

When the Cruise Ships Stop Coming

GREGORY SCRUGGS

As coronavirus puts the cruise industry on hold, some popular ports are rethinking their relationship with the tourists and economic benefits the big ships bring.

The *Costa Luminosa* never made it to Venice. The vessel was one of several ill-fated cruise ships thwarted from exotic ports of call as Covid-19 overtook these luxury leviathans in February and March. Cruise ships functioned as oceangoing hotspots in the pandemic's early days, until the industry suspended operations; a no-sail order from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will keep boats that ply U.S. waters anchored until at least August.

If current nationwide restrictions in Italy hold, no cruise ships will sail into Venice's famed lagoon at all this year. The absence of visitors in the famously overtouristed city during Italy's nationwide lockdown, which began to lift in early May, has been a surreal experience for Jane da Mosto, executive director of the citizen advocacy group We Are Here Venice. "It was sublime and sad at the same time," she says. "On the one hand, Venice has never been more beautiful. Imagine Venice where the water is so flat on the Grand Canal, you could see the shadows of the palaces as sharp, straight lines."

June is historically the busiest month for cruising to La Serenissima, which might see 170,000 cruise passengers flood the historic city. They may not be missed: Venetian activists like da Mosta have long criticized the behemoth vessels that can have an outsized impact on the fragile city and its surrounding ecosystem. "No big ships in the lagoon during the time of coronavirus and forever," demands the Comitato No Grandi Navi (No Big Ships Committee), threatening civil disobedience if the cruise port returns to business as usual after the pandemic subsides. "We lived on a toxic diet of mass tourism that was just a way of having money in the short term," says da Mosto, whose organization promotes focusing the city around the needs of its dwindling number of full-time residents. "What Venice needs is to be repopulated."

In ports of call known for their cruise appeal, the disappearance of boat-borne tourism has been greeted with mixed feelings. Many towns and cities depend in part on revenue from these vacationers. But the boats bring problems, too: Critics often cite the industry's environmental record and dubious economic impact — study after study show that passengers on short stopovers contribute relatively little to the local economy. The role that cruising played in spreading coronavirus — the Miami Herald COVID-Cruises Project documented 2,791 cases and 76 deaths across 58 vessels — has only intensified calls for change aimed at the \$45 billion industry.

The Cruise Lines International Association, an industry trade group, has responded to the pandemic by stressing that most of its vessels were unaffected by the virus. Soon after the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic in mid-March, "CLIA oceangoing cruise

lines took the unprecedented step to voluntarily suspend worldwide operations, making the cruise industry one of the first to do so,” the group said in a statement. “When the time is right for cruise ships to once again set sail, our community will be an important part of the global economic and societal recovery.”

In European port cities that have been tangoing with the cruise ship industry for years, the pandemic pause is an opportunity to accelerate longer-term goals to better manage visitors. Five years ago, 80% of cruise ships that docked in Barcelona were just passing through. Today, that figure is down to 60%. City tourism director Xavier Marcé hopes to see it drop even further as part of the city’s efforts to tamp down on overtourism by promoting Barcelona as a home port, which encourages tourists to come early or stay later, where they spend more money and their presence is less disruptive to everyday life. “Ships just passing through pollute more and those stopover tourists only go to the most obvious places that are already full,” Marcé says.

To ease their environmental impact, Barcelona’s port authority plans to electrify dockside hookups by the end of 2021 so that cruise ships don’t burn fuel in port. The pandemic will slow that construction project, but Marcé is confident it will proceed even with an impending recession given the city’s commitment to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. “The debate is not whether we want them or no,” says Marcé. “We want cruise ships that don’t contaminate and promote a more intelligent use of tourism in the city.” He doesn’t foresee a cruise ship docking in Barcelona until October at the earliest.

In the Caribbean, the region is taking a big economic hit from coronavirus and accompanying travel stoppage. Carnival Cruise Lines, the industry’s largest player, has announced its intention to restart scheduled sailings in August with trips from Florida to the Bahamas. It’s not yet clear when cruise passengers will return to places like St. Kitts and Nevis, where the St. Kitts Urban Development Corporation recently unveiled the \$48 million Port Zante cruise terminal, opposite capital city Basseterre. The terminal can accommodate four ships at a time — in December 2019, the port saw 10,629 passengers in one day — in a country of just 55,000 citizens.

The 27-acre retail complex is dominated, some locals believe unfairly, by expat merchants from India, says Shivdi Singh, a Trinidadian development consultant. She managed her country’s branch of Caribbean Local Economic Development (CARILED), a regional foreign aid program sponsored by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and now raises the question of how much of an economic hit a season or more without cruise ships will mean for Kittitians and Nevisians. “The Indian merchants sell retail to the tourists, who then head back onto the ship where they were already accommodated and fed,” she says. “There wasn’t very much interconnectedness of cruise ships to other sectors in the country and there wasn’t that downstream effect actually feeding into the local economy.”

Where residents will be squeezed, however, is in dwindling national coffers. “The national government is losing revenue, and that trickles down into social programs,” Singh says.

The International Monetary Fund predicts a 6.2% drop in GDP in the Caribbean region this year due to the tourism collapse, and countries like Barbados are doling out unemployment insurance at a rapid clip. In an attempted quick pivot, Jamaica leaned into its burgeoning call

center industry, only to trigger a coronavirus outbreak. Writing for the World Economic Forum, Bahamas-based businesswoman Barbara Ann Bernard fears impending social unrest.

Few places depend on cruiser dollars more than southeast Alaska, which should have seen its first ships coming through the Inside Passage from Seattle and Vancouver this month. This part of the state expected 1.44 million cruise passengers this year, comprising 90% of all visitors to the region. Almost no vacationers are expected this year, in turn, as southeast Alaska cannot be reached by road, air connections have been reduced to skeleton schedules, and out-of-state visitors currently must quarantine for 14 days upon arrival. As of now, the earliest possible Alaskan cruises will depart in late July, missing over half of the peak summer vacation season.

A decade of growth has made tourism the area's largest private sector industry. That seasonal injection of jobs and dollars has buttressed a local economy facing the long-term decline of timber and oil revenue and the ups and downs of seasonal fishing. "Anybody in Ketchikan that wants a job in the summer can have one," says Patti Mackey, president and CEO of Visit Ketchikan. At least, that was the case until coronavirus stopped the cruise ships.

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<https://www.citylab.com/life/2020/05/cruise-industry-coronavirus-tourism-job-economic-development/611854/?preview=ks3LC0z5-PVzrdUmjHj63nmd3xM#>

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