

MAJOR CHANGES IN CATERING AND FOOD SUPPLY ON CRUISES GENERATED BY COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The 1970s have represented the most flourishing period of mass tourism and at the same time the growth of cruises for leisure. From that period on to the present day, for over 50 years, this relatively new industry, has undertaken a spectacular evolution.

The debut of SarsCov19 virus, at the beginning of this pandemic (February 2020) had a major influence on cruising. When the cruise ship Diamond Princes of Princes Cruises Company has registered over 700 cases of Covid 19, with 15 deaths, from a total of 3700 passengers, the decline of cruising industry has begun. The cruising industry has been shut down completely and it started with a slow revival. All operational procedures on board have undergone changes, especially in regard to the safety of tourists.

This paper tries to analyze the catering and food supply changes of different cruising companies.

Keywords: Cruises, catering, food supply, safety

JEL Classification: Z30.

1. Introduction

As Covid 19 pandemic spread on a global scale in March 2020, the cruising industry has stopped working for several months. Even though, the ocean cruise industry has registered an annual passenger growth rate of 6.6% from 1990 to 2019, in 2020 the activity has dropped with more than 75%, estimating an increase in sales with 47% in 2021 compared to 2019. Regarding 2022, some companies are predicting to even up with 2019 results and to possibly surpass them. In 2019, the cruise industry passengers reached over 27.5 million, but ending the activity in 2020, for several months, has led to a major decrease in passenger number, leveling up to 2000-year statistics, around 7 million, mostly from North America representing 3.22 million, Europe with 1.9 million and 1.9 million for the rest of the world. The predictions for 2021 are approximately 13 million passengers, doubling the value of 2020 numbers.¹

The 2020 pandemic has strongly influenced the cruising industry, and therefore companies have voluntarily suspended their activity worldwide, for the benefit of public health. As a result, companies faced significant challenges and were able to

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¹ <https://cruisemarketwatch.com/growth/>

repatriate 100.000 crew members, using their own ships, if the airlines restrictions have generated a difficult context and took important initiatives for passengers, in terms of new safety procedures to proper deal with SarsCov2.

2. The Covid 19 changes in the cruising industry

The Covid19 pandemic and the lack of any activity from the middle of March to September 2020, had a profoundly negative impact on cruising, resulting in an estimated loss of more than 77 billion worldwide, 518.000 jobs and 23 billion in wages.²

However, the cruise industry has promptly taken actions to overcome the negative effect of the Covid 19 crisis, and with the help of national and international health authorities, have established new protocols for tourists' safe travel.

Testing the crew and passengers is the first step towards the new cruise travel, cruising industry been the first of tourism sectors to adopt this initiative, an important approach to safe travel. Pre embarkation testing represents a major step towards the health, safety and wellbeing of both passenger and crew for all cruising activities to come.

2.1. New concepts and experiences onboard generated by SarsCov2

Due to Covid 19 pandemic outbreak, many ships are operating at less than full capacity, at approximately 50-60%, mainly to encourage social distancing, many of cruise lines planning to increase the capacity over the next few months.³ Even if social distancing requirements are preventing cruise operators to obtain top level revenues, companies have made substantial investments in order to offer tourists the safety and comfort of cruise travel. Therefore, cruise lines have competed in creating new concepts for post Covid 19 experience.

Smart Vacations⁴ – a new concept that provides important information on new facilities or activities onboard, digital displays and interactive monitors in the common areas for passengers, cabins with TV information channels and personalized call center services by telephone.

Using electronic bracelets, throughout the entire cruise, allows a fast localization, enables passengers to be informed and to activity participate in applying and respecting all social distancing polies onboard.



Figure 1: https://future-cruise.nridigital.com/future_cruise_may20/dimeq

² https://cruising.org/-/media/research-updates/research/2021-state-of-the-cruise-industry_optimized.ashx

³ <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2021-11-03/covid-changed-cruises-cruise-ship-safety-protocols-what-to-know>

⁴ <https://www.croaziere.net/protocol-de-sanatate/protocol-covid-costa-cruises/>

More space for passengers – The number of passengers onboard is significantly diminished, for ensuring a safe and pleasant travel in the context of social distancing. The public areas, including the relaxing spaces have been redesigned to maintain the safety standards, allowing access to a limited number of people at the same time. Also, the signaling of public areas has been improved to respect social distance protocols.

More space for medical facilities represents another important change in redefining cruise operations.

Open air entertainment facilities are to be considered an important trend, outdoor shows with weather protection are the proper option of the new cruise travel.

Flexible cancellation policies – Many companies have adopted flexible cancellation policies, sending a clear message regarding these aspects, to potential passengers, even before the activity has resumed.

Other important concepts emphasizing changes are:⁵

An app for everything – cruise lines are developing apps for facilitating all activities onboard, such as contacting each other, making reservations for different activities, find easy access directions to their stateroom.

Going with the flow – new design features, with open spaces for dinning, socializing or relaxing etc. which allows passengers easy and free movement around the onboard amenities.

Smart accommodation – accommodations are integrating smart concept for new experiences, including virtual views in interior cabins, living facilities in verandah staterooms. Smart technologies such as virtual assistants, personalized smart-lighting and others improve the home like experience provided.

Prioritize island time – private destinations are more and more appealing to the tourists, island retreats are offering additional entertainment, dining, and other interesting experience in addition to the onboard one.

2.2. Safety measurement on cruise lines

For relaunching the cruising industry, urgent measures have been required, for all activities onboard, new procedures for operationalization, training the operational personal, keeping social distance, sanitizing etc.

The first measures which can prevent spreading of SarsCov 2 were the negative PCR tests and the proof of vaccination, as for the end of 2021 the companies also recommended booster shots for their passengers and crews.

Some initiatives were aiming to improve the air quality through efficient filtering and purification, the ventilation systems onboard providing optimal filtration of fresh outside air, minimizing indoor air circulation.

Another important example are the changes in the entertainment activities, many shows being presented several times during the week, in order to be accessible to all the tourists, with the social distancing protocols.

⁵ https://cruising.org/-/media/research-updates/research/2021-state-of-the-cruise-industry_optimized.ashx

Taking into account the main steps from embarkation to disembarkation, the safety measures have been divided in before embarkation, on board and at shore measures.

2.2.1. Before embarkation

Even before embarkation, the passengers are informed about the onboard measures, the conditions and rules for embarking, which are different, in this pandemic context. Therefore, there are new regulations regarding the passengers' Covid testing. Passengers over 12 years of age must be vaccinated against Covid 19, with both doses. Those up to and including 11 years old don't require vaccination proof, but a negative test for Covid 19, a PCR test, between 24 and 72 hours before sailing (The rapid antigen tests are not accepted). Also, from September 13, 2021, all passengers, regardless of age or vaccination status, have been tested in the boarding terminal⁶.

As well, there is the possibility for additional equipment for boarding sanitation, for instance the use of automatic doors for the entrance and exit points, operated with photocells, avoiding unnecessary touch points⁷.

2.2.2. On shore

Visiting the port of calls can only be done on their own, by fully vaccinated passengers. Passengers that want to be accompanied by non-vaccinated children must purchase an organized trip. All passengers are obliged to follow the regulations, sanitary protocols and local legislation from the port of call destinations.

2.2.3. Onboard

First of all, nowadays on board Covid19 protocols have been implemented on each ship and within each cruise line. All crew members take specific training courses on compliance with safety protocols and practices.

Secondly, all guests are asked to maintain proper hands hygiene, using water and soap and other available disinfectants onboard, being mandatory the instructions received from crew members and through the means of communication on board.

And thirdly, new anti-microbial carpets can be used for the public areas and cabin corridors⁸.

3. New catering concepts on cruise lines generated by Covid 19 changes

Among the major activities on cruise ships, there are supplying, preparing and serving of foods and beverages for offering exquisite meals for cruise passengers. Considering the fact that passengers are spending the entire vacation onboard, food and beverage policies and strategies are well defined and based on statistics and consumption habits, taking into account the passenger's profile and changes in their

⁶ Disney Cruise Line, <https://www.croaziere.net/protocol-de-sanatate/politica-de-anulare-covid-disney-cruise-line/>

⁷ <https://www.cruiseindustrynews.com/cruise-news/22838-cruise-ship-designers-prep-major-changes.html>

⁸ <https://www.cruiseindustrynews.com/cruise-news/22838-cruise-ship-designers-prep-major-changes.html>

needs and wants. Such strategies are reflected in bulk purchasing and updating, if necessary, for keeping costs down and permanently monitoring the supply usage; as a result, very little food goes to waste. Cruise lines usually spend \$10-\$15 on food per guest, per night. The food expenditure represents 6% of the cruise fare paid by the passenger, premium cruise lines having a higher food cost on average than budget and mainstream cruise lines⁹.

Even though cruise ships have resumed their travels around the world, travelling conditions have significantly changed since the Covid 19 pandemic. The way to carry out any economic activity, regardless of its nature, and the new safety procedures for all industries have generated important operational changes, for the onboard cruise ships activity, in general, as well as for the food and beverage ones. Each company has tried to implement and innovate in order to bring passengers back on cruise ships, developing new concepts such as:

- **Catering to single cruisers** – sales strategies are focusing on the needs of single cruisers¹⁰.
- **Bubble travel** – tourists are allowed to visit different destinations, but on a series of strict regulations. Based on this concept, tourists can't purchase or consume anything at the destination, being permanently accompanied by cruise ship organizers.
- **The buffet is not a free-for-all**, passengers are not serving themselves. The cruise lines are trying to provide similar experience without the risk of contagion, working hard to ensure optimal condition for cruise buffet.
- All the self-service dining experiences were considered to be substituted with **full-service options**, upon initial activity revival. Regardless of the buffet experience, the main appeal of cruising consists in variety of dining options onboard.
- **Hygiene is the new luxury** – Safe dinning requires the cleaning and disinfection of high touch surfaces, and also avoiding the sharing of items.
- **Changed dining rooms** – new regulations are imposing social distancing in seating and standing areas, and increase sanitation.
- Restaurants can install **screen dividers between tables**.
- **Lower number of tourists** is allowed simultaneously in the dining areas.
- An alternative to self-service the staff is helping to plate and serve food and for contactless experience onboard, passengers **can access restaurant and bar menus from their personal mobile device by scanning a QR code**.
- Another version of safe catering is a new buffet system, **where guests tell the server** the food they want and it is plated for them.
- The use of an **interactive wristband** for touch-free purchases of food and beverages, including at the buffet, as part of the contactless experience¹¹.

⁹ <https://emmacruises.com/cruise-food-how-much-do-cruise-ships-spend-per-cruise-and-per-person/>

¹⁰ <https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/disruptive-cruise-market-trends>

¹¹ <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/travel/cruises/2020/10/07/future-of-cruise-ship-buffets-carnival-norwegian-royal-caribbean/3585196001/>

- To avoid crowding, cruise lines are offering virtual queuing at all specialty restaurants onboard, providing passengers with a contactless way to have **food delivered to their cabins**.
- The onboard restaurants were redesigned to ensure social distancing policies, only **guests from the same cabin** may share the same table, many restaurants recommend reservations and are limiting to eight guests, the groups at the dining tables¹².
- For breakfast and lunch there is free access to restaurants, with **larger serving time allocated**.
- **The quantity** of culinary products offered onboard remains equally important as their **quality**.
- **Increased pace of renewal and assortment variety**. To diminish the negative impact of the new safety restrictions onboard, passengers will be able to enjoy greater assortment diversity and a faster pace of renewal of culinary products, especially since changes have occurred in debarking to ports of call, with differences prior to the pandemic.
- **Changes in supplying procedures** due to strict operational regulations on port of calls, the lack of materials and the shortage of supply logistics (for instance, the lack of carriers in UK).
- **Preparing and serving the food as efficiently as possible in the pandemic context** requires additional conditions for food safety and social distancing, even among kitchen employees etc.
- **The pace of menu renewal** in line with customer trends and desires **must be just as fast, if not even faster** than in the pre-pandemic period.
- Cruise lines are offering a dinning card upon embarking, which specifies that in addition to the same dinner time (which happens before the pandemic), the guest will have **the same place at the table throughout the trip**, therefore increasing the safety dinning measures¹³.
- In terms of safety measures, companies such as Virgin Voyages, Virgin's Scarlet Lady adult-only ship¹⁴, are choosing to give up the buffet for preparing a number of 20 menu options.

Studies conducted on cruise passenger profile have reached the conclusion that, the growth rate of people embarking on cruise ships between 18 and 34 years is higher than that of people over 65, as it was until 2018¹⁵. Changes in demographic of cruise passengers determine important concerns for adaptation to this segment, in term of food and restaurant trends.

¹² <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2021-11-03/covid-changed-cruises-cruise-ship-safety-protocols-what-to-know>

¹³ https://future-cruise.nridigital.com/future_cruise_may20/cruise_ship_food_trends

¹⁴ <https://www.virginvoyages.com/onboard/eat-and-drink>

¹⁵ <https://www.travelpulse.com/news/cruise/princess-sale-offers-drinks-wi-fi-tips-specialty-dining-and-more.html>

4. Conclusions

In 2020 the number of cruise ship passengers was 75%¹⁶ lower compared to 2019, according to the Cruise Lines International Association. This massive loss, even though companies have not stopped investing and launched new ships, has determined innovative initiatives for attracting customers lost in the pandemic, for responsible implementing of safety measures, procedures resulting from awareness of the danger posed by SarsCov2 and its threat to the safety and health of the world's population.

Although the cruise industry has been one of the most affected ones during this pandemic, major players are confident that with the proper measures promptly implemented, there are loyal customers looking forward to return on cruise ships for a memorable experience.

All of these changes represent add on value to cruise vacation packages, and give potential passengers confidence that they will have the safest journey in terms of Covid 19 contamination. Also, the new concepts of Food and Beverage departments, along with the modern technology onboard are underlining the important contribution of cruise lines in offering services and products in line with the current trends, accentuating the concept of safe travel.

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