

AS THE WORLD FALLS APART, WHERE BETTER TO SHELTER THAN A FIVE-STAR ARK CALLED ... THE WORLD. AS THE SHIP HEADS DOWN UNDER, **FIONA CARRUTHERS** REPORTS ON HIGH LIFE ON THE HIGH SEAS

# LIQUID ASSETS

TONY DE LEEDE WAS ON BOARD IN Portofino last October when he took the call that changed his life. It was the office on the line, the sort of run-of-the-mill business call that the Australian Fitness First chairman and managing director had taken a thousand times before.

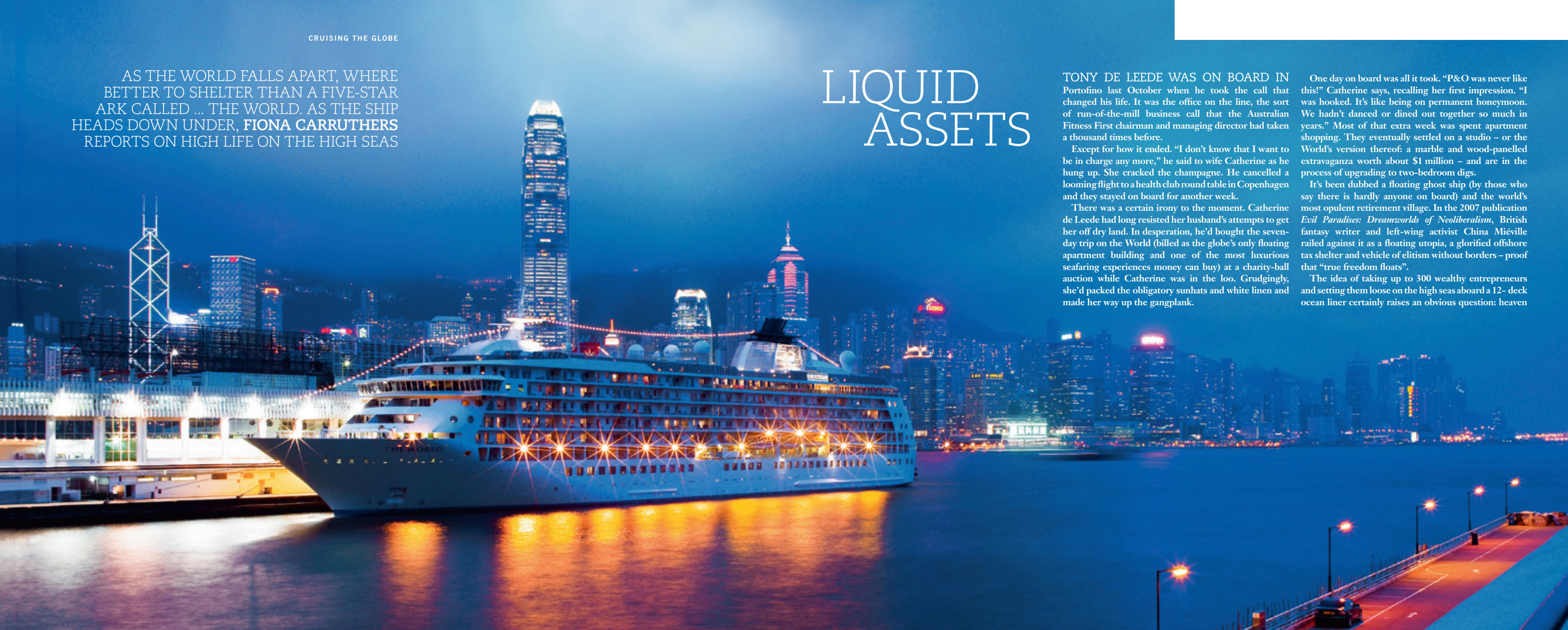
Except for how it ended. "I don't know that I want to be in charge any more," he said to wife Catherine as he hung up. She cracked the champagne. He cancelled a looming flight to a health club round table in Copenhagen and they stayed on board for another week.

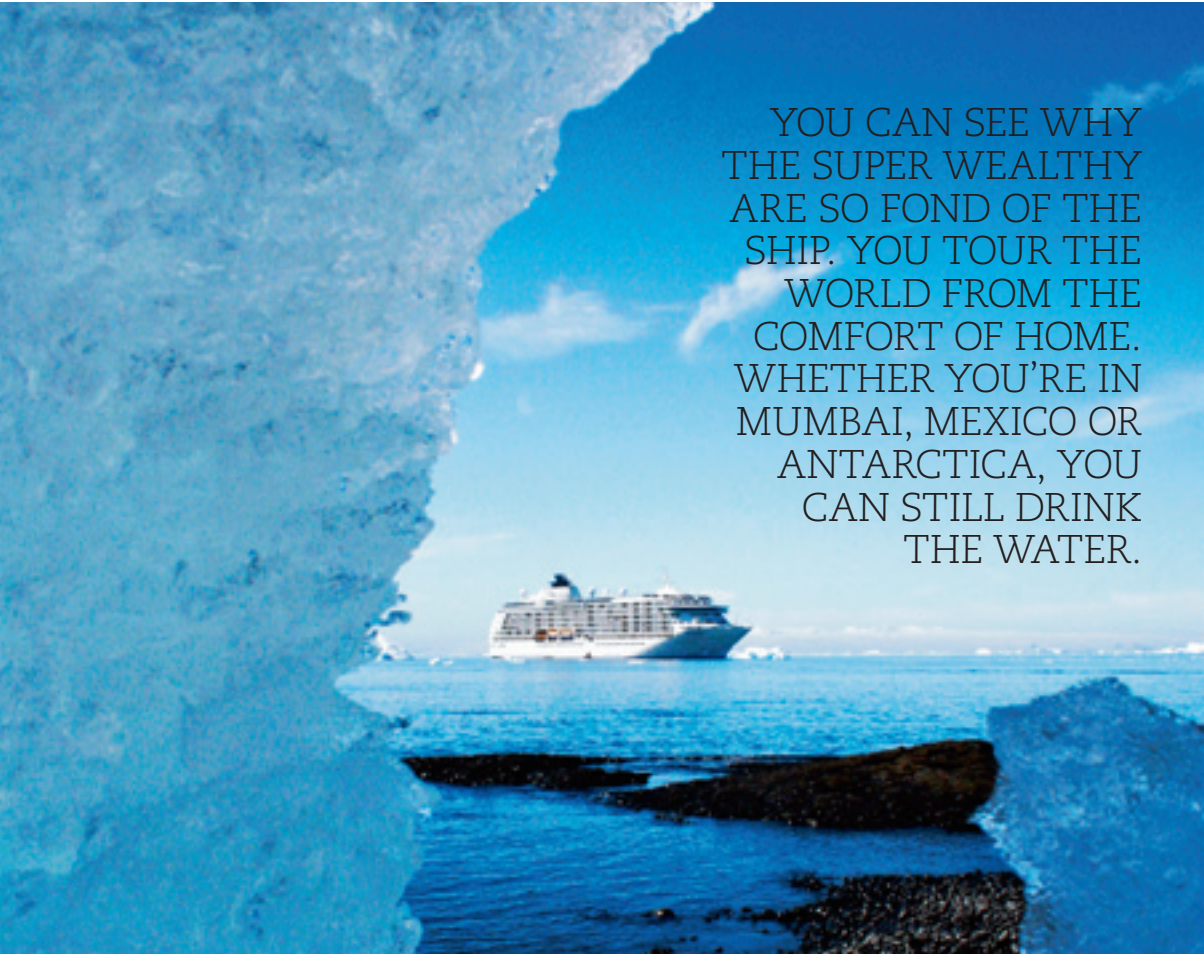
There was a certain irony to the moment. Catherine de Leede had long resisted her husband's attempts to get her off dry land. In desperation, he'd bought the seven-day trip on the World (billed as the globe's only floating apartment building and one of the most luxurious seafaring experiences money can buy) at a charity-ball auction while Catherine was in the loo. Grudgingly, she'd packed the obligatory sunhats and white linen and made her way up the gangplank.

One day on board was all it took. "P&O was never like this!" Catherine says, recalling her first impression. "I was hooked. It's like being on permanent honeymoon. We hadn't danced or dined out together so much in years." Most of that extra week was spent apartment shopping. They eventually settled on a studio – or the World's version thereof: a marble and wood-panelled extravaganza worth about \$1 million – and are in the process of upgrading to two-bedroom digs.

It's been dubbed a floating ghost ship (by those who say there is hardly anyone on board) and the world's most opulent retirement village. In the 2007 publication *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*, British fantasy writer and left-wing activist China Miéville railed against it as a floating utopia, a glorified offshore tax shelter and vehicle of elitism without borders – proof that "true freedom floats".

The idea of taking up to 300 wealthy entrepreneurs and setting them loose on the high seas aboard a 12-deck ocean liner certainly raises an obvious question: heaven





YOU CAN SEE WHY  
THE SUPER WEALTHY  
ARE SO FOND OF THE  
SHIP. YOU TOUR THE  
WORLD FROM THE  
COMFORT OF HOME.  
WHETHER YOU'RE IN  
MUMBAI, MEXICO OR  
ANTARCTICA, YOU  
CAN STILL DRINK  
THE WATER.



**LEFT:** Icebergs break in two right outside your bedroom window. **ABOVE:** The World's plush accommodation makes millionaires feel at home on the high seas.

or hell? But for the high-end punters who count one of its 165 residential apartments among their suite of homes (from the ship to the Cape Cod compound to the London penthouse – you get the picture), the answer is categorical. The World is a marble-clad, gilt-edged parallel universe where everyone not only likes you, but is also a lot *like* you.

Dan Japha, a former chief executive and attorney for a United States home-building company, and his wife, Angela, also first came on board as tourists, or “guests” as they’re called, in June 2004. “We spent the entire 10 days looking at apartments,” he confesses. Before flying home, they settled on a two-bedroom, two-bathroom suite on deck nine and were back on board within weeks, subsequently adding a studio to their floating portfolio, so family and friends could join them. (“If they lived in Paris, I’d only get to visit them in Paris,” Dan’s adult daughter says philosophically. “This way, I see everywhere.”)

You can see why millionaires love the boat given they can tour the world from the comfort of home. Whether you’re in Mumbai or Mexico, you can drink the water. If you need the tuxedo or tennis whites, they’re in the cupboard, ironed. The ship handles customs and immigration and, when it’s in port, air-conditioned buses shuttle you to and from town.

“The ship changed my thinking,” Japha says from the comfort of a deck chair. “I call life on board ‘history and geography by Braille’. I’m a history buff. Always have been. It’s not until you sail from Tunisia to Norway that you comprehend the size of the Roman Empire.”

Some of those geography lessons are anything but historic. Japha was dining in the World’s lush East restaurant as the ship passed through Antarctic waters and an iceberg broke in two right outside the window. “That was cool,” he admits, in his Denver, Colorado, drawl. “There we were, eating sushi, watching one of the most incredible natural events right outside the window from a floating five-star restaurant.”

It raises a point: where better to weather storms of all sorts than a floating five-star ark? Not least when the price of entry is a mere \$US850,000 (\$1.13 million), for a studio, through to \$US7 million for a three-bedroom apartment. Or, for

the ultimate statement on the seven seas, you could go the full six-bedroom catastrophe with multiple spa baths and wraparound private veranda, owned by a British family and on the market for \$US17 million.

In many ways, it is a ship for its times, not least because the World is, itself, no stranger to strife. In fact, it nearly sank before it even had the chance to float.

**N**O SOONER had it rolled off the slipway in Rissa, Norway, in March 2002, than the World was in financial trouble. The brainchild of Norwegian cruise-ship magnate Knut Kloster jnr, it was a blueprint so bold – the world’s largest private yacht at 196 metres long – the industry joked success would depend on whether it could find enough billionaires who didn’t get seasick. Maybe the rich are queasier – by mid-2003, the experiment was taking on water and the developer-owner, ResidenSea, wanted out. Sixty-seven of the 165 apartments had failed to sell. Terrified that a ruthless new operator would tamper with their beloved boat, about 50 residents formed a holding company and bought the ship, carrying the cost of the unsold inventory until they could offload the apartments. “Most of the residents are extremely sharp and capable business people,” the ship’s senior vice-president of sales and marketing, Nikki Upshaw, says. “Nevertheless, at the time, no one knew how it would go and there was definitely an element of risk. I think all those who went through the process would agree that emotion took over.”

Step aboard and you see what they were out to protect. Complete with tinkling grand piano, the reception area radiates a slick, no-nonsense, five-star feel. The ship has the only Banyan Tree Spa and the only House of Graff jeweller afloat. A 45-minute foot massage at the former will set you back \$US80, while at the latter, the Waterfall Collection diamond earrings and necklace retail for roughly the same price as Sydney water views. Four restaurants, plus tearoom, lounge, pool grill and Fredy’s – a coffee shop cum delicatessen and gourmet grocery store – keep hunger pangs at bay. “If I took a room at the Ritz-Carlton I’d still need a driver, staff – and

the telephone,” says a former British model who must now be in her 70s, but whose skin has been refashioned seemingly beyond the grasp of time. “Living here, I don’t need any of that,” she says, waving an immaculately manicured hand out to sea. “If I want lunch with girlfriends, I don’t need to call them a week ahead. I just say: ‘Meet you at Fredy’s in 15.’”

If you tire of Fredy’s, there are five bars, a Cigar Club, a nightclub and a library that includes 2000 DVDs. For the sports minded, there is the jogging track, a full-sized tennis court, two swimming pools (one a resistance pool for laps) and a golf simulator that mimicks 55 of the world’s most famous courses (complete with swing analyser). Naturally, there’s 24-hour room service, plus a doctor and nurse on call and a mini-hospital with x-ray and emergency facilities. Even the life rafts are pure luxe, with a bar and observation deck should you ever need to toast the ship, martini in hand, as it sinks.

If the surrounds are lush, the service is staggering. At the breakfast buffet, waiters blanch if you make a move towards the guava juice. Any item you lay eyes on, from coffee to French toast, is placed on a doily-covered tray and frogmarched to the table. “It’s the only time in my life I’ve never been able to help myself at a self-service buffet,” marvels one bewildered guest. “I don’t know if I could live this way.”

For others, it’s like being assumed bodily into heaven. “From day one, I was just so impressed,” Dan Japha says. “Going back to land is healthy because there’s no one to cut up your grapefruit. It keeps us in touch with reality.” For the Japhas, reality is a top-floor apartment in the Landmark, a luxury resort-style condominium development in Denver. They spend six to eight months of the year on the ship, structured as six weeks on, followed by a few weeks in Denver, then back to the ship.

Most of the residents are self-made, rather than silver spoon, and the average age, 52, is younger than the retirement home slur suggests. And regardless of how, when and where they made their fortunes, there’s a strong sense of being in this tub together. After all, the boat may be subject to the usual tensions and gossip, but it’s also one of the few places where a multimillionaire can indulge every whim – saunter into

Quantum Nightclub on a Friday night in full-length clinging white evening gown dripping diamonds, for instance, and belt out Céline Dion’s *Titanic* theme song without anybody batting an eyelid (the staff even ask for an encore).

It’s the sort of place you can freely discuss the best boarding kennels in Florida for pure-bred Pomeranian puppies, or the travails of running a monthly book club when the core clubbers keep disembarking. In addition, the passengers are possibly the globe’s richest population sample with home addresses in Bermuda, the Canary Islands, the Cayman Islands or Switzerland – or all four. When a British reporter asked in 2002 whether people who bought apartments were simply in search of a tax haven afloat, one resident chortled that most owners had “sorted out their tax arrangements” long before they set foot on the gangplank.

One owner swears she never rises before the “crack of noon”, and a resident sheik jetted his close friends the Gipsy Kings in as a shipside treat, while a third, who refuses to cook on board but has never had enough wardrobe space, had clothes racks fitted to the kitchen ceiling. “I’m absolutely done with diamonds,” one of *Sophisticated Traveller’s* favourite residents, the British

ex-model, sighs, stroking a large green rubber iguana brooch. “They’re so predictable – now, I only wear him.”

If the ship forges bonds, the strongest may well be between residents and their staff. Day in, day out, it’s one big 24/7 spoiling exercise. The employees laugh at their jokes, plump their pillows, all the time observing strict formality (residents and guests are only ever addressed as Mr and Mrs). “The staff make this experience,” Angela Japha says. “Since they can’t be with their families for eight months of the year, they adopt us.” By way of thanks, residents donate unused food and beverage coupons towards parties for the ship’s workforce and support a staff enrichment fund. Last Christmas, the workers feasted on lobster and caviar, thanks to their charges.

With 250 staff from 40 countries, the “below stairs” personnel is as diverse as those they wait upon. And their dreams run on parallel tracks. Even though his digs are down on deck four, Paul Oppenkemp, executive sous-chef, aged 29, shares the same wanderlust as the IT software millionaire taking a spa bath a few levels up. “I don’t know why, but I always wanted to work on a cruise ship,” he says. “Which is really strange because there aren’t many luxury cruise ships when you grow up in rural Holland.”

Years ago, he tried to hold down a land job and lasted six months. Today, he oversees the \$US1 million-plus worth of goods on the ship that could be classified as food or beverage, from the boxes of Felchlin Swiss cooking chocolate to the Quaker Oats and crates of Oyster Bay sauvignon blanc. When pushed for his all-time weirdest requests, Oppenkemp names a pizza with no base; eggs cooked sunny side up without the

yolks and a soufflé sans eggs. “We never argue,” he says. “We figure they must have got the idea from somewhere and our job is to deliver.” (The pizza was assembled on parchment paper, baked and flipped on to a plate. The sunny-side-up yolks were removed once the eggs were plated, but Oppenkemp can’t recall how the eggless soufflé was baked – it just was.)

General manager Renato Chizzola insists his staff have failed if they don’t uphold such standards. “For example: say residents come on board who never drink wine,” he says. “If we don’t remember to remove all wine glasses from their table before they come in to dine, we aren’t doing our job.” For the briefest moment, his eyes moisten. “If I had worked as hard as them; if I had been so successful and now I come on board to enjoy life – I’d expect nothing less.”

Transcending the clinking glasses of bubbly, the high tea and the truffle-and-parmesan hand-cut french fries in Portraits, is the more serious business of keeping this fantasy afloat. As of June 2006, all apartments had finally been sold. Since then, residences for sale have ranged from about 2 per cent to 20 per cent of the ship, and the current inventory on offer is nearer the latter end of the scale.

Thanks to maintenance fees, the ship is debt-free and does not need to rely on the great unwashed tourist dollar. About 30 per cent of the apartments can be rented short-term – the only requirement is a minimum stay of six nights. However, the experience will set you back about \$US875 to \$US2550 a night, per person, including all meals, port charges, tips and select beverages. Upshaw is clear that the World welcomes

short-term guests in the hope they might one day buy. Should you be so tempted, annual maintenance fees for 2009 are calculated at \$US214 (about \$280) a square foot. A 100-square-metre, two-bedroom apartment will set you back \$US213,000 a year in fees. Compulsory food and beverage coupons cost a further \$US42,000 a year, per apartment. Voting rights are based on apartment size and residents eagerly vote on proposals for the ship's itinerary. Do things get hot under the collar with so many triple-A personality types tossing up whether to sail to Vladivostok this year or next? "The ship is like anywhere else," Dan Japha says. "You have really interesting people and you have the smartest guy in the room. We work it out."

**A** KEY tip to potential buyers is to maximise their investment by spending time on board. Only about half the residents are on board for six months or longer and a mere fraction of those live on the ship full time. "It's like most top-end athletics or country clubs in the US," Japha says. "Most members only use the club in January and February because of a new year's resolution. The rest of the year, they fund guys like me who are here all the time." A couple of years ago, when sailing the Barbados-to-Canary Islands leg, the Japhas were on board with about 30 other passengers – and 200 crew.

Of course, the recession has long tentacles and its effects are being felt even here, floating 16,000 kilometres from Wall Street. "Everyone is rethinking how they run their businesses; there's nothing like a crisis to bring about good change," Tony de Leede says. The de Leedes own Gwinganna, a luxury eco resort on the Gold Coast, and they have brought their green credentials on board. "More people like us are beginning to query how things are done," Tony says, adding that Catherine is gunning to create a green committee. "Everyone loves the opulence. But there's a growing feeling of 'You can't waste just because you can'. I mean, do the sheets really need to be washed every day? It's a little extravagant."

Sitting by the outdoor hot tub and pool, Angela Japha confides it's hard at first to sell the ship to friends. They ask: It's a cruise but it's not a cruise? Surely it's just full of retirees? What do you do all day? Don't you get sick of each other? The intensity of the interrogation suggests it could be a truth not yet universally acknowledged that those of us not cruising 24/7 wish we were. "So often, people say, 'Don't you get bored on that ship?'" Angela says. "And I reply: 'Don't you get bored commuting to and from work. Don't you get bored making the dinner every night, doing the shopping, piles of washing, taking the car to the garage?'"

As *ST* sits on the pool deck, watching Chile slip past, sipping beetroot-and-carrot juice as four waiters anticipate whether you'll want a macchiato or an ice-cold sauvignon blanc next, it's hard not to agree. She definitely has a point.

■ Queries to Cruise Traveller: telephone 07 5575 8094 or email sales@cruisetraveller.com.au. Further information: www.cruisetraveller.com.au or www.aboardtheworld.com. The ship will be in Australia from early December.



# OCEANS OF BUSINESS

CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS? LUXURY LINERS ARE CRUISING ALL THE WAY TO THE BANK

**W**HEN the Cunard Line recently announced the maiden voyage of its new ship, the Queen Elizabeth, due to set sail from Southampton for Atlantic islands on October 12, 2010, berths were sold out in 29 minutes. "You have to ask 'What recession?'" says Ann Sherry, chief executive of Carnival Australia – the local arm of the United States company that owns Cunard. "I think the feeling is times are tough, but life is short."

It's not just Cunard that is celebrating the fact that every deckchair is accounted for on the Queen Elizabeth. As the rest of the travel industry licks its wounds, boats are generally buoyant. International Cruise Council figures released in March show the number of tourists electing to walk gangplanks rose 26 per cent last year – the strongest performance in five years. Cruises to Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific attracted the most passengers, as holidaymakers headed for the sun in droves.

The managing director of the Traveller Group in Brisbane, Craig Bowen, attributes the sector's resilience to the fact it charges a one-off initial cost. "Cruising is a definable cost and there are good deals on, both in terms of discounting and value-adding to the product," he says.

The age-old cruising stereotype of "newlyweds and the almost deads" is also changing. Taking to the ocean is considered one of the more stress-free holidays, whether you're a recently retrenched banker or a family of eight.

And the top end seems to be booming the most. The uber-luxurious liner, the World, will be sailing around Australia from early December until the end of January. "[In April, I took] very solid bookings for the World, including a couple who booked an apartment for 47 days," Bowen says.

The upmarket Seabourn Cruise Line (also owned by Carnival) recently recorded its highest number of bookings taken in one day. Within the next 12 months, it is scheduled to almost double its fleet to satisfy demand, at a cost of \$US90 million. It has three new ships coming online to join the four intimate yachtlike vessels it already owns.

Of course, the new ships were ordered in boom days, long before the global financial crisis. The Seabourn Odyssey, for instance, to be launched later this year, is almost double the size of the line's existing ships, with room for 450 guests. It offers a range of creature comforts, including four dining venues, six bars and lounges, and a two-deck, state-of-the-art spa. Ninety per cent of the suites will have private verandas, and the top-of-the-range Wintergarden suites will also include a private solarium. The Odyssey will visit



Australia on its first world cruise in 2010. It'll be followed next year by the launch of the similarly sized Seabourn Sojourn and another, as yet unnamed, ship will come online in 2011.

"Would I rather not be introducing them at a time when there's been a slowdown in the global economy?" Seabourn's United States president, Pamela Conover, says. "Yes, but that doesn't change the fundamentals of the business plan and I would still rather have the ships, because we're building 30-year assets. We contracted two years ago and the fundamentals of the business plan are still sound. There's still a demand for luxury cruising and it's still great value. In fact, the GFC has provided the opportunity to reach new groups."

In the first three months of this year, Seabourn recorded a 67 per cent increase in new guests, plus a 36 per cent increase in new agents. In April, the cruise line also had its highest booking day ever.

The Italian-owned Silversea will also boost its fleet from five to six this December, when Silver Spirit rolls off the slips. Like Seabourn, Silversea is increasing passenger load, gambling passengers will trade exclusivity for greater on-board luxuries. The company brags of Silver Spirit that her 540-passenger load will enjoy "one of the highest space-to-guest ratios at sea today ... [190 cubic metres] of space per guest". It also offers a 770-square-metre indoor/outdoor spa, six restaurants and a supper club featuring all-night entertainment. Silver Spirit sets sail on January 21 next year, from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to 45 ports in 20 countries. Fares for the full 91 days start at \$US39,187 (\$50,650) a person.

It's the allure of the known as much as the unknown that's

WE ARE FLOCKING TO THE DECK RAIL BECAUSE MORE PASSENGER LINERS ARE COMING HERE, WHICH MEANS AUSTRALIANS DON'T HAVE TO FLY TO JOIN THE SHIP

drawing local passengers. "Australia is the fastest-growing cruise market in the world," Carnival's Sherry says.

And we are flocking to the deck rail primarily because there is now far greater choice, she says; more passenger liners are sailing Down Under more frequently – a phenomenon known as home porting, which means Australians don't have to fly to join the ship. We are also finally cottoning on to the joys of a holiday that doesn't involve schlepping bags around. And unless pirates accost you, cruise ships are generally considered far safer than aircraft and other means of travel.

When the Cunard-operated Queen Mary docked in Sydney in February this year, 1200 Australians stepped aboard (she carries only 2500 passengers). Most of them did the three-week trip from Sydney to Dubai. At present, Seabourn gets 1000 Australians on board each year. When its three new ships come online later this year, Sherry expects that figure to double.

But if cruising's booming, it's based on intense, almost internecine, competition. Silversea recently extended "butler service" to all accommodation levels in its five ships; the

World overhauled its public areas earlier this year. But right now, a little more is required than a fresh lick of paint.

"Over the past five years, the number of guests has steadily increased," says the World's senior vice-president of sales and marketing, Nikki Upshaw. "This year, we're down due to the recession," she says. "We don't feel it's appropriate to discount heavily, but it's also important to be responsive to the marketplace and show value."

By way of compromise, the World has introduced a complimentary seventh night program. When guests book an apartment for seven nights, they receive one night free, with seven nights in a deluxe studio costing \$US5325.

Sherry says that Seabourn has not had to discount – but it will consider the move if deemed necessary. In late February, Silversea announced 50 per cent off all suite categories on 39 of its voyages worldwide. But the company is not keen to do this. "Brands can sustain stress," Silversea executive vice-president and chief operating officer Kenneth Watson says. "You have to make sure you maintain integrity. One of the concerns I have about dramatic price discounting is, how do you get your prices back?"

Silversea prefers to focus on giving top-end customers "additional perks" in the form of added on-board spending credits to the value of \$US1000 that can be blown on spa treatments, shore excursions or extra alcohol. Considering the half-yearly fashion sales are approaching, it could be a good time to get your cruising wardrobe in order.

■ By Fiona Carruthers, with additional reporting by Lisa Allen and Ute Junker.

## CRUISE TRAVEL



Wonders of The World ... (clockwise from far left) an apartment entrance hall; the pool on deck 11; inside East, one of four major restaurants on board; the ship at anchor.

## TRIP NOTES

## GET ON BOARD

► Apartments on The World range from \$1450 to \$5100 a night for two people, minimum six-night stay. Rates include dining, select beverages, tips and port charges.  
 ► The World arrives in Australia on December 4, berthing in Cairns. It will cruise the coast, arriving in Sydney on December 22 for four nights, before returning for New Year's Eve. Its last day in Australia will be February 3, in Broome.  
 ► For inquiries, phone Cruise Traveller on (07) 5575 8094, email [sales@cruisetraveller.com.au](mailto:sales@cruisetraveller.com.au). See [cruisetraveller.com.au](http://cruisetraveller.com.au) or [aboardtheworld.com](http://aboardtheworld.com).

without effort. Indeed, as the days go by, our self-control goes out the porthole and drowns, utterly spent, in the South China Sea.

In a laughable attempt to dislodge the porcini mushroom risotto from the Mediterranean-style Tides restaurant the night before, and the creamy linguine from the lunchtime before that, I visit the gym. I'm not surprised to find it busy, nor to see that no one on the treadmills or cross-trainers has a weight problem. Being A-type personalities, they can stare down a five-course degustation in the fine-dining Portraits, looking fabulous in formal gowns and black tie, because they've been to the gym today and will go again tomorrow.

We see the engine rooms of our undoing on a galley and provisions tour with the executive sous chef, Paul Oppenkamp, who leads us through expanses of shining stainless steel while imparting tidbits: 90 per cent of the food is made on board, from scratch, using the finest raw ingredients; there are 54 chefs from nine

countries; frozen meat is thawed over three days at temperatures of 6 degrees; baking of the breakfast pastries starts at 2am every day.

"We never switch off the light in the kitchen," Oppenkamp says.

Residents Colin and Ana are also on the tour, poking their heads into the various walk-in freezers and cold stores and a wine cellar with 5000 bottles from more than 30 countries.

Ana later recalls the first time she saw The World, on the internet. "I said, 'How ugly! A floating block of units!'"

She's now a convert. In a gobsmacking feat of logistics, their one-bedroom apartment was completely refurbished during the five days at anchor in Hong Kong.

We meet Ana again, by the tennis court on the uppermost deck 12, just after we've been kicked off. We had checked whether bookings were required for the court and were told no. A misunderstanding it might be but we're nonplussed when two residents and the fitness

instructor simply walk on and take over, with no niceties at all.

It's in contrast to our other encounters with residents, such as Richard, who happily demonstrates the golf simulator for us by thwacking balls into a screen; Ana, who talks to us courtside about her family and The World; and Karyn, who catches up with me one morning on the walking track and starts to chat about her mildly disabled grandson and her California ranch, which was recently threatened by bushfire.

Then there's the crew – about 250 from more than 40 countries. From the housekeepers and waiters to the senior managers and singing duo Marty and Holly, who we have virtually all to ourselves on several occasions in the Regatta Bar, every interaction is a pleasure. The residents, understandably given their outlay, have high expectations but bonds between employer and employee inevitably form, living as they do on the same super-yacht. (Or is that floating resort?)

One night during our cruise, residents attend a charity dinner in the Marina restaurant for the families of Filipino crew affected by September's Typhoon Ketsana. Together with donations, they raise \$US250,000.

Our last day at sea and it's time to be brave and ask the price of the diamond ring Libby has been admiring in the window of House of Graff, the on-board jewellery shop.

"If you have to ask, you can't afford it." There, the salesman says it. But he tells us anyway. It's \$US80,000. A cheapie. The month before, he sold a five-carat ring for \$US1.2 million. A one-carat pink Argyle diamond sold for \$US800,000, the resident, temporarily not in residence, sending a jet to meet the ship to pick it up. Then he shows us a picture of a \$US35 million necklace.

I look at Libby. I can guess what she's thinking: no wonder they're kicking renters off the tennis court.

*The writer was a guest of The World.*

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