



## Icon of the Seas

### ROYAL CARIBBEAN GROUP

Part beach resort, part theme park, Royal Caribbean launches its first Icon-class ship, introducing a new era of cruising.

Words: Rebecca Barnes • Photography: Courtesy of Royal Caribbean International (unless otherwise stated)

How does a design team transition from a blank piece of paper to one of the most innovative mega ships on the ocean, with the presence to literally stop traffic? This is how Royal Caribbean's mighty Icon of the Seas – the world's largest cruise ship to-date – began its inception, and the reaction it received when it finally arrived in PortMiami in early 2024.

"Icon of the Seas is what's called a white paper ship – there were no boundaries to the ideation," says Jay Schneider, Chief Product Innovation Officer at Royal Caribbean International. "We wanted to create the ultimate family holiday – an all-encompassing line-up of experiences that combines the best of beach escapes, resort getaways and theme park thrills in one unforgettable trip."

The ship sees eight diverse neighbourhoods – including five new additions and three old favourites – spread across a total of 20 decks. More than 40 restaurants, bars and lounges are on board, including a duelling pianos bar, casual coffee shop, champagne bar and a traditional English-style pub. The vessel is also home to seven pools and nine whirlpools, as well as 28 types of accommodation, ranging from interior cabins to split-level suites. There are a number of impressive firsts aboard the 7,600-passenger ship, including the brand's first swim-up bar at sea, the largest waterpark and the tallest free-fall slide, positioned at a 66-degree incline.





The interior design scheme across the ship is bold and playful, with plenty of greenery in Central Park, and light fittings throughout created by Chelsom

Seven years in the making, Icon of the Seas is certainly no shrinking violet: the bold, playful design has been dialled up a notch compared to other ships in the fleet. There's lots of new features alongside familiar, albeit enhanced, signature venues including Central Park, which has 20% more greenery than predecessors, and the reimagined Royal Promenade with its floor-to-ceiling ocean views.

One of the most striking design highlights is The Pearl, the world's largest kinetic art sculpture located in the Royal Promenade. "The Pearl is not only this incredible experiential installation, but it's also a superstructure that allows us to open up the side of the ship for natural daylight and connectivity to the water," explains Jason Liberty, President and CEO of Royal Caribbean Group.

Created by Brooklyn-based new media studio Breakfast, it spans over 46ft in height, with a diameter of 50ft. Inspired by the ocean, it features nearly 3,000 computer-driven kinetic tiles, arranged in a Fibonacci sequence to

echo the patterns found in marine life. "We were shown the rough concept of a sphere with a stairwell, but were given the freedom to conceive a piece we felt would match our artistic voice and style, while ticking the boxes for the client," says Andrew Zolty, founder of the studio. According to Zolty, this is considered one of the most complex art sculptures ever created. "There were hundreds, if not thousands of challenges and setbacks over the four years it took to develop, but we just took them one at a time," he reveals. What sets the immersive sculpture apart is its interactivity, and ability to continuously transform and reflect current environmental conditions. "Our approach is to contrast the highly technical and geometric nature of our sculptures with movements that fluidly echo the organic forms of nature," explains Zolty. "What truly makes this piece special is that it's pulling in real-time tide and wind data from the Caribbean, and this influences the way the artwork moves. Parts of it are entirely dynamic and ever-changing."







Another structure, perched at the top of the ship and featuring 12 individual modules that took eight months to assemble, the AquaDome is a versatile space featuring multiple venues – including Royal Caribbean’s first food hall – with wraparound ocean views and a 55ft-tall water curtain. The AquaDome’s theatre meanwhile is complete with all manner of high-tech features, from robotic arms to projection mapping. “The design came from the chairman, who sketched the dome on a napkin, handed it to the shipyard and asked them to build it,” explains Jay Rosser, Manager of Product Development at Royal Caribbean.

Schneider continues the story: “The AquaDome is a transformational design that not only took engineering to a whole new level, but the 363-tonne dome is the largest single structure of glass and steel ever to be lifted onto a cruise ship. There was a whole team assigned just to monitor the weather, planning ahead of time to find the right slot, to make sure that this monumental lift was done safely,” he explains. “Traditionally, our AquaTheaters are located at the back of the ship on the lower levels, and the revolutionary new position towards the top deck at the front added further complexity. The greater the weight is on a ship, the greater the impact on stability and centre of gravity. Luckily, we had an experienced team who could make the vision possible.”



In true mega resort style, the ship really comes into its own outside, where no corners have been cut to deliver non-stop family fun. “Water plays an integral part in the design on the open decks, where we have 62% more water than on Oasis Class ships,” says Schneider. “Instead of putting the pools into the superstructure, the superstructure was designed around the pools. A main objective was bringing the pools toward the outboard, allowing guests to be in the water and look out at the ocean.” Indeed, the ship is home to a whole host of water features for every mood and occasion, including the line’s first swim-up bar at sea, a suspended infinity pool and a multi-level sun terrace with whirlpools.

Thrill Island is the first time Royal Caribbean has themed a full neighbourhood around the idea of adrenaline-fuelled attractions, with decks 16 and 17 featuring a waterpark, surf simulator, rock climbing venue and a sky-high ropes course that takes daredevils 154ft above water level. The process of bringing the vision to life, however, did not come without its challenges. According to Harri Kulovaara, Executive Vice

President, Maritime & Newbuilding, Royal Caribbean International, a ship normally has a couple of hundred tonnes of water in the pools – Icon is said to have between 500 and 1,000 tonnes of water.

For waterpark Category 6 – which features six record-breaking slides, including the tallest drop slide at sea – Kelly Gonzalez, Senior Vice President of Architectural Design at Royal Caribbean Group, adds that a key consideration was how the team would add the weight to the ship. “We wanted a lot of water, a lot of speed and a lot of height,” she says. “And we did not want to compromise on any one of those things. So we had to bring in a number of experts to ensure we could design this in a way that is technically sound.”

The final word goes to Schneider, who emphasises that when the team set out to create Icon of the Seas, they simply wanted to make the world’s greatest holiday. And with the ship already well sold for 2024 and continuing to break records, it seems they are well on their way to fulfilling their greatest goal yet.



#### ON DECK

**Route:** Caribbean  
**Maiden Voyage:** January 2024  
**Owner:** Royal Caribbean International  
**Operator:** Royal Caribbean Group  
**Architecture and Interior Design:** Skylab Architecture, Wilson Butler Architects, 3Deluxe and RTKL  
**Shipyard:** Meyer Turku  
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