “ultra-deluxe and intimate.” On tropical voyages, a beach barbecue begins with the crew walking through the surf to serve guests caviar and Champagne. “The message Seabourn gives is, The world is your oyster.” Pollard traveled to Tahiti with Regent Seven Seas Cruises on the *Paul Gauguin*, which carries with it all the water gear imaginable: Jet-Skis, snorkel equipment, and more. “Regent’s accommodations are really beautiful and spacious,” he says.

About Silversea, Pollard comments, “Service is impeccable and the onboard amenities pure luxury.” Each trip generally includes an extraordinary outing: On a Silversea voyage Pollard took to Norway, passengers picnicked atop a fjord on Champagne and strawberries.

He has this to say about Crystal Cruises: “‘No’ does not exist; they aim to please and they succeed. Crystal has all the amenities of a large ship—a variety of dining options, lectures, entertainment—without a big ship’s crowd of passengers.”

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