

> WINNERS &  
LOSERS 26

> GLOBAL CRUISE  
OUTLOOK 30

> BACK TO THE  
FUTURE 74

> KEEP IT  
CLEAN! 88

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58



EYE ON ENERGY

## G. Allen Brooks

Allen Brooks is Managing Director of energy services investment firm PPHB in Houston. His fortnightly newsletter, *Energy Musings* (formerly *Musings from the Oil Patch*), is among the most widely read in the industry.



# HOW COVID IS CHANGING THE CRUISE EXPERIENCE

**IT'S DIFFERENT NOW – FROM CANCELLED PORT CALLS TO WEARING A MASK – BUT WORTH THE EFFORT.**



**T**he yellow signal flag flapping in the breeze was a subtle reminder of the force that has dramatically altered the cruise industry's growth trajectory. Few people on board cruise ships pay attention to the various flags flying from the bridge, unaware of the significant information they convey.

The flag notified the world that our ship was carrying people infected with COVID-19 and in quarantine. Daily reminders of the cruising world's battle with COVID are the hand-sanitizing dispensers widely dispersed throughout the ship's public areas. So too were the constant reminders to observe heathy practices – washing hands frequently, wearing masks and social distancing, often delivered by the Captain and Cruise Director in their daily announcements and posted on signs everywhere.

### BACK ON THE WATER

After not vacationing since March 2020, we were ready to celebrate Christmas with family on a cruise from Galveston to Roatan and Mexico. That cruise was to be followed two weeks later by a southern Caribbean voyage. Given COVID's disruption of the cruise business the past two years, we

wondered how different our experience might be.

We've taken numerous cruises over the years, experiencing many locations around the world – the eastern Gulf of Mexico, the Mediterranean, the Baltic, Dubai to Oman, around South America including Antarctica, Alaska, the Panama Canal, New England, eastern Canada, New Zealand. We've done river cruises in Europe and combination land-and-water tours in Egypt and Machu Picchu and the Galapagos Islands. Every cruise was different.

For us, it's always about the itinerary when deciding to cruise, except for family trips. We pack and unpack once. No cooking or cleaning required. We enjoy the specialty restaurants and entertainment. We fight the poundage battle, but fitness centers have expanded and are better equipped. More pools and water features, coupled with other unique adventure venues, await.

These experiences may not be for everyone, but based on the industry's growth from 2009 to 2019, prior to COVID, it seems the industry met travelers' desires. Over that period, passenger volume grew an average 5.4 percent per year from 17.8 to 30 million passengers. Two million more were anticipated for 2020, until COVID struck.

In 2019, the most popular destinations were the Caribbean (42 percent), Asia and China (14 percent) and Northern Europe (six percent). North America provided 15.4 million passengers with 7.7 million coming from Europe and 3.8 million from Asia. While cruising has attracted all age groups, the predominance of older cruisers has the average passenger age at 46.7 years. Given the growing popularity of cruising among Millennials and Generation Z, that average is projected to fall – unless COVID forces a radical and permanent shift.

### NEW PROTOCOLS

The current Omicron variant has disrupted cruising's recovery as fear of getting sick causes travelers to cancel or delay. On board, changes are happening, even in a matter of weeks. Changes initiated on the Christmas



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cruise were institutionalized on the Caribbean voyage.

The cruise communities on those two trips were notably different. The Christmas cruise was populated with families and extended family groups. A large number of children slows the boarding process as young unvaccinated children must be tested before boarding. On the Caribbean cruise, there were fewer than 60 children, and mostly an older passenger demographic. A number of passengers were in the midst of back-to-back cruises, gaining status with the cruise line while making up for lost vacation time.

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Fitness facilities are off-limits to the unvaccinated as are some deck areas. Vaccination status also limits options when going ashore, determined by the health rules of the countries. The unvaccinated are limited to purchasing and participating in ship-sponsored land tours to ensure their visits comply with the health rules of the host country.



The list of countries banning or restricting cruise ship visits is growing. Some ban cruise ships if they have any passengers or crew in COVID quarantine. Others may target ships based on their positivity rate, or specific cruise lines based on their history of handling virus cases. Certain locales have instituted new testing requirements that cruise ships often cannot meet, so they avoid them, altering itineraries. The uncertain

virus status of cruise ships and changing port rules keep itineraries in flux, frustrating passengers and challenging the ship’s staff.

COVID protocols have forced cruise lines to limit the number of passengers, which can be a positive for those

traveling. Our Caribbean ship had a 4,050-passenger capacity, but the cruise line only planned for about 2,400 or 60 percent of capacity. With Omicron’s outbreak, the ship departed with 1,623 passengers or 40 percent capacity and a crew of 1,392.

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**Gone are the lavish buffets – replaced by pointing to what you want and having kitchen staff put it on a plate for you. According to a Captain we talked with, this operational shift has led to a 30 percent savings from less food waste but an increase in staff, which makes the economic trade-off a push. This change is likely to become permanent, however, since a side benefit of the adjustment has been the disappearance of norovirus infections that plagued cruise ships in the past.**

Such low capacity meant venues were more open, elevators mostly empty, casino tables vacant and fewer shoppers and passengers lounging, but importantly less revenue for the cruise operator. Many of those cancelling occupied more expensive rooms, further impacting profit margins.

### IT'S DIFFERENT NOW

If you cruised pre-COVID, you experienced crowded ships and ports, lavish food and beverage options, and constant interaction with crew, support staff and other passengers. Now it's different. Many previous activities that involved personal interactions have been shelved by COVID protocols. Reservations for many events and meals are required. There are separate main dining rooms for those passengers vaccinated and those unvaccinated.

The changes begin at check-in as you are handed a colored bracelet to wear for the duration of the cruise, making it easier for the ship's staff and other passengers to know your vaccination status. Itineraries are adjusted on-the-fly as port availability changes. Our Caribbean cruise experienced three port adjustments – one as we were about to depart and two while sailing.

Cruising has been a huge economic boost to many locales, but the 2020-2021 suspension levied a heavy toll. Operating tours and selling merchandise to passengers were mainstays in some communities. In one port with cruise line-owned shops, the merchants had their rents cut in half and payment delayed but accumulated during the suspensions.

Once cruising returned, these merchants were given six to nine months to repay their suspended rents, making them desperate for sales – good for visiting passengers. Merchants have no idea what will happen this spring if they fail to repay all their suspended rent, but they've seen fellow shopowners fail and have their stores emptied by the

cruise line.

### IMPACT ON CREW

During the cruise hiatus, ship crews were sent home if not needed to maintain the vessel. According to staff, our cruise line provided partial compensation to some workers sent home, but who and how much was unclear and seemed to depend on the person's position.

When home, many had to find other work to help their families survive, having lost their tip income – the bulk of their earnings. Those recalled are happy to be back. When they return, they're placed in 10-day quarantines in a section of the ship kept off-limits to passengers. This is the routine for handling staffing rotations.

Guests who contract COVID are also sent to this area and then removed from the ship to onshore quarantine locations once the cruise ends. Some cruise lines are operating ships merely to handle crew quarantining, which can be especially helpful in managing crew changes.

Staffing issues can be disruptive to cruise operations. On our Caribbean cruise, we were told of a December cruise where one unvaccinated child tested positive and exposed the entire staff of the youth activity facility. With the loss of those workers, over 800 children on that cruise and a subsequent one could not enjoy the facility, disappointing their parents.

### RESERVATIONS, PLEASE

Daily routines are altered. Reservations are needed for shows, entertainment and athletic venues. Contact-tracing comes and goes depending on whether there are positive COVID cases among passengers or increased sensitivity of the staff to that possibility.

Activities that depend on certified operators can be shut down if they become infected, further disappointing passengers. Other activities that involve passenger interactions have been elimi-

nated such as bridge games and art and cooking classes.

Gone are the lavish buffets – replaced by pointing to what you want and having kitchen staff put it on a plate for you. According to a Captain we talked with, this operational shift has led to a 30 percent savings from less food waste but an increase in staff, which makes the economic trade-off a push. This change is likely to become permanent, however, since a side benefit of the adjustment has been the disappearance of norovirus infections that plagued cruise ships in the past.

Smoking onboard is highly restricted. While traditionally limited to a few outdoor areas and the casino, we saw it limited further and banned from casinos. Those changes happened during our Christmas cruise.

Entertainment continues to be a focal point of the cruising experience, but be prepared for changes in shows. Seating requires a reservation to comply with social-distancing measures. Exiting is done by seating section to further comply with social distancing.

### SAFEST FORM OF TRAVEL?

Cruising claims to be the safest form of travel today given the adjustments to ship operations and the idea of the community operating within a "bubble." The Omicron outbreak is challenging that claim with infected ships having been banned from ports and cruises cancelled.

As we were boarding our Caribbean cruise, we were handed a letter outlining our cruise operator's assessment of the virus situation. It noted that the prior cruise community experienced a 2.9 percent COVID positivity rate, well below rates seen onshore. Yet such a rate can still be troubling for travelers. In today's virus situation, cruise lines are trying for under one percent positivity as that is the cutoff rate for entry to some ports, but zero is the true goal.

Cleaning is the key to keeping the in-

**Hopefully, the industry will survive the Omicron outbreak with only modest disruptions. In our experience, most passengers were observing the mask and social-distancing guidelines and still having fun. People were cautious about getting too close. While some cruises have been cancelled due to the virus, the number has been low.**

fection rate low. Between disembarking and embarking, staff is sanitizing public areas and staterooms. Cleaners could be seen everywhere and at all times of the day, wiping down everything – railings, seats, tables, even elevator buttons.

### NEW NORMAL OR TEMPORARY DISRUPTION?

Hopefully, the industry will survive the Omicron outbreak with only modest disruptions. In our experience, most passengers were observing the mask and social-distancing guidelines and still having fun. People were cautious about getting too close. While some cruises have been cancelled due to the virus, the number has been low.

What passengers are dealing with are itinerary changes, meaning patience

and flexibility are required. How the unsettled itinerary issue impacts traveler experiences and views of cruising's desirability is unknown.

In the long-term, we doubt much about cruising will change when "normal" returns. No one knows when it will happen, let alone what it will look like. The industry continues building larger and more lavish ships, although some delivery dates have been pushed back.

The big unknown is how the cruising experience may change. Will people still opt for the lavish vacation experience cruising is known for or will smaller, less elaborate ships with more remote itineraries gain greater prominence? How will services and experiences on board be altered? The answers to these questions are key to the future of cruis-

ing. We already expect the new buffet procedures will become permanent. Revised disembarking procedures are also likely to remain.

### PLANNING TO CRUISE

A recent survey said 82 percent of past cruisers were planning to cruise again, the highest percentage in recent years. Reports are that future bookings are recovering – good news for the industry – but possibly due to bargain fares being offered. What happens when fares increase? Unknown is whether the three-year pandemic experience will diminish traveler enthusiasm for cruising, altering its growth plans.

We plan to be cruising.

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