

QUEEN MARY

by Jim Sweeney



The ocean liner Queen Mary has spent more years docked in Long Beach, California, than it did crossing the Atlantic. It's still renting out rooms (it's now a 365-room hotel) and you can also take a tour.

The exhibits on the liner's history were closed for a major overhaul when I visited in April, but everything else is open. Some of the rooms that are preserved for display, such as the barber shop and nursery, are also being renovated but you can still look at them (through glass). There's also a new exhibit that displays artifacts from the ship's archives.

I was surprised to discover that the Queen Mary isn't floating in Long Beach harbor. It sits on an artificial reef.

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Presumably that puts less wear and tear on the ship. Not having much experience on any kind of ship, I hadn't even noticed the lack of any motion until I glanced down and saw the pile of rock on which the Queen Mary rests. The water is murky enough that the rocks are often not visible.

One of the most interesting displays is on the art of the Queen Mary. Some of the original art didn't survive and is represented by period photos. In other instances, you can see the original artwork in the exhibit (as well as scattered throughout the ship, of course). The exhibit describes the ship's decor as being conservative but still art deco.

The style wasn't the only thing that was modern about the

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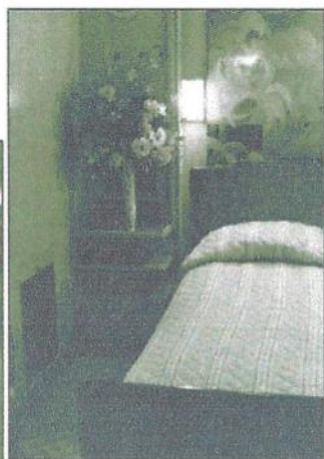
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ship's art. The materials often were, too. One of the artifacts on display is Sigmund Pollitzer's panel from the "History of Transportation" mural, made of sandblasted and silvered wire glass, the sort of thing you'd see on a gym door. A photo represents Maurice Lambert's relief panels, done in anodized aluminum.

More than 80 percent of the ship's original decor is intact, a crew member told me. Considering that the Queen Mary was in service until the 1960s, it's surprising that so much of the original art deco interior remained intact.

The hotel portions of the ship are off limits to visitors, but you can see much of the rest of the Queen Mary. You can wander the halls and imagine you're at sea in the 1930s, headed for London. You can see a broad range of facilities, from the bridge to the captain's quarters to the radio room.

While I could see the Queen Mary from my hotel room in downtown Long Beach, it's only when you get up next to it, and roam it from end to end, that you appreciate its size. It is over 1,000 feet long, with 12 decks. One of the more interesting



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statistics the brochures provide, at a time when periodic blackouts are hitting California, is its fuel consumption when underway: 13 feet per gallon.

The new exhibit of items from the ship's archives covers many aspects of the ship. It has everything from upholstery samples to towel bars to fans. The display on the first-class bathrooms shows that the tub had four faucets, for cold and hot fresh and salt water. (It doesn't explain why anyone would want to bathe in salt water.)

The lounges and restaurants aboard are still used for dining, many with their original deco decor. Like many hotels, the Queen Mary rents large rooms for receptions and conferences. The wedding chapel is also intact, and the ship's management promotes it for weddings. The chapel's brochure indicates that, for a fee, a ship's officer can perform a non-denominational wedding service in a captain's uniform.

A separate exhibit is the "Ghosts and Legends" tour, a multimedia event that takes a tongue-in-cheek look at the various legends associated with the ship. It might scare little children,



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but it's mostly done for laughs. You do get a look at some of the interior portions of the ship, including some of the engine rooms, although everything is festooned with fake cobwebs, funny lights, fog, etc.

Statistics posted at the ship's medical office showed surprisingly few deaths, deliberate or otherwise, on board during the Queen Mary's career. However, hundreds died in an accident involving the ship during World War II, when it was a troop transport.

The Queen Mary and her escort ships were following zigzag courses as protection against U-boats. The Queen Mary was faster than her escorts, so they were supposed to stay a little ahead of her.

At one point an escort ship turned into her path and the Queen Mary couldn't avoid a collision. The escort ship was cut in two and more than 300 men on board died. The Queen Mary was under strict orders not to stop for anything, because the Nazis had put a huge bounty on her, so it continued on while the other escort ships dealt with the consequences (the Queen Mary suffered minor damage). This incident gets big play in the ghosts tour.

Before the tour began, one of the ship's employees told me that, several years earlier, a tabloid television show had sent a reporter and a "ghost hunter" to do a segment on the Queen Mary. They were filming at the pool, the scene of some rumored apparitions, and the ghost hunter saw something during the interview. She told me that the ghost briefly appeared on the tape. Oddly, they don't show you this tape during the "Ghosts and Legends" presentation.

While the Queen Mary is visible from downtown Long Beach, it's a long hike from the downtown hotels. You'll need to drive, take a cab, or a free shuttle bus.

For information, call (562) 499-1699 or look at their website, www.queenmary.com.