



Superstar Is

The Helsinki-Tallinn route is one of the busiest in the world, and in terms of types of tonnage it's one of the richest as well. The capital route received two new high-speed ropax vessels this spring, so **STEVE BROWN** and **TEIJO NIEMELÄ** went to check on their amenities. ▶

Viking XPRS



Photo credit: Steve Brown

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Annually, over six million passengers make the crossing over the Gulf of Finland between the Finnish and Estonian capitals of Helsinki and Tallinn. It's little wonder then, that Tallink and Viking Line, the two main players in the service, introduced brand new vessels at the end of April. Both ms Superstar and ms Viking XPRS are designed to cross the sea in about two hours year-round, offering amenities and public rooms to passengers that are close to those found on cruise ships. However, it is here that their similarities end.

Background

Currently there are no less than six ferry companies plying this route. Vessels range from catamarans to ro-ro vessels and even pure cruise ferries - the latest of which, ms Baltic Princess was delivered from Aker Yards in early July. Still, we are now looking at the high-speed ropax versions, namely the 36,000 gross ton Superstar and 34,000 gross ton Viking XPRS, which both have genuinely combined best parts of all passenger ships plying this route.

The latest vessels of Estonian operator Tallink and Finnish operator Viking Line are designed to operate the route comfortably year-round, even during the icy



A la carte restaurant, Superstar



Red Rose, Viking XPRS

Photo credits: Jouni Saaristo

conditions of winter, when traditional fast ferries are laid up. Both Superstar of Tallink and Viking XPRS are slightly slower than the fastest catamaran ferries, but make the trip more quicker than conventional ferries. As a matter of fact, the Superstar and its running mate ms Star (delivered a year ago) allowed Tallink to retire all of the car-carrying catamaran ferries from its fleet. Meanwhile, Viking XPRS was designed to replace the aging 1980-built ms Rosella, with state-of-the-art amenities and a higher operating speed than its predecessor.

These new ropax-ferries offer a high capacity on their car decks (as a matter of fact, there are 1,930 lane meters on Superstar compared to 995 on the XPRS) and a myriad of passenger areas that offer plenty of choice. With their large cabin areas, the ships can even offer mini-cruises, thereby enabling both to earn revenues from a broad spectrum consisting of cargo haulers, motorists, business travellers, conference passengers, as well as day or overnight cruisers.

Tallink, which had previously ordered all of its other newbuildings from Aker Yards in Finland (and its predecessor Kvaerner Masa-Yards) commissioned this vessel from Fincantieri's Ancona shipyard. Its design is based on those constructed for Moby Lines at the Daewoo shipyard in South Korea and Fincantieri, in Italy. Tallink even retained Italian **Carlo Ciribi** (who designed Moby Lines' ships) as the ship's architect. Meanwhile, for Viking Line, the Viking XPRS is the first new ship they have built since 1990. The Viking XPRS was built in Aker Yards Helsinki shipyard, but unfortunately, its delivery was postponed due to the heavy workload of the Finnish shipyards. Viking Line used well-known Swedish architect company Tillberg Design and Finnish architect **Lasse Heikkinen**. Tillberg has been behind virtually all of Viking Line's present ships.

From crossings to mini-cruises, conferences

Although both ships are marketed as high speed fast ferries, their schedules have been designed with mini-cruise passengers in mind rather than optimising the number of crossings. Viking XPRS conducts only two round-trips a day and remains in Tallinn during the daytime for a total of four hours, thus providing a perfect daytrip from Helsinki. When leaving from Helsinki in the evening, Viking XPRS offers passengers the option to stay onboard until the ship returns to Helsinki the next morning, as the ship remains docked in Tallinn for eight hours.

The timetable is also well-suited to conference passengers, which are an important revenue source, especially during the off-season. Viking XPRS features an expansive conference center on Deck 7 occupying approximately one fourth of the deck space.

Superstar, and her sister ship, Star operate five daily sailings, with the first leaving from Helsinki at 7.30, and the last at 22.30.

Viking XPRS offers 238 passenger cabins with a total of 732 beds. As a matter of fact, Viking XPRS has devoted one full passenger deck for cabin accommodations. Although most of the cabins are rather small (all fitted with toilet and shower), they



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Casual dining, Superstar

are more than adequate for a short trip. Meanwhile, Superstar is fitted with 186 cabins, all with bathrooms and a shower.

When CBR sailed on the Viking XPRS in early June, Viking Line was still limiting the use of the ship's full capacity of 2,500 passengers. With its Swedish flag it is more expensive to operate than the Estonian flagged Superstar, which carries 2,080 passengers, so the onboard crew is just limited to less than a hundred.

Dining

Both Superstar and Viking XPRS offer comprehensive spaces for wining and dining during such a short crossing. The dining options, however, are more varied on the Superstar.

The more limited Viking XPRS features a large self-serve buffet restaurant, called Bistro Bella, with space for 400 diners, and the cafeteria-style Blue Deli with seats for 70 diners. Although we liked the free flow arrangement and the open kitchen of the counters, the lines to the cashier were rather excessive. What is more, to find tables in Xpresso Street - the starboard side arcade - created another challenge. Thankfully, a large cafe & dance bar called Red Rose, located forward of the same Deck 7 was given over to dining as well.

Due to the rather limited spaces available for dining, Viking XPRS also offered traditional pub food in its Viking's Inn music pub. The menu consisted of bratwursts, sauerkraut and potato salad. Overall, the main con on the dining options on Viking XPRS is that there are no a la carte restaurant with table service.

There are several restaurant areas on Superstar, all located on Deck 8. The a la carte restaurant, located aft and to the right, seats 100 diners, offering reasonably priced fare, serving appetizers from little as 9 Euros, and main course from €18- in a nicely decorated area, which also offers views out to sea. Opposite this, behind the lifts and stairwell, is the Pizza Roman pizzeria, which seats 56. Moving forward, on the left, is the cafeteria Sardinia, seating 185 passengers. It serves salads, sandwiches, a good selection of pastries, and liquid refreshments.



Blue Deli, Viking XPRS

As you walk forward, still on the left, you can find the Preston Hamburger Bar. This seats around 135 passengers. Directly adjacent to this, is the Children's play area, Tivoli, which has 66 seats, a slide and swings, and a video game area. There is also an ice cream bar, called Pinocchio. On this particular trip, there were many families, so the playroom was in great demand. On the right, past the second set of lifts and another stairwell, is the Toscana restaurant, seating around 300 diners. Buffet breakfasts are served at 7.30, and 10.30. A warm buffet is sold on the afternoon/evening departures. This area is very light and airy, and the serving stations are well placed, and sectioned off from the tables, so as not to restrict passenger flow.

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Dolce Vita, Superstar

space here can be at premium. Another watering hole, Viking's Inn music pub is located aft of Deck 7. Despite its nice decor, it is rather dark, as the room is cut in half by the engine casing, and both sides accommodate the lifeboats, thus limiting the view out to the sea. The positive factor, however, is the access to the large terraced sun deck, which has proven so popular in the summer time.

Superstar has three bar areas, which was more than enough to satisfy the beverage needs of pas-



Shopping World lobby, Viking XPRS

On the Superstar, all food items and drinks at the self-serve outlets were sold on disposable plates and glasses, creating a lot of trash, although there were plenty of large, clearly-marked disposal bins, to encourage passengers to 'recycle' their waste in 3 separate categories, namely bio waste, paper, and plastic.

Entertainment

On Viking XPRS, predominant venue is the large Red Rose Bar on the forward of Deck 8, which offers a rounded bar and dancing with a full size orchestra. However, Red Rose also acts as an overflow for the diners from the deli, so on a busy crossing, the

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sengers on this ship. Dolce Vita, is located in the bow of the ship, over two decks, where on this occasion, passengers were entertained by the resident Trubadour, who sang Finnish classics. Although Dolce Vita was not busy on this particular, trip, no doubt because it was a 10.30 sailing, there is enough seating for around 300 seated passengers, and plenty of standing room. Its stage is easily big enough to accommodate larger shows.

DaVinci, located in the aft of Decks 7 and 8, (where the sun decks can be found on Superstar's sister ship, the Star) is a piazza-style bar that offers views out onto the ship's wake. The top deck is furnished with small tables, each with 4 chairs, and towards the back half a dozen very comfortable sofas. DaVinci seats approximately 400 passengers. LaLuna, located on Deck 8, is the sundeck bar, and is open (or closed, as was the case on CBR's trip) depending on the weather. This area is protected from the wind by glass partitions, and was busy on this trip, despite the fact that the bar was closed.

The whole sun deck area is protected from the wind (and to some extent, the rain) by glass partitions. There is also a bar here, although it was closed for CBR's trip. The rear of the ship now houses a bar, on two decks, called DaVinci.

Superstar has a well-equipped business lounge for 138 passengers Located on Deck 6 behind the food market and perfume shop, it offers wireless Internet and comfortable seating. Passengers travelling in a Business Class have a complimentary buffet lunch, and free drinks included in the price of the ticket. Gaining access to the business lounge was no easy task as one of the doors (right next to the main stairwell) was locked, meaning that you had to walk all the way around to the front of the ship, in order to get in. This was the cause of some frustration annoyance to one group of passengers, who gave up and went to one of the other bars.



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Both ships offers many opportunities for onboard shopping, as. Located on Deck 6, are a huge duty free shop, a perfumery and a supermarket. The total area given over to shoppers is around 1,500 square meters. Most activity (as is the case with all ships operating the Helsinki-Tallink route) seemed to take place in the duty free shop, while the perfumery slightly less busy, and was inhabited completely by females. The supermarket also seemed to be trading briskly.

On the XPRS, the Shopping World is centrally located on Deck 7 occupying roughly one third of the area. Despite the abolition of the duty-free, the alcohol is still cheaper onboard than onshore in Finland.

Embarkation and Disembarkation

Bar code ticketing is in use at both the Viking Line and Tallink terminal, whereby you place your ticket face up on a laser reader in order to open the turnstile. At Tallink's Helsinki terminal, there appeared to be some confusion by many passengers, as to which way round to show the ticket, which, in turn, caused something of a tailback.

Embarkation for both Superstar and Viking XPRS starts 30 minutes before departure, and as is usually the case on these day trips, there was a mad rush to board the vessels. On the Superstar, there are two embarkation/disembarkation points, although only one of them was in use on this particular occasion, whereas XPRS offers three gangways.

Disembarkation in both Helsinki and Tallinn is nowadays a straightforward affair, due partly to that fact that there is no passport control, something that used to cause considerable delay only a year or so ago. ■

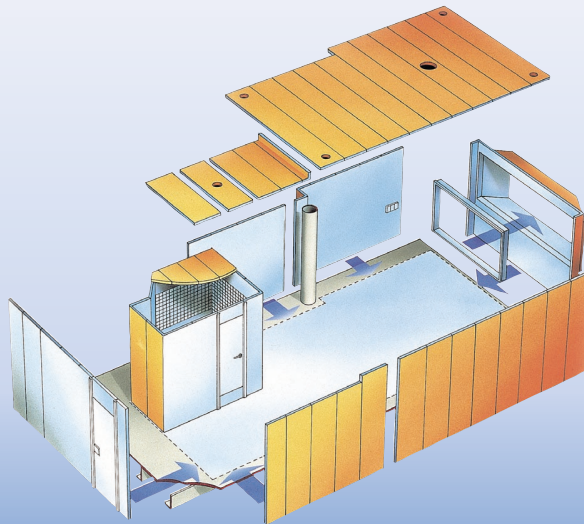


main particulars

	SUPERSTAR	VIKING XPRS
■ Built:	Fincantieri, Ancona	Aker Yards, Helsinki
■ Owner:	Tallink	Viking Line
■ Route:	Helsinki-Tallinn	Helsinki-Tallinn
■ Country of registry:	Estonia	Sweden
■ Classification society:	Bureau Veritas	Lloyd's Register
■ Price of the ship:	€120 million	€130 million
■ Length overall:	174.9 m	185.0 m
■ Beam:	27.6 m	27.7 m
■ Tonnage:	36,400	34,000
■ Passenger capacity:	2,080	2,500
■ # of passenger cabins:	189	238
■ # of crew:	120	100
■ Car capacity:	665	240
■ Trailer lanes:	1,930	995
■ Main engines:	4 x Wärtsilä	4 x Wärtsilä 46F
■ Total power:	50,400 kW	40,000 kW
■ Service speed:	27.0 knots	25.0 knots

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