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Quantum of the Seas introduces new wows for Royal Caribbean

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Quantum of the Seas sails from Cape Liberty in Bayonne, New Jersey. The arm extending from the top of the ship carries the North Star, an enclosed capsule that lifts 14 guests over the ship's deck for expansive views. JONATHAN ATKIN / ROYAL CARIBBEAN

Aboard Royal Caribbean International's new Quantum of the Seas, a pair of long robotic arms dance a jerky, drink-mixing ballet in the Bionic Bar as patrons place orders on tablets and a wall displays their wait time.

Elsewhere on the vessel dubbed the "world's first Smartship," a set of six giant robotic screens rotate, pulse with light and swoop around to serve as a backdrop for singers, dancers and aerialists.

All around, passengers use programmed wristbands to enter staterooms or pay for merchandise, and guests in inside staterooms get an eyeful of the outdoors thanks to virtual balconies with a real-time feed of the ocean. Those not suffering from a fear of heights venture into a wind tunnel for a simulated skydiving session or ascend to 300 feet above sea level in a pod that extends from the top deck.

While there's much familiar for fans of the Miami-based cruise line — the Windjammer Marketplace

still offers buffet dining and adventure seekers can scale a rock climbing wall or surf the FlowRider machine, for example — the nearly \$1 billion Quantum of the Seas is blazing new trails for the industry.

“The expectations were exceedingly high from everyone not only in the industry, but anyone who enjoys cruising as pastime,” said Randle Roper, president of a cruise charter company who took a short introductory trip earlier this month. “It didn’t disappoint. It really breaks the mold for cruising. It takes all the dated, stale traditions and spins them on their head, which is exactly what the cruise industry needs.”

With Quantum, which was christened earlier this month in Bayonne, New Jersey, Royal Caribbean has reinvented key facets of the cruise experience, from boarding to dining to watching a show. And while some of the features will be unique to the class, others will be (or have already been) introduced on other ships in the fleet, including the virtual balconies, robot bartenders, dining changes and wristband technology.

That could be good news for South Floridians who want some of the new experiences without traveling to the New York area, where Quantum will sail until leaving for its new home port of Shanghai in May.

Sister ship Anthem of the Seas, originally scheduled to sail from Port Everglades during the winter of 2015, will launch in England in April and then move to New Jersey’s Cape Liberty. A third ship in the class, Ovation of the Seas, arrives in autumn of 2016, but no details about deployment have been announced.

We experienced as much of the ship as possible during a two-night introductory cruise from Cape Liberty. The 4,180-passenger vessel — significantly smaller than Royal Caribbean’s last new arrival, the 5,400-passenger Oasis class — was nearly 90 percent full, but rarely felt crowded.

The company has rolled out a new boarding system for Quantum, asking passengers to fill out forms and upload a picture in advance with a goal of getting guests from “sidewalk to ship” in 10 minutes and eliminating lines. Agents with tablets filled the area outside the terminal, meeting passengers as they approached and scanning their passports and printed boarding passes.

Radio frequency identification tags allow passengers to track their luggage’s location as they wait for it to reach their stateroom. The new Royal iQ app allows guest to track luggage from mobile devices and book shore excursions, make dining reservations and secure a seat for a show.

On board, the ship has jettisoned the concept of a main dining room with set times in favor of “dynamic dining,” featuring a handful of different options with more than 430 seats each. Lisa Lutloff-Perlo, Royal Caribbean International executive vice president for operations, said the concept is being rolled out to Oasis and Allure of the Seas.

This idea isn't completely new – most lines have multiple dining options between a main dining area, other complimentary venues and specialty restaurants that carry an extra charge. But Royal Caribbean sought to differentiate itself by eliminating the supersize venue altogether and creating several distinct (and free) options with no assigned times or seats.

They are: Silk, a pan-Asian concept; Chic, with a modern, innovative menu; The Grande, more formal with classic European offerings; and American Icon Grill, highlighting regional comfort food. Coastal Kitchen, only for suite passengers and Pinnacle Crown & Anchor members, offers California cuisine; it will be included on other ships as well.

Other free options include the traditional buffet, Windjammer Marketplace; the Café at Two70 with sandwiches, soups and salads; and SeaPlex Dog House, a hot dog haven.

Restaurants that cost extra include brand staples such as Chops Grille, Izumi Japanese Cuisine and Chef's Table, but several new concepts have arrived with Quantum as well. Michael's Genuine Pub, from Miami's Michael Schwartz, has an a la carte menu with favorites such as polenta fries, pork sliders and s'more brownies. British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver created Jamie's Italian, and *Biggest Loser* chef Devin Alexander crafted a menu at Devinly Decadence where all items have 500 calories or less.

Wonderland, the kind of place where patrons must use a paintbrush dipped in water to read their menu, features small creative bites like a "liquid" olive or buffalo chicken eggs as well as fish, meat and poultry entrees.

In addition to all the new dining options, the ship boasts a slew of new entertainment and recreation activities.

The indoor SeaPlex includes a dramatically lit court with a floating DJ booth that can be used for bumper cars, roller skating, circus school and basketball and other team sports. Individual rooms in the complex contain an Xbox gaming suite, air hockey, foosball, table tennis and other games.

Outside is the North Star, an enclosed capsule that slowly lifts 14 guests over the ship's deck and, when not in port, extends over the side for expansive views 300 feet above sea level. The ride is free, as is the RipCord by iFly skydiving simulator.

Passenger time in the wind tunnel lasts only one minute, but a training session and suit-up (jumpsuit, helmet, goggles, ear plugs) draws the experience out. An instructor stays in the simulator with each flier, helping to adjust form and avoid bumping into walls.

Two of the ship's pool areas can be enclosed so passengers can use them during cold or rainy weather.

The brand new Two70 space — a room with 270-degree views and glass walls that stretch nearly three decks high — performs double duty as a relaxing chill-out spot by day and entertainment venue by night. During *Starwater*, a rollicking song-dance-aerial show created for the space, the windows become screens that display massive projections. Performers rise up from the floor, drop from the ceiling and disappear just as suddenly.

“I’ve never seen anything like Two70,” said Roper, the president of RSVP Vacations, which charters cruises for gay and lesbian travelers. “The projection on the back wall, that was spellbinding. I felt kind of bad for the performers because I couldn’t stop looking at the technology.”

As part of its Broadway at Sea program, Royal Caribbean has staged the full theatrical production of the show *Mamma Mia!*, showcasing ABBA’s greatest hits.

The majority of the 2,090 staterooms on Quantum — nearly 1,600 — have balconies, including 12 studios for solo travelers. Those without an actual view of the ocean feature virtual balconies, giant screens that show outside views (and a balcony floor and rail) in real time. Royal Caribbean so expected that feature to be a hit that it was added to Navigator of the Seas during a drydock renovation earlier this year.

“This is the first time we’ve ever retrofitted an older vessel before the first one has come out,” said Richard Fain, Royal Caribbean Cruises chairman and CEO.

While not expected to appear on older ships, the hugely popular (but sometimes slow and glitchy) Bionic Bar will be on the two upcoming Quantum-class and Oasis-class ships. Future ships will also include the wristband technology.

And Royal Caribbean is also adding its faster WiFi to other ships — Oasis and Allure by December — which is made possible by using satellites in a lower orbit.

Fain said the bandwidth is 450 times as fast as what the company had just a couple years ago, calling it “as good as you’re used to at home and in your office.”

Our tests showed that speeds were not always quite that fast, especially during high-traffic times like sailing past the State of Liberty when Instagram photos wouldn’t load. We were able to watch a TV show on Netflix one night, but couldn’t do the same the following night. There were a few other tech-related hiccups: a touchscreen navigation system that wouldn’t respond, unclear search results on the Royal iQ app and tablets that wouldn’t boot up. (A spokeswoman said the company was still fine tuning the Wi-Fi and Bionic Bar during the preview sailings.)

But overall, Quantum feels polished and pleasant, packed with things to do and sights to marvel at (including a giant magenta polar bear).

Josh Gordon, whose family owns a cruise travel planning business in Davie, went on the New York introductory trip and praised the activities, the “outrageous” variety of restaurants, the flow and the staterooms. He said the ship reminded him of sister company Celebrity Cruises’ Solstice class.

“It feels like a little more upscale than most of the rest of the Royal Caribbean ships, a little more elegant,” said Gordon, executive vice president of The Gordon Group. The one downside: that South Florida, at least so far, isn’t scheduled to welcome any Quantum-class ships.

“Kind of a bummer,” he said. “Because we were so excited to have one down here.”

QUANTUM OF THE SEAS

Capacity: 4,180 double occupancy, 4,905 with all berths filled

Gross tonnage: 168,666

Length: 1,141 feet

Draft: 28 feet

Cruising speed: 22 knots

Decks: 18 total, 16 for guests

Crew: 1,500

Staterooms: 2,090, including 375 with virtual balconies; up to 16 family-connected cabins; 12 studios with balconies and 16 interior studios for solo travelers

Dining: 18 restaurants, including 10 free with the price of the cruise

Entertainment: *Mamma Mia!*, the musical, and Sonic Odyssey, a concert featuring unique instruments, at the Royal Theater; *Starwater*, a performance of dancers, singers and aerialists (and robot screens) in Two70; tribute bands in Music Hall

Art: 2,980-piece collection, including a 30-foot-tall magenta polar bear and a wall of 210 butterflies made of aluminum, stainless steel, acrylic and enamel

Activities: Bumper cars, circus school, roller skating in the SeaPlex; slow-moving North Star ride that ascends 300 feet above sea level; RipCord by iFly, wind tunnel skydiving; FlowRider surfing machine; rock climbing wall

Itineraries: Bahamas and Caribbean from Bayonne, New Jersey, until the ship leaves for Shanghai in May

Price tag: About \$1 billion

Sister ships: Anthem of the Seas, launching in April of 2015 in Southampton, U.K.; Ovation of the Seas, scheduled for delivery in autumn of 2016

Information: www.royalcaribbean.com (<http://www.royalcaribbean.com/>)