

First look at Queen Mary 2's £90million redesign

Whether they recognise it or not most peoples' romantic notions of cruising are bound up in the heritage of Cunard. In her hey day the Queen Mary, launched in 1934, carried the great and good – and their pooches too – from Southampton to New York in relative luxury.

It's been 13 years since the launch of her successor the Queen Mary 2 and this week, following a £90m refurbishment undertaken by Cunard, the world's most famous ship sailed into Southampton to show off her bow-to-stern "remastering".

A lot has changed. This is a complete back-to-the-drawing board makeover, with new carpets (enough to cover the Wembley Stadium pitch 10 times), artwork, soft furnishings, light fittings, decorative ironmongery, plus a fair amount of French polishing. All in all, it's a rebirth of note.

QM2 Remastered project manager Alison Clixby has set out to evoke the history of the QM2s forebear. The results can be seen in the stylishly elegant Queen's Grill with its claret-red art-deco tub chairs (lots more tables for two); in the fabulously retro "starburst" carpeting, in the whimsical art in the new Verandah restaurant and in the re-upholstered cabins where geometric graphics are paired with gold and navy bedspreads, rounded sofas and chaise longue seating.

Stripped of two hulking lifts and featuring guests' first introduction to the starburst carpet motif, the Grand Lobby is a brighter, more welcoming space (though it's a shame the casino can be seen from here).

The same "emptying out" approach is repeated in the Princess Grill and Queens Grill, where the removal of bulky waiter stations and pillars has opened up the dining floors, with the thoughtful addition of attractive, privacy-enhancing screens.

The "jewel in the crown", as one official put it during my tour, is the restructuring of the all-day buffet, King's Court, and the addition of the adjoining Carinthia Lounge, with its impressive Port Wall (the oldest bottle from 1840).

There was strong whiff of canteen in the buffet area's previous incarnation. Gone are the cold, dated floor tiles, flow-inhibiting service areas and tall, bar-style tables. With its vastly enhanced lighting and self-serving stations, and fresh, clean decor it is far more conducive to relaxed, informal day-and-night dining.

The single most remarkable addition to the ship is probably the Carinthia Lounge, which has replaced the dated, conservatory-style Winter Garden with a cosy, lounge-cum-dining area with a sit-up bar and self-service cafe offering salad bowls and charcuterie boards, Illy coffee and vintage Iberian wines. It's good to see Cunard acknowledging the demand from cruisers for smart but informal spaces in which to eat and relax.

As well 50 new cabins, including 15 for single occupancy, all existing suites and cabins on board benefit from new carpets, curtains, cushions, sofas/chairs and – deep breath – the addition of kettles.

There are 30 new Britannia Club staterooms, all with flat-screen TVs, and new stateroom structure has also been installed on the top deck (13). The average floor area of the new single cabins is 178-183 sq ft.

Dogs (and cats) cruising with Cunard have always been a little bit spoilt. The line employs a kennelmaster to tend to their needs. So popular is the service that 10 more kennels have been added (22 in total) and owners and pets can be reunited in a new kennel lounge.

The QM2's provenance has flourished under Clixby's eye. There are places where old and new don't blend as seamlessly as they might (the fancy new carpets rather show up the yellowish staircase panelling) but the ship feels like the grand dame she always should've been – and wasn't quite.

And the dogs? As part of the refurb poop deck has been fitted with a lamppost (taken from outside the Cunard building in Liverpool) and a US fire hydrant. They should feel right at home.

Essentials

A seven-night crossing from Southampton to New York from 18-25 October costs from £1,199 per person staying full board in a balcony stateroom, including one-way flight from New York (0843 374 2224; cunard.co.uk).