

Luxury dining on the Silver Shadow

Travel & Dining Adventures

By David Rottenberg

The Silver Shadow lay berthed at the dock in Auckland, New Zealand, poised like a sleek, silver bullet about to fly off onto the Tasman Sea. I was embarking on an 11-day cruise from Auckland to Cairns, on the northern end of Australia, where the Great Barrier Reef protects a vital ecosystem. I could hardly wait for the adventure to begin.

The Silver Shadow, along with its twin ship, the Silver Whisper, and the other vessels operated by Silversea Cruise Lines, are the ultimate in luxury sailing. Silversea Cruise Lines is a small, privately held company, only 10 years old, whose owner is a member of an Italian seafaring family with old nautical traditions of quality. There is no corporate structure or board of directors who require decisions regarding quality be justified on a "bottom line" basis. If the owner wants something, he gets it. And he insists on only the very best for his passengers.

The Silver Shadow and the Silver Whisper came into service less than 4 years ago. They have the latest equipment for safe, comfortable travel. The vessels have many decks, salons, shops and elegant dining rooms, but carry only about 350 passengers. The ratio of crew to passengers is almost 1:1. Service is impeccable.

The embarkation process was swift. Luggage was quickly gathered and delivered to my cabin. After a few check-in formalities, I was escorted on board and greeted with a glass of champagne. A hostess then escorted me to where I would spend the next short phase of my life.

The cabins are larger than those on many comparable vessels. I didn't have the cramped feeling I usually experience on cruises. The furniture is made of gorgeous, shiny teak. Beds are firm and comfortable. My cabin, a Silver Suite, had a separate sitting area, and a dining area. Closet space is generous. The bathroom is a sea of marble, with stall shower, jacuzzi tub and double sinks. Almost every cabin has an exte-



The maitre d' awaits guests at The Restaurant aboard the Silver Shadow.

rior balcony. "We want our guests to experience the same luxury lifestyle on board that they enjoy when at their homes on land," the hotel manager told me.

Cruising aboard a Silversea vessel is a different experience from that of most other cruise lines in several important ways. First, it is "all inclusive." That is, all the wine and liquor one desires is included in the ticket price. There are no "nickel and dime" charges that may annoy travelers and impinge on the pleasures of being at sea. I didn't have to concern myself about the cost of a second glass of wine, or even the first.

And, there is no tipping. I wouldn't have to worry at the end of my trip whether I was sufficiently rewarding or a miser. Gratuities are included in the price of the trip.

Finally, I could choose the exact cruise I wanted. The Silversea vessels meander around the world, visiting interesting and often infrequently visited ports. For example, Newcastle, Australia, was on my itinerary. This would be one of the first cruise ships to stop there. I could get on where I wished and stay on as long as I wished, paying only a "per diem" rate. I could custom design my trip.

"So, tell me about the food," a friend demanded by e-mail. My one word response: Superb.

Meals are available at a large buffet or by menu in The Restaurant, a beautifully ornate room, with a stunning view of the ocean off the bow of the vessel. Hamburgers and salads are served poolside in the afternoons. Should one somehow manage to grow hungry, room service is available 24 hours a day. Well-stocked bars dispense wonderfully mixed drinks at most day and early evening hours.

The Restaurant has no first or second seating, nor is seating pre-assigned. Diners come when they wish during the dining periods, and dine with whom they wish. The conflicts between diners common on other cruise lines are totally absent on the Silversea vessels.

The kitchen staff consists of 47 people who turn out almost 1,500 meals a day. The galleys shine from stainless steel. Cleanliness is next to holiness in the food preparation area.

Chef Rudi Scholdis is the executive chef for the entire fleet. "Running the kitchen," he said, "is like playing a concerto. All the players must be coordinated perfectly to make everything come out all right." This is particularly challenging on this vessel because every dish is cooked to order.

Every dinner menu includes a "cruiselite" series of choices,

restricted in caloric content but exotic in preparation nonetheless. The regular menu includes choices of cold and hot appetizers, soup, salad, sorbet, main courses, vegetarian dishes and desserts. Raspberry Blue - fresh raspberries dipped in blue curacao - or Fish Waterzooi' - Flemish sole, salmon and shrimp casserole with chardonnay cream, leek and carrot vermicelli - are typical appetizers. Cauliflower Veloute, a creamy parmesan and cauliflower soup with pesto crostini, is an example of a typical soup choice. Main courses include Mauritian style Sea Bream, fresh pan-fried sea bream with baby bok choy and fennel ragout or Filet de Bouef et Yommes Moellcuses, roast fillet of black Angus beef with shallot jam and foie gras confied potatoes.

"We want to emulate on board the quality of superb land-based dining," Chef Scholdis continued. He is creating a new method for ordering supplies for all vessels that emphasize fresh local seafood and produce. "We want to get away from salts and heavy sauces and move toward lighter fare based on exciting flavors," he said.

Servers are continually refilling crystal goblets with exceptional wine selections from vineyards all over the world. Labels from California, Australia, New Zealand, France, Chile and other countries are ceremoniously presented for approval. These are expensive, quality vintages.

"Our company's loth anniversary celebrations begin in April," Chef Scholdis informed me. "We will have some of the world's premier winemakers on board. They will bring their latest products and will make informative presentations. Even Robert Mondavi is expected, as well as people from Jackson Kendall," he added proudly.

Dining on the Silver Shadow lives up to the high standards of quality and luxury that the cruise line is well known for. For information about any of the exciting programs that are planned for future sailings, call your travel agent or go online to www.silversea.com.

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