

When crossing the Atlantic, getting there is half the fun

You can fly to New York on a jet, but it's far better to take your time and spend six days on the open seas, writes **Christian Sylt**



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OPENING JAN '10... THE NEW SANDALS EMERALD BAY, GREAT EXUMA, BAHAMAS



IT IS a glorious morning in New York. The sunlight is sparkling on the skyscrapers as I look out over Manhattan island having just arrived in the United States. I couldn't be more relaxed after an early morning visit to the spa while I was on my way. There's not a hint of jet lag and no luggage limits to hamper me.

It may sound like a vision of the future but in fact it is the exact opposite. There's a catch of course, and that's the fact that it has taken me six nights to get here, travelling aboard the Queen Mary 2 cruise liner.

There is a tremendous sense of occasion when setting off on the voyage. It begins in Southampton where travellers arrive in the unusual surroundings of a hangar-like check-in area with Union Jacks hanging from the ceiling and huge trunks belonging to the more well-heeled passengers being unloaded from fleets of Bentleys. The feeling of adventure really kicks in as the QM2 pulls out of the port. It seems like most of the 3,000 guests are gathered on the vast top deck sipping champagne with the QM2's famous red and black funnel towering over it. Its horn bellows as we leave Southampton behind us and over the loudspeaker a maritime historian talks about the history of the port and the liner.

The smell of polished decking is thick in the air and, adding to the sense of adventure, people packed into ferries travelling to the Isle of Wight wave and cheer at the QM2 as it sets sail.

SHEER SIZE
After the festivities you won't be able to resist the urge to explore and the first thing that comes across is the sheer size of the QM2. There are 10 restaurants, seven bars, five swimming pools, a ballroom, a nightclub and the obligatory costly boutiques aimed at those rich tourists who come to spend, buying jewellery in the Swarovski store, Hermes outlet and sundries from the on-board Harrods concession. But it's the most unusual facilities which best convey the scale of the QM2.

There's a full-size theatre, a two-floor gym, a cheery casino complete with table games and even a planetarium. Corridors

stretch as far as the eye can see and the over-all effect is that of a five star hotel. Cream carpets and polished beech walls abound and it all looks sparkling clean.

Although the QM2's operator, Cunard, is now owned by US-cruising giant Carnival, it hasn't forgotten its quintessentially British roots. Every day white-gloved waiters serve afternoon tea in the QM2's winter garden and there's even a squeaky-clean pub with a darts board.

It comes across as a view of Britain through American eyes and it makes the QM2 a big hit with the US market. You might also hear some well-known voices on board too.

Racing legend Sir Jackie Stewart is a regular guest on the QM2 and in June this year celebrated his 70th birthday by taking his family on it to New York. "My ideal would be to make the journey at least once a year," he says.

REASONABLE RATES
However, it's not just for the big spenders. The most basic cabins have recession-busting rates (relatively speaking - this is a cruise aboard one of the world's finest boats) with a one-way ticket starting at £690 per person including return air fare. This rate would be reasonable for the six nights of accommodation alone but also included in the price of all QM2 cabins is unlimited food and soft drinks 24 hours a day, even through room service. There aren't many luxury hotels which offer that.

Dining on the QM2 is an event in itself. Every night guests get a table in the flagship Britannia restaurant where black tie is required and a classical band plays in the background. The quality of the food is up there with top restaurants in capital cities and there's no restriction on when you can enjoy it, since there are also round-the-clock buffets.

If you prefer relaxing in bed, even the mid-range cabins will impress. They don't look any different to rooms in a deluxe hotel aside from a slightly



cramped bathroom which lacks a bath. The cabins are kitted out with both UK and US power sockets, and wireless internet access is available throughout. But the most impressive aspect is the view from the ship that awaits you every day.

Through a glass-walled balcony you get an uninterrupted vista of the ocean from your cabin. Staring out into the horizon while listening to the waves crashing against the ship is mesmerising. Adding to this hypnotic effect is the fact that the QM2 is equipped with high-tech stabilising equipment and there is so little sensation of movement that it seems as if your eyes are deceiving you on looking out and seeing the spray from the ship. Another welcome bonus is that every day clocks are set back one hour to compensate for New York being five hours behind the UK. It means you get an extra hour in bed every day, which just might be the best luxury of all.

HOT TUB
The most calming way to while away the day is sitting in the hot tub watching the clouds and sea pass by through the glass canopy. It couldn't be more different to being squeezed into an airline seat. There is also an ingenious tiered swimming pool. Since its water picks up even the slightest movement of the ship, the pool has a natural wave-like motion. Its stepped sides mean that, instead of spilling onto the deck, water from the wave motion flows into the upper tier before cascading back down like a waterfall.

Once you arrive, the commotion of New York is a huge contrast to the atmosphere aboard the QM2. Walking through Manhattan you get that famous sense of being on the set of a blockbuster movie, with smoke

stacks rising mysteriously from the streets billowing out steam from the subway. The best and swankiest way to see it all is from the famous Four Seasons hotel. It is the tallest hotel in town at 53 storeys, and from the huge windows in the rooms the cars on the streets below seem like toys. You don't even need to leave your bed to see the sun rising over Central Park - pushing a button on the bedside panel will draw the curtains back for you, allowing you to watch the day break over the greatest metropolis on Earth.

It is a haven of tranquillity and the only downside is when the time comes to return to the UK and cram yourself into an airline seat while picking at in-flight food. Compared to the comforts of the QM2, the plane seems somehow old-fashioned.

Every day the clocks are set back one hour to compensate for the time difference, meaning an extra hour in bed every morning of the trip

TRAVEL NOTES

Private music studio
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QM2 will offer 21 Atlantic crossings (10 six-night and 11 seven-night) between Southampton and New York in 2010. Fares for the six-day crossings begin at £999 per person, including the air fare in the opposite direction, with the seven-day crossings from £1,099 per person. A wider range of new combination packages including the Rockies and capitals tour, and two-centre options which com-

bine a stay in New York with one in Barbados, Disneyworld, Miami or a deluxe option in Las Vegas are also offered. For reservations call 08450710300 or visit www.cunard.co.uk. Stays of three nights and over at the Four Seasons New York are from \$663 per night. For reservations call 0800 6488 6488 or visit www.fourseasons.com.