

Webjet shuts down cruise division

LISTED online travel agency Webjet will no longer sell cruising, with the company yesterday advising customers of the shutdown of its Cruise Sale Finder operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cruise Sale Finder is part of the NZ-based Online Republic business purchased by Webjet four years ago for about \$80m (*CW* 07 Jun 2016), which also operates the NZ-based Cruise Republic online cruise agency, and fulfils cruise bookings on behalf of the main Webjet OTA.

The business yesterday advised it was no longer accepting new cruise bookings, and would cease operating effective from Sep this year while assuring customers that existing bookings are protected and will be honoured.

Reservations will continue to be supported by the Cruise Sale Finder team as normal for sailings



departing through to 30 Sep.

However, "for sailings from 01 Oct your booking will be supported by the cruise line directly," the company advised, with Cruise Sale Finder working closely with cruise line partners to manage the transition.

The same arrangements apply for Webjet Cruises, with the "Cruises" tab now removed from the main webjet.com.au website.

Online Republic launched Cruise Sale Finder in NZ in 2008, and then in Australia in early 2009,

and has sent more than 300,000 customers on a cruise holiday.

Just over a month ago Webjet confirmed a new leadership team for Online Republic and was restructuring the business, including "a plan to return Cruise to profitability through technology and product enhancements".

That now appears to be off the cards, with Webjet's shares suspended from trading on the ASX as it works on a proposed capital raising.

Rescue Ruby!

CARNIVAL Australia is urgently working with Federal and State Governments to rescue crew currently on board *Ruby Princess* on humanitarian grounds.

The company has complied with NSW demands that the ship leave local waters, but maintains it is not safe for *Ruby Princess* to sail away while sick people are on board.

"Australia has maritime obligations to protect the welfare of seafarers and as such we need to care for foreign nationals as we would expect other nations to care for Australians in similar circumstances abroad," said Carnival CEO Sture Myrmell.

"Repatriation of *Ruby Princess*'s crew would be an important step in upholding Australia's reputation as a caring maritime nation."

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How bad is cruising actually for the environment? Find out in the April issue of *travelBulletin*.

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A humanitarian crisis - ships stranded at sea

OPINION

Orlando Ashford is the President of Holland America Line.

THE coronavirus (COVID-19) has run rampant, catching all of us off guard. During a time when we're afraid to go out, fearful of others as possible COVID-19 carriers, how do we ensure we continue acting in ways consistent with our common human dignity?

Holland America Line is working tirelessly to find medical help and safe passage home for the 1,243 guests and 1,247 crew stranded at sea on our two ships, *Zaandam* and *Rotterdam*.

They are among the 9,000-plus passengers still remaining on about a dozen other cruise ships worldwide. These are unfortunate souls unwittingly caught up in the fast-changing health, policy and border restrictions that have rapidly swept the globe.

The questions I keep asking are:

- How will those needing intensive medical treatment receive it with limited shipboard medical staff, facilities & supplies?
- Nations are reluctant to share provisions or afraid to carry critical supplies out to us. What happens when we run out?
- Can guests and crew without symptoms get home with limited flights and closed borders?

Nations are justifiably focused on the COVID-19 crisis. But they've turned their backs on thousands of people left floating at sea. Are these reactions based on facts from experts, or fuelled by irrational fear? What happened to compassion and help thy neighbor?

Forced to Fend for Ourselves

We are dealing with a "not my problem" syndrome. The international community, consistently generous and helpful in the face of human suffering, shut itself off to *Zaandam* leaving her to fend for herself.

As a result, *Zaandam* was forced to take proactive measures,



rendezvousing with sister ship *Rotterdam* to replenish supplies and protect the health of the guests and crew who aren't ill.

We made the unprecedented decision to transfer to *Rotterdam* those guests we could quickly and safely move to alleviate *Zaandam* crew workload, and to get as many guests as possible into rooms with verandahs.

Following CDC protocols, we screened guests prior to transfer. We did not move guests likely to need ongoing support by the medical team to *Rotterdam*. Guests on both ships continue to self-isolate in their staterooms.

Reducing the guest count on *Zaandam* helps available staff better serve those remaining on board. No guests who have been ill or symptomatic were moved, nor were their close contacts. And no *Zaandam* crew moved to *Rotterdam*.

How We Got Here

It's important to remember passengers and crew did nothing wrong. When voyages began in early March, South and North America had few confirmed COVID-19 cases.

The World Health Organization (WHO) was advising against travel restrictions, and the Americas weren't affected by travel or

health advisories. Travel in all forms continued – albeit with more hygiene reminders.

Within a matter of days, that all changed. Local governments swiftly closed ports globally.

Ships previously cleared for docking were abruptly turned away. Officials denied repeated requests for access and assistance and the world shut itself off, leaving ships stranded at sea to make it on their own, which isn't sustainable. Eventually someone must allow these ships in.

Holland America Line began actively monitoring COVID-19 in early 2020, working to step up already-robust procedures to keep guests & crew safe.

Then on March 13, amid growing global health concerns, we announced a 30-day suspension of global cruise operations. On March 30 that was extended an additional 30 days, cancelling cruises until May 14.

For ships like *Zaandam* mid-cruise – its two-week South America voyage began March 7 – we quickly sought approval to disembark guests for flights home. Chile announced the closure of their borders on March 16, literally while *Zaandam* had been sitting in Punta Arenas for two days awaiting clearance

for guests to disembark. Peru closed, as did Argentina, then the rest of South America. Repeated requests for humanitarian consideration were denied.

Then March 22 – one day after the voyage's original end date – a few guests and crew began reporting influenza-like symptoms. Despite countless desperate pleas in the following days, we were forbidden to

medevac critically ill patients.

Already four guests have passed away and I fear other lives are at risk. As of March 30, 76 guests and 117 crew on *Zaandam* have influenza-like illness, including eight people who have tested positive for COVID-19. We have seen a notable and steady decline in cases over the last 48 hours, showing the actions we took have helped contain spread.

However, there are also 1,167 healthy guests and 1,130 healthy crew across these two ships.

Thankfully, the Panamanian government graciously granted humanitarian approval allowing us to move through the Panama Canal, which we did the evening of March 29. Even with this progress, we are still facing a multi-day journey before we can safely dock and disembark.

And we need confirmation from a port that is willing to extend the same compassion and grace that Panama did, and allow us to come in so our guests can go straight to the airport for flights home. It's tempting to speculate about the illnesses that may have been avoided or lives saved if we'd gotten the assistance we sought weeks ago.

A Test of Our Humanity

It's easy to condemn those who are unhelpful and unwelcoming during times of need. But what if instead we focus on the type of society we strive to be, where nations share a collective responsibility to help others in peril? Because these travellers could have been any one of us or our families – caught up by a fast-changing scenario nobody foresaw.

The COVID-19 situation is one of the most urgent tests of our common humanity. To slam the door in the face of these people betrays our deepest values. Given the opportunity, I am hopeful that all of us will follow the lead of our Panamanian friends and help our neighbours.

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How have cruise operators coped with the coronavirus crisis? Read more in the April issue of *travelBulletin*.

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COUNTRIES are doing more and more these days to protect and maintain the health of their bodies of water, and in Colombia, Pablo Escobar seems to have inadvertently aided the country's river ecosystems.

A initial pod of four hippopotami the late drug lord illegally imported into the country in the 1980s, which later escaped, now numbers more than 80, and scientists have noticed the invasive species may be helping river ecosystems through their excrement.

Some experts told *Scientific American* magazine the massive amounts of dung produced by the animals is positively affecting the oxygen levels of the waterways they habituate, which helps other water life that populate the rivers - viva la hippos!

Russia developing east



RUSSIA has announced a plan to develop its cruise tourism sector in its Far North and East.

The country's Federal Agency for Tourism and Ministry for the Development of the Far East & the Arctic have begun a study of potential cruise tourism opportunities in the regions, with senior officials from the two government agencies meeting with representatives of local cruise ship operators and other businesses last month.

As initially instructed by Deputy Prime Minister & Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District Yuriy Trutnev, new proposed laws to aid development will mostly be focused around removing barriers to development, such as the lack of accessibility, business activity and tourism infrastructure in the region.

The measures will also outline priority tourism zones for each Arctic region, with the development of each to supposedly quickly increase

tourist numbers.

Minister for Development of the Far East & the Arctic Alexander Kozlov adding the laws were set to be finalised within a month.

"Cruise tourism is a promising factor of economic development in the Far East and the Arctic," Kozlov enthused.

"It can boost these regions' income, which is why we are working on it."

The plan is part of a wider effort of Arctic development planned through to the year 2035 by the Russian government.

"This analysis provides the basis for formulating an Arctic tourism strategy in accordance with the state policy and the tourism development strategy in Russia," said Deputy Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic Alexander Krutikov.

"We have agreed with our colleagues to work together on this project."

Pictured: Kondyor Massif in Khabarovsk Krai, eastern Russia.



Finding Hope

"TRAVEL is a fundamental human compulsion. We're restless, curious, questioning creatures with a never-ending need to see what's around the corner."

When I read this quote in *Traveller*, it was the inspiration I needed to continue to look forward to the time when our industry rebounds as it surely will.

Before we can make that leap from armchair to cruise cabin again, we need to look for and celebrate the positive initiatives people are taking in our industry.

In a nod to those valuable people working behind the scenes in cruising, one of our destination members, Tourism NT has just won the Cruise Insight magazine award for their We Love the Crew campaign. Launched last October, the campaign encourages cruise crew members to make the most of their time in Darwin by offering them discounted rates and value-add offers to local businesses, attractions and experiences.

Crew also feature in a segment on the new Viking.TV platform as they deliver messages of hope to their passengers. This wonderful communications initiative takes travellers on an online journey via destination content, culinary inspiration and musical performances.

I congratulate both these members and look forward to sharing similar stories in the future.

RCL extends

ROYAL Caribbean Cruises (RCL) has extend its Cruise with Confidence policy from 31 Jul to 01 Sep.

The policy still allowing cancellations up to 48 hours prior to sailing, for any reason, with guests will receive a full credit for their fare, usable on any future sailing RCL in 2020 or 2021.

CLICK HERE to access C-19 Central, which includes a regularly updated page of cruise cancellation policies.