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CRUISE *FIRST CALL*

Having a great time getting to know the Explora I

By Tom Stieghorst   | Oct 05, 2023



Although the MSC name and logo appear on the funnel, there's not much point in comparing the Explora I to MSC's massive ships. Photo Credit: Tom Stieghorst

ABOARD THE EXPLORA I -- If you've ever had a first date go better than expected, that's how I feel about my cruise on the new Explora I.

It wasn't that I was anticipating something bad. As with some first dates I've been on, I really didn't know what to expect. The Explora I is the first ship of a freshly created brand. Other new brands I've tried in recent years have at least been extensions of river cruise lines, or of luxury hotel chains, or were old ships repurposed under new ownership.

What I knew about Explora Journeys was based on news releases from the line, and that it is part of MSC Group. What would a luxury version of MSC entail?

And as I looked ahead to this first date, I wasn't sure if the cruise industry and travel advisors needed yet another luxury brand to learn about and sell.

So why was I smitten?

To start with, Explora is a completely separate operation from MSC Cruises. Although the MSC name and logo appear on the funnel, there's really not much point in comparing the 922-passenger Explora I to the 5,000-passenger megaships of the contemporary MSC line.



The Explora I's lobby. Photo Credit: Tom Stieghorst

While MSC offers glitz and novelty, Explora is more about comfort and familiarity. The brand's pillars are described as privacy, choice, design and space.

Left out of that formula is a terrific housekeeping staff that is well-trained, genuinely friendly and one of the strengths of the experience.

The food also was a strength. While there were some misses, the beef bourguignon, the oysters and the flaky pastries were memorably good. The spaces were attractive -- the Japanese restaurant Sakura was especially charming. The menu at the gourmet restaurant Anthology, which carries an additional cost of \$200 per person, was developed by three-Michelin-star chef Mauro Uliassi, and it shows.

Explora says guest chefs of the same caliber will be rotated in every few months. The food was more sophisticated than I'm used to and might attract a foodie following.

A favorite spot for me was the Conservatory Pool, the largest of four pools on the ship. An indoor area with a sliding glass roof that looks lighter and more graceful than the clunky, old-style ones, this space will be equally popular in warm or cool weather. A pair of long, narrow hot tubs running alongside the windows on either side is unlike anything I've seen on other ships.

Chris Austin, Explora's chief sales officer, echoed what many sales executives in the cruise industry say, which is that Explora is positioned to compete not against other luxury cruise names -- Regent Seven Seas, Silversea, Seabourn -- but with upscale land resorts. The demographic sweet spot, he said, is discerning travelers 40 to 60 years old.

"We are targeting younger audiences that are looking to get away from the classic and traditional," Austin said. "Instead, they want authentic, cosmopolitan and relaxed European luxury."

In its design, the ship strives for a residential feel and a hotel ambience. Explora isn't trying too hard to be novel, or contemporary, or traditional. On the whole, it is comfortable, tasteful, quiet, relaxing and warm.



The Conservatory Pool is covered with a sliding glass roof. Photo Credit: Tom Stieghorst

The shipwide brown/beige color scheme felt unifying and soothing to me, but some might consider it monotonous. If you really hate brown, this may not be the ship for you.

The ship's passenger capacity begs for comparison to Viking's 930-passenger oceangoing ships, and with its heated-floor bathrooms and worsted wool throw blankets, Explora seems aimed at Viking as much as at any others in the luxury segment.



Customer service is provided at these oval desks. Photo Credit: Tom Stieghorst

But there are differences. Viking's target group is older and the line is focused more on the U.S. and the U.K. market. Its design is boldly Nordic rather than mildly European. And at 64,000 gross tons, Explora's ships will be a third bigger than Viking's, with that much more space to play with.

The ship's entertainment team is small but top quality. A pianist drew a dedicated pre-and post-dinner audience in the Explora Lounge. Especially worth catching was cruise director Tanya Roberts, whose show mixing operatic bits and pieces with Broadway standards was a showcase for her astonishing vocal talent.

In talking to passengers, I heard mention of a few glitches, such as miscommunication on available shore excursions and behind-the-scenes technology that was not ready for prime time. But most seemed well satisfied and inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to the

new line.

Austin has said that Explora may be intentionally sold short of capacity in its early cruises, and indeed our ship was less than one-third full on an eight-night sailing from New York to Quebec. Passengers skewed more toward 60-plus than 40.



The main show lounge on Explora I features a series of "An Evening By Candlelight" musical presentations. Photo Credit: Tom Stieghorst

One unknown is how aggressively the brand will live up to its Explora name. With one ship, itineraries are limited, but there are five more ships on order, so more adventurous itineraries may be in the cards once the fleet hits full size.

To return to the date analogy: Agents will likely want to get personal with a voyage of their own in the coming months. But I have to admit to some warm and fuzzy feelings: I'd be open to the idea of a second date with the Explora I.

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