

Westerdam Review – June 14 – 21, 2009



By Ben and Sid McDonald

Our best cruise yet! The Westerdam was in tip-top shape and the crew was fantastic. Now the details.

Background. We are in our 50s and took our first cruise 3 years ago on the Oosterdam to the Mexican Riviera, and we were hooked. So this was our 7th cruise and 2nd to Alaska. Last year we took the Diamond Princess from Whittier south and loved it but wanted to do a RT Seattle and the price was right.

Embarkation. We drove to Seattle since we were visiting family in Boise, ID. Spent a night in Yakima, WA and was pleasantly surprised that it was in Washington's wine country. Drove into Seattle Saturday morning and used points at the downtown Sheraton. Had a wonderful corner room on 25th floor with great water view. Spent the day walking around Pikes Market and had a great crab dinner on the water. The next morning we had breakfast with Sid's sister and family at a great neighborhood place near the pier. We saved considerable \$\$\$ by leaving the car with them while we were on the cruise.

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We were dropped off at the pier at about 11:00 and walked right up to the counter to check in. Sat in the waiting area for about 20 minutes before boarding. Tip – there are Alaska coupon books that are in a rack in the waiting area – get one! We got a number of free souvenirs and hats that made great gifts for friends at no cost (don't tell them!).

Boarded about 11:30 and went straight to the spa to make our reservations for the thermal suite. One reason we choose Holland America is the thermal suite option. For \$250 a couple has access to the hydrotherapy pool, steam rooms, aromatherapy showers, and best of all – the heated ceramic loungers with music and view. They only sell 80 packages so we always get there first.

Cabin. We wanted to go on the cheap since we just got off the Eurodam a few weeks before. So we got an I-category inside cabin. It was fantastic. More room than the verandah cabins on the Eurodam. Spacious with room for everything. We met our two cabin stewards on day 1 and they were fantastic the whole trip. We saw them a couple times each day and they always greeted us by name and asked if there was anything they could do for us. At each port we brought them back some snacks and they loved it.

Dining. Normally we would eat 3 or 4 nights in the Pinnacle Grill but the food in the dining room was superb. So, only 1 night in the Pinnacle and the rest were in the main dining room. We had open seating and usually arrived at 6:00 and had no wait. We loved meeting everyone at the big tables which is something we don't usually do. Every night the food was superb. I especially love HAL's chilled soups and escargot. Service was spot on and no complaints about anything. The Pinnacle Grill was its normal great – steaks were tender and huge, just the way I like them.

We always did breakfast in the Lido after a few cups of coffee and sitting on the Lido aft deck. Omelets were great and they always had a choice of about 6 types of eggs Benedict. Never any wait, but we are early risers so it may have been busy after 8:00.

Passengers. We loved meeting the people on this cruise. On our last cruise on the Eurodam everyone seemed to be grumpy. Perhaps that was because it was the Caribbean and there were a lot of New Yawkers... On this cruise everyone was very friendly and we met some great people.

Spa. As I said, we did the thermal suites every day. The water temperature was great and the steam rooms did their job. Fell asleep on the heated loungers more than once just watching the scenery float by.

Entertainment. We don't normally do show but this cruise was the exception. The highlight was Joel Mason, an Elton John impersonator. He was fabulous and we saw him twice. The comedian was good, but the late night adult show was very lame and not worth staying up for. Got to meet some of the HAL Kats in the sports bar and it was fun talking to them about life on a cruise ship. We hung out at the sports bar a lot. Didn't try the casino since this was a budget trip. It was busy most of the time, however. I did play \$20 worth of quarters on that stupid machine that pushes coins off the ledges. I must have had too much to drink that night.

The Ship. The Westerdam was in great shape due to a great crew. We spent a lot of time in Explorations Lounge/Library/Crows Nest relaxing with a book and music on the comfortable chairs. We look forward to traveling on the Westerdam again.

Ports. This trip is all about scenery. Glacier Bay is one of earth's treasures. We were able to get close to Johns Hopkins glacier and very close to Marjorie Glacier. Spent a couple hours there and it was so serene. Saw lots of eagles and whales and dolphins. No bears, but we have too many of them at home anyway.

On the first sea day we did the galley tour and it was fun and tasty. Rest of the time was spent relaxing, thermal suites, and eating/drinking.

Juneau. We have been here before so just walked around town and caught up on e-mails at a cyber café. Hint – the town library right next to the dock has free wi-fi (didn't know till we were back on board). Did souvenir shopping and was going to take the tram up the mountain but was a ridiculous price and weather was so-so. We were back on the ship by 2:00 and in the thermal suite by 2:15.

Sitka. This became our favorite Alaskan port – all the shops were locals (no Diamonds International!). The trip into the port was fantastic, passing many small islands with homes on them (imagine owning your own island). We walked around town then went to the grocery store and took a hike into the rainforest. It was spectacular. Ranger Man told us to make a lot of noise since they have more bears than people on the island. So, we sang as we hiked. After coming back to town we stopped at the community center next to the dock and watched the townspeople put on a Russian dancing show.

Ketchikan. We like Ketchikan, having been there last year as well. We walked on Creek Street and spent some time in the nice bookstore there. Then had some great crab chowder. We had an early departure (2:00) from Ketchikan so it was funny watching people run to the ship at the last moment. One poor woman did not make it and it was so sad watching her standing on the pier crying as we departed.

Victoria. Unfortunately we were only there from 6:00 p.m. to midnight but it was fun to walk around downtown. Beautiful city. We wanted to go to Burchart Gardens but will plan to go back there another time when we can see it during the daytime.

Disembarkation. Flawless. Off the ship at our appointed time, found the luggage and back to pick up our car within ½ hour.

