



## **Women Presidents Are Changing the Cruise Industry for the Better**

By Erica Silverstein

Who runs the cruise world? Increasingly, it's women in leadership positions throughout the industry.

"The cruise industry provides the most advanced opportunities for women in maritime," reports Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA). CLIA data shows 50% of women in the cruise sector hold mid-level positions or higher positions and that women hold 40% of cruise line senior leadership positions. Female presidents and CEOs lead some 20 cruise lines including 11 CLIA-member ocean cruise lines and six river cruise lines.

Female representation in the industry is on the rise, from the navigation bridge to the boardroom, and both cruise lines and their guests are benefiting from this sea change in the historically male-dominated maritime world.

We talked with several women cruise line presidents to learn about their journeys to leadership and the growing opportunities for women in cruise.

### **No path to leadership is the same**

Most of today's female cruise line presidents did not begin their careers in the cruise industry, though many started out in the travel and hospitality world.

Dondra Ritzenthaler, CEO of Azamara Cruises, began her career at American Airlines before transitioning into the cruise industry. Katie McAlister, president of Cunard, worked for TUI Group, one of the world's leading travel businesses; and Anna Nash, president of Explora Journeys, initially worked for land-based luxury lifestyle brands such as Aman and Belmond. Christine Duffy, president of Carnival Cruise Line, started out as a travel agent.

Other female presidents found their way to cruise from other career paths. Lynn Torrent, president of MSC Cruises' North America division, was first an accountant, and Laura Hodges Bethge, president of Celebrity Cruises, started her career in education.

Beth Bodensteiner, president of Holland America Line, started as a temp at Holland America Line quickly rose through the ranks, holding a range of leadership roles.

One thing most of these women have in common – they credit their families, most often their mothers, for inspiring them to succeed.

### **Female leaders raise up the industry**

Having diverse leadership styles and viewpoints strengthens the cruise industry and women presidents bring many assets to the table that impact both their company's success and their guests' enjoyment of their cruise vacation.

"With women driving most of consumer vacation planning and booking decisions, it's essential that their voices are represented at the leadership table," says MSC's Torrent. "When women help shape strategy, product design, and guest experience, we're better positioned to deliver cruises that truly reflect the needs and preferences of our guests."

Women leaders have brought significant changes to their brands. "Many of the innovations that elevate the guest experience have been shaped by women across our organization," says Cunard's McAlister.

"Women bring a leadership style that naturally aligns with what makes cruising special – empathy, intuition, collaboration, and a deep focus on people," says Azamara's Ritzenthaler says. "Women leaders often excel at seeing the full picture – how onboard operations, shoreside teams, and the guest journey all intersect. And they lead with the kind of emotional intelligence that creates stronger teams and more loyal guests."

### **Cruise lines support future female leaders**

Cruise companies are expanding programs to grow the ranks of female leaders and support and encourage women working both on land and at sea. This includes inviting hospitality and maritime students to come on board ships to learn about career opportunities.

Every year, more women climb the ranks of officers, with several cruise lines boasting female captains – such as Captain Inger Thorhauge, Cunard's first female captain, and Explora Journeys' Captain Serena Melani.

"We see female captains, chief engineers, and hotel directors commanding ships with strength and confidence," says Azamara's Ritzenthaler. "Their presence is changing perceptions – not just for guests, but for future generations of women who may have never imagined a career at sea."

Carnival Corporation, with nine cruise brands, created an award-winning online platform, the Women Officers Network (WON), as a way for female officers to "connect, share knowledge, and support each other in an environment that is frankly still predominately men," says Holland America's Bodensteiner.

"We intentionally mentor and elevate women at every level – through leadership training and hands-on development opportunities," says Explora Journeys' Nash. "By creating space for diverse voices and giving them the freedom to shape strategy, we become stronger, more thoughtful, and more human as an organization."

### **The sky's the limit**

Women cruise line presidents encourage other women in the industry to also think big. "Don't limit yourself to the roles you think you're supposed to pursue," advises MSC's Torrent. "Some of the most meaningful opportunities come when you step outside your comfort zone."

With more women embracing leadership in the cruise industry, everyone benefits. "Every time a woman steps into leadership in this industry, she widens the path for others," says Explora Journey's Nash. "That alone makes it worth the climb."

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