



The Biggest Week in the World

THE
NORWAY
TIMELESS GRACE AND ELEGANCE

NORWEGIAN
CRUISE LINE

Fine Ocean Liner Collectibles

The SS France/ Norway: From Ocean Liner to Cruise Ship to Memory

SHE WAS CONCEIVED and designed while ocean liners were the queens of the oceans. But by the time the SS France, the last ocean liner built specifically for ferrying passengers across the North Atlantic, started sailing, the world of passenger ships had changed dramatically. Never again would steam ships carry more passengers than airplanes.

And in a few short years, her original competition—the Cunard Queens and the SS United States—would be gone, sailing no more.

The France would continue on, but in 1974 the French government would cease its subsidies

of the line and the ship's career would come to an end—for the time being.

Ah, but what a reputation she gained in those relatively few years.

France was built to replace the aging Ile de France and the Liberte. While some had proposed two ships of around 35,000 tons each to be built, Charles de Gaulle, the larger-than-life president of France said the country needed a flagship to bolster its national pride, something akin to the late and lamented Normandie.

Whether this was the best approach doesn't really matter. Gen. de Gaulle decreed it would

be a grand ship and, therefore, a grand ship was built.

And she was built in the then-innovative manner of prefabricating various parts, even in some distant parts of the country, and assembling them in the Chantiers d'Atlantique shipyard in St. Nazaire, rather than building the ship from the keel up as had been the practice for centuries.

Indeed, while the France was a grand, big, and special ship, it was not necessarily the exercise in excess that the Normandie was. Different eras demanded somewhat different ships. For example, rather than the traditional three classes of service, France had two, skipping the middle (cabin) class.

But if the French invented or at least distilled *joie de vivre*, they put a good portion of their supply of it in the SS France.

More than one person has come into the Trans-Oceanic shops, seen artifacts from the France, and found it necessary to say—in front of a spouse or partner—that their voyages on the ship were the best times of their lives. That's occasioned some dirty looks from those significant others.

Remember, though, that many of the France's prime sailing days were in the midst of what's come to be known as the Sexual Revolution of the late 1960s and the passengers were generally on board by choice (and many for the adventure) since it was much faster to travel by air.

After the French government gave up on her, she sat idle in Le

Havre until 1979 when an Arab businessman bought her, although the purpose of his purchase was never clear and he never actually did anything with the France. And then along came Lauritz Kloster, whose Norwegian Caribbean Cruise Line (NCCL) was riding the crest of a renewed interest in cruising fueled primarily by The Love Boat television series. He bought the ship that would instantly double the number of berths operated by his company. In the process, NCCL would get a flagship of some repute and certainly some size. France was the longest passenger ship afloat. She would be the largest cruise ship of them all.

But first she would need to be refitted and Bremerhaven, Germany was selected for the job. She cost Kloster \$18 million to buy and \$80 million to refit from a North Atlantic liner built for cold, even icy, weather to a cruise ship configured for the warm, even steamy, Caribbean. And \$80 million had been her original construction cost back in the early 1960s.

The \$80 million refit got her a new lido deck and two new swimming pools, as well as more passenger capacity, smaller crew size, and new interior décor. After a year of work, she set sail to begin her work as a cruise ship from Miami.

That crossing of the North Atlantic was not without incident. Although not publicly reported, there were numerous fires around the fuel tanks in the ship's double bottom, which had originally been constructed to carry 8,000 tons of oil, enough for a round-trip across the Atlantic. And there were apparently numerous mechanical problems, perhaps related to her lay up.

The Norway was truly a different cruising experience when she debuted in the Caribbean that year. Her size allowed for more entertainment, including Broadway-style stage shows. As the Norway, she always sailed with good passenger loads, even



THE WAY WE LIKE TO REMEMBER HER—The SS Norway spent her second career cruising the eastern Caribbean Ocean. Norwegian Cruise Line provided post cards like the one pictured above to travel agents to promote their group sailings on board her. We have a number of these post cards available, all in excellent condition. They measure 8³/₄ inches wide by 5 inches high and are \$6 each.

though she experienced mechanical problems with some relative frequency.

Over the years Kloster, in its various corporate guises, kept

Norway in prime condition as one of the most impressive cruise ships in the Caribbean, even as the line of newly-built, larger ships began to encroach on the

market, especially after Royal Caribbean's 73,000 ton Sovereign of the Seas debuted in 1988 to begin the modern era of very large Caribbean cruise ships. Sovereign of the Seas was larger than the France, but slightly smaller than the Norway. She heralded an era in which bigger cruise ships were regarded as better cruise ships. And over the course of a decade the expectation would be of continually larger iterations of ships, until megaships would approach the ridiculous, and certainly challenge the engineering and fabrication capabilities of their day.

Norway had been the pioneer of the concept of BIG in cruising. Although the big ocean liners, notably the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, had conducted mid-winter calendars of cruises, in large part because they would sail nearly empty across the icy North Atlantic, those were generally not successful.

But Norway truly brought BIG to the cruise picture. Consider the big shows Norway hosted. The showroom was big. The dining room was big. The ship was so big it couldn't dock, but had to lie at anchor and tender passengers in nearly everywhere it would go.

It was, indeed, the Biggest Week in the Caribbean, as the NCL advertising touted.

Despite constant upgrading and frequent refitting and additions, though, Norway—as with any ship—aged. Externally she remained attractive (despite structural changes that some ocean liner enthusiasts and critics would decry). Internally, she was



WHEN SHE WAS THE FRANCE—Some souvenir items were produced, during her years as the SS France. This is an anchor and life preserver wall hanging that measures 24 inches tall and 15 inches wide. The anchor is made from wood and the life preserver is probably something like plaster. It has a very sturdy hook on the back for hanging. There is a semi-circular crack 3¹/₄ inches long from the left end of the A to the right end of the N in FRANCE. Good condition. **\$165.00.**

as contemporary as a cruise ship could be expected to be

The ship's age was most readily evident in her power plant. Its machinery was never fully reliable. In separate incidents in 1980 and 1981, she was adrift, dead in the water, for more than a day. And incidents of the same kind but of varying lengths happened throughout her service career. Still, they were infrequent enough and handled readily enough that Kloster kept the ship on a regular weekly schedule of Caribbean cruises with some forays to Europe, generally with nearly full passenger loads.

And then in 2000, Norway was retired from cruising—or at least she was supposed to be. Star Cruises, which by then had acquired NCCL (which had been renamed to Norwegian Cruise Line), had announced that the ship would be relocated to Asia in 2001 and undertook a series of farewell cruises and a transatlantic voyage.

But, in fact, Norway returned to her familiar week-long Caribbean cruises from Miami. And it seemed that she would continue on this route for many years to come. In 2002, Star Cruises had studied whether Norway could continue to sail beyond 2010, when a new set of Safety Of Life At Sea (SOLAS) guidelines come into effect. (SOLAS guidelines are issued by the International Maritime Organization—IMO—and the set commonly known as the 2010 guidelines were issued in 1992 and have been phased in since 1994. 2010 is the year that all of the guidelines will finally come into effect. The guidelines apply to ships that carry 36 or more passengers and sail in international waters. They are enforced, or not, by countries that are members of the IMO. Already under 2010—which is properly titled Chapter II SOLAS 74—ships must have two means of escape from any



THE STUNNING SHIP AT SEA—The SS France was featured in a Life Science Library release by Time Life Books entitled *Ships*, in 1965, the prime of her service years. The book includes 14 pages on the France, with a four-page fold-out cutaway of the interior spaces of her decks and a stunning two-page shot of her first class dining room. Other pages cover her navigation, power plants, safety equipment, and life on board. Other sections of the book cover early ship construction through then-modern times and it even has a feature on the then-new NV Savannah, the nuclear powered ship now undergoing decontamination and restoration. The book is 200 pages, hardbound 8^{1/2} inches by 11 and is in good condition. **\$32.50.**

atrium area, smoke detection systems in all passenger and service spaces and stairway enclosures, fire suppression systems in certain areas, and other safety improvements. The guidelines that come into effect on October 1, 2010 state that all ships built before the SOLAS 74 guidelines must be brought into compliance with their restrictions on the use of combustible materials—that would be especially the often

beautiful wood that was used in the décor of older ships.)

Reports are that Star Cruises had concluded the Norway could meet the guidelines by the 2010 deadline and have a long and productive future sailing beyond that date.

Some wonder, though, about the veracity of the report or how seriously it was taken because by that time, the Norway had begun to suffer from a lack of mainte-

nance. She was no longer the pride of the NCL fleet or even among the best of the ships sailing the Caribbean.

And then early on the morning of May 25, 2003 tragedy struck the Norway and it was once again the machinery that failed her. An explosion in the boiler room soon after she had arrived in port killed four crew members on the scene. Three other crew members would die from their injuries, bringing the death toll to seven, with more than two dozen badly injured.

Three cruises were cancelled over the coming week. Then more as each week passed.

A month later, on June 27, Norway was towed from Miami, destination unknown. She ended up at the Lloyd Werft Shipyard in Bremerhaven, Germany. It was expected that it would take seven to 12 months for a new boiler to be built and installed. She was expected to come back into service in the spring of 2004.

Rumors swirled about her fate, including some that she might become a static hotel and attraction. Finally in late winter, 2004, NCL announced that Norway would not be returning to



SS FRANCE ASHTRAY—As the Blue Lady (ex. France, Norway) heads toward Alang and the scrappers, we can look back at a time when there was real competition on the North Atlantic passenger market. This ashtray, featuring a profile of the France in gold with stylized waves and smoke and the ship's name, is in cobalt (or Bristol-like) blue, much richer and darker than it photographs. It measures 11 cm in diameter and is in fair condition with some chips at the top edge and very minor wear of the gold paint. **\$98.00.**

service, at least not in the North Atlantic cruise market.

Over the course of a couple of years, she was used as temporary housing for NCL personnel as they awaited completion of new ships being built at the Lloyd Werft yard.

And then she was gone. She was seen in Cape Town, South Africa. And then in August, 2005 she was seen arriving off Malaysia. Rumors circulated that her next destination would be the beaches of India, one of the places where ocean liners are broken up for scrap. Or she might

become a very slow moving gambling ship.

By December it was reported that she had sold to breakers who

would take her to India or Bangladesh to be scrapped.

By late spring, 2005 she had been renamed Blue Lady and was towed from Malaysia.

Throughout the summer of 2005, questions, controversy, and intrigue were a part of any mention of the France/Norway/Blue Lady. What were the intentions of the current owners? Were they really ship brokers who only bought old ships to scrap them? What about the asbestos and PCBs on board the ship? Were the quantities beyond what the Indian Supreme Court would allow into the country? What about those mysterious interests from Dubai who supposedly wanted to buy the ship as a hotel in that Middle Eastern country? Were they being rebuffed? Had

they been rebuffed when they allegedly tried to purchase the ship before the brokers got a hold of her?

She sat in Indian waters awaiting legal proceedings. Finally, on August 15, 2006 she was beached at Alang, India. In December, 2007 the first cut was made to begin her demolition.

Some hoped that perhaps her very construction—the asbestos and PCBs that make her one of the 50 most toxic ships afloat—that could save her, some have said. Their reasoning was that the Indian Supreme Court would

‘Some thought that perhaps her very construction—the asbestos and PCBs that make her one of the 50 most toxic ships afloat—could save her.’

adhere to the country’s laws and not allow the ship to be demolished there unless the toxic materials are first removed in a developed country that presumably has the infrastructure and wherewithal to properly deal with them.

But the France/Norway/Blue Lady did not get a permanent reprieve from the acetylene torches of the Indian wreckers—or any wreckers. The one-time ship is now just a collection of potentially valuable scrap elements.

While that’s a depressing prospect for ship preservationists, ocean liner buffs, and fans of the France/Norway, it’s the economic and pragmatic reality of the shipping world. The vessel only has value as long as it can

produce a profit for the owner. And for a ship broker, the only way for it to return a profit is to scrap it.

The value of an ocean liner for those who really love the ships is not necessarily in her steel and wood and laminates and art, however. The value of an ocean liner is in the knowledge that she served well and good for many years and was the venue for a million stories of love and lust and joy and pride and awe and astonishment and grand entrances and simple pleasures.

We can lose the ship to the torch, but the essence of her being, whether under the French or Norwegian flag, is indestructible as long as there are those who care to remember.