



Stay Longer – Experience More

An Interview with Larry Pimentel,
President and Chief Executive Officer, Azamara Club Cruises



Amalfi, Italy - Azamara visits smaller ports that large ships can't get into (left); Azamara connects guests to people, places, and things in the destination (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Taking the helm in 2009, Larry Pimentel and his team have created a new niche of cruise travel distinguished by Destination Immersion®, meaning longer stays, more overnights, and night touring. Before joining Azamara Club Cruises®, Pimentel was President and CEO of SeaDream Yacht Club. At Carnival Corp. he served as President and CEO of Cunard Line and Seabourn Cruise Line. He was previously President and CEO of Classic Hawaii.



Larry Pimentel

COMPANY BRIEF Azamara Club Cruises (azamaracruises.com) is a brand of Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., a global cruise vacation company that also owns Royal Caribbean International, Celebrity Cruises, Pullmantur, and CDF Croisières de France, as well as TUI Cruises through a 50 percent joint venture. These six brands operate a combined total of 47 ships with an additional 12 on order. They operate diverse global itineraries that call on approximately 460 destinations on all seven continents.

What made you feel you could differentiate Azamara in this space?

I was a part of the development of Cunard and Sea Goddess, which was considered one of the most magnificent small ship experiences in its day. As I've spent 30-plus years in the cruise industry, we've gone from family-owned businesses to corporations that today are Wall Street listed companies.

I've noticed that the ships are getting bigger. Those big ships have a lot to offer. However, small ships can go to places that big ships can't. With our brand, roughly 50 percent of the places Azamara visits are ports that ships with thousands of guests can't get into.

I found there was an opportunity that wasn't being capitalized on so we positioned Azamara as the vacation brand that offers Destination Immersion®.

We have since evolved this positioning to "Stay Longer. Experience More." That starts with immersive itineraries and how we connect guests to local people, cultures, sights, sounds, tastes, and more. We refurbished the ships completely in 2016, which makes them feel fresh and new. Rates are going up, and the brand is booking exceptionally well. Despite the fact that it's a

two-ship operation, the brand punches well above its weight as evidenced by an industry that is copying the notion of longer stays and more overnights.

We have focused outside of the ship and what we can do on land to create bespoke product that is authentic, localized, and experiential.

Onboard we offer cuisine and culinary efforts that are about the destinations we visit. We're focused more on bringing the destination onboard than the physical plant. We want to give people what they really want.

How broad is the market?

We are dealing with today's affluent travelers, and they almost don't need more things, but they're still actively collecting experiences.

Our objective is to offer experiences in a unique way: for example, we have new country-intensive itineraries in places like Japan where we're there for 15 nights during which we'll visit 13 Japanese ports. It's a far more efficient way to travel. We have the same thing in a variety of other countries. Others are copying this idea because the revenues are showing the success.

Historically, older ships don't get a higher tariff, but we are clearly an exception.

How do you go about building brand awareness?

The greatest boutique hotels in the world may not have an army of people, but they have managed to punch it up. We're doing the same thing.

Word-of-mouth is one clear advantage. We have made the brand more inclusive. We have remained focused on our core of destination immersion. It is delivered on the ship and on land. As long as we stay on that concept, it's an advantage.

Social media has also been a real juggernaut. I'm active on my own accounts. I find the guests respond to authentic scenarios, and I can communicate to a global audience through social media. We have a modest budget, but guests know we are different. I would not be surprised if we got an opportunity to build this into a significant sector of the cruise industry.

Did you need to reassemble the team when you came in or did the people understand your vision?

Originally, Azamara was a part of Celebrity Cruises. When I took over in 2009, I assembled a team to help build and manage the brand. There is always give and take. It took several

years, but people became believers when they saw the metrics change.

As demand changes, will there be more ships?

There can be. We're trying to connect people to experiences. There are so many interests in the world. If we can tap into those, we can create expansion.

How much of a focus has the food product been?

I have elected not to have a famous chef since they're almost never on the ship. We have excellent chefs who are internationally trained. Every week they're in a different country – they're buying local and the guests are part of that experience, which they love.

How do you find unique local experiences like family-owned restaurants when you're in port?

We have tour operators that serve us that live in these areas, but social media is also an amazing place to aggregate local favorites. We also call the embassies and ask the staff where they would take their friends. The focus is where the locals go because guests want to experience things like locals.

How important is it to maintain the relationship with guests after a trip?

We connect via our crews – they remember names. The ships become a home away from home. The senior officers are the same people I've had for years, and our staff has not been trained so much in formality but in human connection.

Also, Le Club Voyage is an alumni group for those who travel with us. We communicate with them often. Guests love staying engaged.

Is it different to lead a brand of this size?

The bigger brands focus on volumes, which I don't have. It's about connecting people to people and, if we can do that, we will succeed again and again.

I do not fear the growth of competitors because executing what we do is very complicated. It comes down to offering the things people inherently want and need.

How do you go about getting the staff to understand that?

There is enough quantitative data that shows businesses can increase their revenues by having people feel there is a human being available. We teach young people graciousness. We're a two-ship brand that is very gracious with our guests and as a result, they keep coming back. ●