

Holland America's Oosterdam 4-6 February 2014 Melbourne to Hobart

Let's get the name right first - it's **OASTERdam!**

We're fond of saying that big white ships all look the same, and they do. But Holland America ships are dark blue, immediately indicating there is something different about this interesting cruise line which proudly preserves its Dutch heritage.

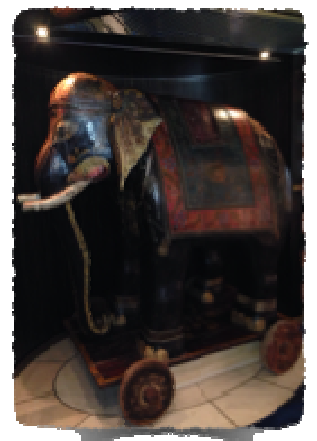
The on board ambience is definitely more hushed art gallery than buzzing country club. Dark wood panelling and leather furnishings immediately evoke a quiet, refined atmosphere, which is enhanced by a better than average passenger to space ratio - there are ships of the same design which carry 600 more passengers in the same space. *Oosterdam* also proudly boasts a 1:2 cruise to passenger ratio. Service crew are all Indonesian or Filipino.

Holland America ships are really all about the art. On *Oosterdam* you have everything from tiny figurines to a life size wooden Indian elephant. There are massive Balinese wooden doors, and even an original Andy Warhol. The collection is beautifully displayed and completely curated. To take a proper look there is a free 2 hour self-guided iPod tour which guests can take. At the tail end of a day in port, with the ship almost deserted, it's very easy to imagine you are in an interesting art gallery. The remainder of the decor is subdued and nice, although the carpet in the cabin corridors is unattractive, and the corridors themselves are quite narrow, and plainly decorated. That said, the layout of the ship is such that the lift lobbies are enormous and a kind of "dual corridor" system keeps passing traffic well away from the bedrooms. There is absolutely no lift noise.

Although owned by the Carnival Corporation, and administered from Seattle, somehow Holland America manages to retain its Dutch feel - I pass the Queen's lounge and note that the bronze bust outside is of Queen Beatrix- no Queen Elizabeth in these parts!

There are fresh flowers throughout, and an on-board florist with responsibility for them. We are told they are regularly flown to the ships from Holland - I wouldn't have thought there was any need for that! The ship is laid out a little differently in that the accommodation decks are exclusively so, and on the high decks. The public areas are largely located on the lower three decks, the two exceptions being the Lido buffet, and the very popular Explorers' Lounge.

It is unusual for there to be anything noteworthy about a cruise buffet however, this one has two key points of difference - normal sized china plates, as opposed to massive plastic platters, and no trays. The Explorers' Lounge is a special HAL feature whereby a coffee lounge (excellent coffee I am told), a library, and Internet cafe are all in one massive area high and forward on the ship. Comfortable leather sofas and chairs (some with foot stools) throughout, plus many internet stations, and also plain work stations (for souls like me!!), not to mention an amazing selection of books, games, newspapers etc., make this a really pleasant place to be. A continuous large screen presentation of photographs from the New York Times archives, plays in the background. I have seen many library/internet facilities at sea, and HAL does it best.



HOLLAND AMERICA' OOSTERDAM

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MELBOURNE TO HOBART

Cabins are perfectly fine. I had an unusual long, narrow cabin with a verandah, at the rear of the ship. The narrowness made it challenging to move around but overall there was quite a bit of space - the sitting area was generous for example. There is a variety of cabins and suites. All those I saw were more than adequate - you wouldn't say "wow", but you would have nothing to complain about either. Bathrooms are quite large, and while stock standard, are well equipped - Elemis amenities (wall dispensers in the shower - eww! but at least the product is good)

We dined in all three restaurants - the main one Vista is a massive two storey affair which successfully operates an "As You Wish" arrangement on the lower level, for those not wishing to be nailed to a dining time/table each evening. The upper level is reserved for those who opt to dine early at 1730 or late at 2000. Canaletto is an Italian restaurant which you pay a small premium to reserve (\$20). It is in a space which is carved out of the buffet, for dinners only, and offers "shared plate" dining. While the food was OK, the venue wasn't special, and I wouldn't bother paying to dine there.

The Pinnacle Grill (\$29 surcharge) is a 5-star fine dining experience with venue, crockery (Bulgari), linen (Frette), and flatware to match. Well worth it for a special occasion. Food was really good.

There are no laundries which, aside from the inconvenience of having nowhere to iron, stems the flow of shipboard gossip however, more fun can be had by hanging around the Reception Desk for a short time, and listening to the flow of enquiries. Even more fun can be had by grabbing a seat within earshot of the attendant in the Internet Lounge - oh my!!

Laundry packages are available - \$20 a bag which is excellent value on a longer cruise however you need to pay per piece for casual washing and ironing. Beverage packages are available on the day of boarding only, and seem to be good value - if you have six or more drinks a day. Aside from that cocktails are typically \$6.95 (USD of course), and there always seems to be a happy hour.

In summary, this is a really excellent cruise product, but definitely for an older, more sedate clientele. That said, I am yet to see a walking frame, or anyone who looks as if they should be in one. There are 7 kids on board this cruise - good kids' facilities however this is not the product for families. This is a product which essentially competes in this market with Princess/RCI/Celebrity et al yet there are some real differences which set HAL apart.

Some additional points:

HAL has the highest repeat passenger rate in the industry (so they say!)

HAL is a premium cruise line - I would say a notch above RCI and Princess. Ships are all mid-size (around 1600-1900 pax).

The on board crowd is definitely older and quieter.

Anne Rogers

6 February 2014

