



SunStone Ships' newbuilds' interiors have been adapted to meet the design needs of the different operators chartering them. (credit: SunStone Ships)

SunStone Ships: bridging Chinese shipyard knowledge gap

The fact that SunStone Ships' new series of cruise ships are the first to be built in China had a big impact for its interior design and outfitting – the cruise owner's chief executive Niels-Erik Lund highlighted the importance of using European contractors for the interiors.

The company chose Tomas Tillberg Design to manage the interior design and Finland's Makinen for sourcing interior products and outfitting, both companies it has worked with for years. Mr Lund commented "It is very important to have long-term relationships, we know they do things on time and that they know about quality."

"As we are the first ones to be building cruise ships in China, we had to take that into consideration and that is why we secured Tomas Tillberg Design and Makinen. It is very important to get a European product with European quality."

He added "The challenges are on the interiors and technical side, not on the steel side, as [Chinese shipyards] build excellent steel."

Alongside the cruise interior outfitting and

SunStone Ships' newbuilds are the first cruise ships to be built in China, which has large ramifications for its interior outfitting and design. The cruise owner and team behind the interiors explain

design side, Norway-headquartered Ulstein has been contracted to provide the technical design and source the technical equipment.

The importance of the trio of companies is summed up, as Mr Lund said "We would not have ordered a ship in China without contracts with Tomas Tillberg, Makinen and Ulstein, without this combination it would not have worked."

Looking ahead, he predicted the Chinese yard, China Merchants Industry Holdings (CMIH), would learn about interior construction from the SunStone ships, and in the future be able to manage this itself. "I am sure the shipyard is looking at it that way, they need to learn how to do this and build other vessels going forward, so they pick up the knowledge needed."

Tomas Tillberg managing partner Tomas Tillberg described China as a "new frontier" for cruise ship building and added "Chinese yards have not built cruise ships before but by bringing an experienced European contractor to CMIH we can deliver the interior that a modern cruise ship should have."

"It is not a small shipyard, it has built

huge, costly and complicated tonnage before, such as tankers, oil platforms etc. So for them to build a cruise ship is not daunting from a technical or steel point of view. However, there is little or no experience with the hotel side – our job is to bring that to the shipyard.”

Speaking about the relationship, he said “All our colleagues at CMIH are very understanding and helpful and we enjoy a healthy professional relationship.”

Building long-term relationships with suppliers and designers is important to SunStone Ships. Mr Lund said the company had worked with Tomas Tillberg for years, across its current fleet, both on newbuildings and design retrofits. It has also worked with Makinen across its fleet.

Makinen chief executive Sameli Lähdesmäki told *Passenger Ship Interior & Refurbishment* “Our co-operation with CMHI has gone surprisingly well. We recognise a common target and because of that we are going in the right direction.” He said a “strong partnership model” had been developed.

At the time of interview (August 2018), he said installation would start in two months. “It has involved a lot of planning and sitting together with the shipyard and trying to find the right way of doing the installation.”

Makinen currently has five crew based at the shipyard, a number that Mr Lähdesmäki said will grow.

The company is setting up an assembly factory at the shipyard to prefabricate cabins and furniture modules.

Speaking about the materials and products being selected, he said “Some is coming from Europe and some from China. Quite a few materials which are the right quality are being brought from China – these companies are also supplying cruise ships being built in Europe.”

Summing up the importance of bringing

in a European contractor which has a long-standing relationship with the cruiseship owner, he said “I think it brings security to all parties that we are an experienced interior contractor. We know what SunStone is looking for and they know we can deliver what they require.”

Furthermore, he pointed out that the shipyard would gain experience within interior outfitting from working alongside Makinen.

Different charters, different interiors

Aside from being built in China, SunStone’s ships are interesting because they are intended for different charterers, which has an impact on the interiors.

Tomas Tillberg Design lead designer and managing partner Nedgé Louis-Jacques commented “From a design point of view, this series of vessels is very interesting. They are all the same ship basically but intended for different clients, so their designs are adapted individually. Charterers who will operate the ships have specific demands and they cater to certain groups of people, they know exactly who their customers are and what they expect, and we meet these demands.”

Singling out Aurora Cruises, she said that as the company was headquartered in Australia and many of its passengers were Australian, it had an impact on the design. “Australian passengers are a bit more casual than say the UK, it is a different attitude to cruising and is less formal, but still elegant and comfortable so there will be a very nice mix of interiors.”

The third SunStone ship is now under contract with a different charterer, Ocean Victory, where the preference is Scandinavian-inspired design. Tomas Tillberg vice president of design Debbie Breslauer said “We are excited to take this style to new innovative, contemporary heights, while being mindful of the special

challenges that expedition cruising brings.”

Mr Lund added “Depending on the charterer, we have ships with different numbers of cabins, ranging from 120-200 passengers, ships with steam rooms and without, different colour schemes, for example some choosing dark wood panels and others light colours.”

Therefore, he said there were a number of meetings between SunStone Ships, Tillberg, Makinen and each charterer so that all parties agree on the interiors plan.

Mr Lund said that from an interior point of view, the new ships represented an upgrade compared to SunStone’s older ships. “There is more than one restaurant, much larger cabins and we have balconies,” he said.

Important areas include the mud room, where passengers come in and take off wet and heavy clothes, wash boots and clean up before going to the public area. Mr Lund said that from the mud room passengers will have access to four zodiac loading platforms. In the aft of the ships will be areas to store special expedition equipment, including kayaks, and two loading platforms for passengers to enter and exit the kayaks.

Speaking about the design of expedition ships in general, Ms Louis-Jacques pointed out that their designs are very different to those of larger cruise ships. “The focus on bigger cruise ships is more on the entertainment, food and drink, casino and other onboard revenue sources. On a small expedition ship the focus is completely different – the passengers are on the ship for the destination rather than the ship itself. They want a comfortable and upscale environment, but definitely don’t expect a Las Vegas show.”

Space is also used differently on expedition cruise ships – with the designer ensuring it is flexible. “You usually use spaces for more than one thing, so it needs to be flexible to meet a range of requirements.” *PST*

SUNSTONE SHIPS' MAIN STRATEGY FOR OVERCOMING THE CHINESE SHIPYARD'S LACK OF CRUISE INTERIORS EXPERIENCE:

Choosing Finland's Makinen for the interiors outfitting

Only using Chinese products if provided by cruise ship suppliers

Choosing US-headquartered Tomas Tillberg Design for the interior design

Choosing companies with which it has a long-term relationship with

Using European-sourced products