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In conversation with...

# Mark Durden-Smith

He is the man behind the glitz and glamour of Carnival’s UK Cruise Awards. Mark Durden-Smith joins **Melissa Moody** for an exclusive chat about the importance of travel agents – and gladly accepts a challenge to go on a cruise

With his tux buttoned, his bow-tie hanging loose and a presenter’s smile in place, Mark Durden-Smith is an all-encompassing presence as he walks into London’s Roundhouse café.

“There’s a hint of bananas about this whole thing,” the host of the UK Cruise Awards explains when asked if he’s ready for the upcoming night. “It’s Carnival Corporation, though, so it’s going to be a big party. And you have to throw in a bit of mayhem; that’s key at all times.”

This year marks the sixth UK Cruise Awards, an annual event created to celebrate travel agents working with six of Carnival’s UK brands: Carnival Cruise Line, Holland America Line, Princess Cruises, Seabourn, Cunard, and P&O Cruises.

Durden-Smith, who has been at the helm since the very beginning, admits that he landed the role of hosting the



Melissa met up with Mark in London



“It’s a way of saying thank you to agents for all their amazing work”

awards following a conversation between Seabourn managing director Lynn Narraway and his mother, British travel icon Judith Chalmers.

“They said we want to thank all the travel agents for the amazing work they do, and James Corden is out of our budget. So here I am six years later,” jokes Durden-Smith.

It’s a fun job, no doubt, but for the past two years he’s been trying to get Phillip Schofield to take over – with no joy so far. He’ll try again in 12 months, he promises.

## Giving back

For Durden-Smith, the beauty of the concept of the awards is two-fold – it’s a genuine ‘thank you’ from the lines to their agent partners, and also, the ceremony doesn’t drag on, he cheekily admits. There are only eight awards on the night, and the presentations are done by

8:45pm – as long as he doesn’t “bang on too long”, he adds.

“It’s a night of whopping celebration. It’s been an amazing year of corporate lovemaking between travel agents and Carnival UK, and I think it’s a nice way to pat everybody on the back. I think people appreciate it,” he says.

“I suppose you could go around and visit every agent with a nice little fun bus and go ‘here’s your award’ but it’s nice to have a get-together and they [Carnival] are quite good at entertaining. It’s an amazing party.

“You’ve worked your guts out for a year trying to fill these amazing ships with people who want to go on holiday. It’s a nice night, there are no expenses and it’s all on the company.”

As an outsider looking in, Durden-Smith emphasises the changes he has seen within the cruise industry during



UK Cruise Awards host Mark Durden-Smith makes a point to CTN’s Melissa Moody

“The level of entertainment... it’s always been amazing, but wow, Gary Barlow as musical director on P&O Cruises”

MARK DURDEN-SMITH

his tenure as host, from the new ships to the focus on sustainability.

“I felt like everyone last year had a ship coming, and all of them phenomenal,” he says. “I remember they were talking about the roller-coaster on Carnival’s *Mardi Gras* and I was a bit sceptical, thinking about having that on a ship at sea, but I suppose it’s an example of the wealth of experiences you can have on these ships.

“And the level of entertainment... it’s always been amazing, but wow, Gary Barlow [Gary recently became a P&O Cruises ambassador.] I have to say it to myself again, Gary Barlow is the musical director on P&O Cruises – that’s amazing.

“This drive on sustainability, too. There’s a lot of people building cleaner ships and it’s one of the biggest changes that has to happen. I think it’s being fully embraced by everyone in the industry.”

## Time to cruise

He knows his stuff, but amazingly Durden-Smith has never been on an actual cruise. He asks if an overnight stay on P&O Cruises’ *Britannia* counts – it doesn’t. The key question, of course, is why is he yet to set sail?

“I don’t know,” he confesses. “It’s definitely something I’m thinking I should have done by now, because I’ve heard so many stories being involved with these awards.

“It would probably be the best holiday my children have ever been on. I am a convert in waiting.”

His favoured destination would be Alaska and, with an adventurous family, an expedition cruise would be top of his list. Of course, he readily affirms, he would book through a travel agent.

He adds: “You could Google it but there’s no need with a travel agent.



Destination of choice for Mark and his adventurous family would be Alaska

They have such a breadth of knowledge and I think for cruising in particular there are so many different options and having a travel agent to help you makes a big difference.

“If I didn’t book with a travel agent, I couldn’t show my face around here again,” he admits.

So a challenge has been put out: by the time of the UK Cruise Awards 2021, its host must have been on – or at least have booked – a cruise. Over to you, Mark Durden-Smith. 🍌