



## Meeting... Giacomo Mortola

With a career spanning four decades, Giacomo Mortola has designed for many of the world's leading cruise lines. Here, the industry veteran talks planning to perfection, passenger flows and preserving his legacy.

Words: Lauren Ho

What began as a holiday sailing around the Caribbean on board Sitmar's Fairsea in the late 1970s, turned into a defining moment for both the cruise industry and the then newly qualified architect Giacomo Erasmo Mortola. For, in the same way that, say, the late David Collins shaped London's dining scene or Philippe Starck set the design bar for Ian Schrager's boutique hotel concept, Mortola has put an indelible stamp on the cruise business. "While onboard Fairsea, I noticed the shopping area was not very well arranged, so I took several photos, drew some sketches, and when I returned home, prepared a proposal for a new design with handmade renders," explains Mortola. This enthusiasm, in turn, led to a meeting in Monte Carlo with Sitmar's owner, Boris Vlasov and, as Mortola says: "My adventures in the cruise business began."

By 1985, Mortola had set up GEM, his own Genoa-based firm, and when Sitmar merged with Princess Cruises four years later, his longstanding partnership continued. Today, that fateful meeting has resulted in over 30 projects for the brand, including one of Mortola's career highlights: the design of the mega 109,000-tonne Grand Princess in 1998, which at the time, was the cruise line's flagship and the largest, most expensive passenger vessel ever built at a cost of approximately US\$450 million.

Today, the design firm's impressive portfolio is a roll call of the industry's biggest players including – amongst others – Cunard, Silversea, P&O and hip newcomers Virgin Voyages, for whom Mortola is the head architect for its upcoming four-ship fleet. "Another important milestone in my career was achieved when I was engaged by Virgin Voyages for the architectural coordination of their newbuilds," he explains. "During this project, I had the great pleasure of working with Dee Cooper and Tom McAlpine on their innovative and unique approach to the world of cruise ships."

The cruise line from Sir Richard Branson's Virgin group, which has touched everything from gyms to motorsports, though is probably best-known for shaking up the aviation industry in the 1980s with the launch of the relentlessly cool Virgin Atlantic airline, is the company's latest €3bn undertaking. Assembled to Virgin's exact specifications by Italian shipbuilding company Fincantieri, the new line is certainly hyped to throw out the rule book with a vibrant lifestyle-driven product – not least by tapping a series of prominent designers from Tom Dixon to Roman & Williams, of which none had previously worked on a cruise ship before.

Newfangled innovation aside, Mortola is clear that the key to staying at the top of the game is a personal, tailor made approach and says that cruise ship design is not just about using up-to-date materials and following the latest colour and design trends. "There is a tension between preserving a



Mortola is working with Silversea to design its expanding fleet, which includes Silver Muse and Silver Origin

“There is a tension between preserving a cruise line’s identity and introducing elements of innovation that enhance the passenger experience. You can’t do that with a production line mentality.”



cruise line’s identity and introducing elements of innovation that enhance the passenger experience,” he says. “You can’t do that with a production line mentality.” He also explains that functionality and aesthetics are equally important, stating: “Functionality, passenger and service flows, as well as technical constraints are all important factors that need to be addressed in conjunction with the interior design project of the single areas.”

Indeed, from the evocative Art Deco opulence of Cunard’s Queen Elizabeth ocean liner to the understated elegance of the 51 all-suite staterooms on Silver Origin, Mortola’s designs are planned to perfection and are certainly not pinned down to one particular style. The latter is, in fact, Silversea’s contribution to the growing expedition cruise market; a destination-specific ship built especially for sailing around the Galápagos, its stylish cabins designed by Mortola to make the most of the island landscape with ocean-view bathtubs and balcony showers. “Destinations are playing the major role and the cruise experience is being redefined as a journey to cultural enrichment,” says Mortola.

Silver Origin is also one of the designer’s many ongoing projects with the expanding brand, which also includes the recently launched Silver Moon, the upcoming Silver Dawn (2021) as well as Silver Spirit (2009) and Silver Muse (2017), with Mortola noting the latter two as particular career highlights. “I was responsible

for the entire project, from the masterplanning to the interior design of passenger suites and public venues,” he says proudly.

He also notes Manfredi Lefebvre d’Ovidio, the chairman and former owner of Silversea Cruises, as an especially significant figure in his career over the years, referring once again to a personal touch being key to his success. “During the development of the latest Silversea newbuilds and refitting projects, I have had the pleasure of approaching design in a similar way to the process I followed in the seventies,” reminisces Mortola. By this, he means a good old-fashioned face-to-face meeting, which he feels is important for both creativity and communication. “Face-to-face meetings makes it possible to propose alternative solutions based on the owner’s feedback,” he explains. “It also allows us to have a clear understanding of how to finalise the design by the end of the meeting. With the advent of the internet, the process of presenting designs and getting feedback has become much faster. As a consequence, projects are presented again and again with new solutions as owners increasingly seek to achieve their version of perfection.”

But while Mortola might feel nostalgic, after 45-years in the business, he knows better than anyone, the importance of adaptation. These days, he manages GEM alongside his son, Lorenzo, who joined the firm in 2012 after completing degrees in naval architecture and interior design. Naturally, with Lorenzo having

spent much of his life in close proximity to the cruise sector, Mortola says: “Lorenzo was raised in a family that has close ties to the shipping industry. He has brought new ideas and energy to the studio helping to improve our creative process and the way we manage projects. He has also enhanced the digitalisation of the studio and streamlined many of our processes.”

For some, this might mean taking a step back, perhaps slowing down to enjoy some of the cruise ships he has designed. Mortola, however, is as keen as ever to keep going, eagerly remarking that design is a passion for him and that he “cannot foresee a future that doesn’t involve continuing to work on new designs and having an active role in the management of the firm”.

Up next GEM will continue its ongoing collaborations with both Virgin Voyages and Royal Caribbean on Silversea, which includes the 2021 launch of Silver Dawn. When asked what he enjoys most about his job, Mortola replies: “Being able to tackle the complex design solutions and bringing forward a design that is both functional and elegant and which provides added value for the client as well as the passengers.”