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Residents push back on planned cruise ship visits to Yorktown

Whitney Pipkin

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The view of the York River in Yorktown, VA, will include a 16-deck cruise ship when it makes three visits to the town in June 2024.

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A cruise ship carrying about 3,000 people is planning to anchor in the York River on three occasions next summer, giving travelers the option to visit Virginia's "historic triangle" of Yorktown, Jamestown and Williamsburg by water (and bus).

But not everyone in Yorktown is thrilled about it. Some of the fewer than 300 residents living in the small historic area next to Yorktown's beach and national battlefields find a 16-deck Princess Cruises ship out of character for the quaint town where the final major battle of the American Revolutionary War was fought.

These residents are also concerned that a three-visit pilot project next year could quickly balloon into more visits. The potential environmental footprint of even larger ships could be even greater in the future.

"We are not against tourism or cruise ships in general," Yorktown residents Elizabeth Wilkins and Jacques van Monfrans wrote in an opinion article on behalf of a newly formed group called Preserve Yorktown. "It is the sheer scale of these large ships and their inevitable large impact that concerns us."



Princess Cruises plans to bring its 2,200-passenger, 16-deck *Island Princess* to Yorktown, VA, for three one-day visits in summer 2024. (Courtesy of Princess Cruises)

Princess Cruises is a smaller subsidiary of Carnival Cruise Lines, which operates a fleet of 15 ships. The ships range in capacity from 2,000 to 3,600 passengers and about 1,000 crew members. For comparison, the Royal Caribbean's new *Icon of the Sea*, billed as the world's largest cruise ship, will carry 7,600 guests and 2,350 crew members when it launches next year.

Yorktown is already a port of call for much smaller American Cruise Lines ships, which carry 170 passengers at a time. Larger cruise ships visiting this region of Virginia typically come from Norfolk, VA, which has **a terminal for them**.

Princess Cruises **announced its plans in February** to visit Yorktown for the first time in 2024. Initially, the cruise company planned five one-day visits to Yorktown, three from its 2,200-passenger *Island Princess* and two from its 3,080-passenger *Emerald Princess*. These cruises would be part of its "American Heritage" and "Canada & Colonial America" trips, ranging from 10 to 14 days in length, with other stops in places like New York City, Boston and Charleston.

But during an informational meeting in Yorktown on Aug. 14, Princess Cruises representatives spoke only about the *Island Princess* making three Yorktown visits next June. A Princess Cruises spokesman later confirmed that visits from the larger *Emerald Princess* are no longer planned for 2024.

Princess Cruises spokesman Vance Gulliksen said via email that the company made the change "at the request of [Yorktown] community leaders to avoid visits on weekends and holidays."

By the week of the August meeting, the Preserve Yorktown group had started **an online petition** opposing any cruise ship visits to Yorktown. By the end of the month, the petition had garnered 5,000 signatures.

Public input

Yorktown residents Barbara Luck and Alyssa Adams were alarmed about the idea of a 204-foot-tall cruise ship coming to Yorktown when they learned about it in February. The ship is more than twice as tall as the Coleman Memorial Bridge that carries U.S. Route 17 across the York River to Gloucester Point. They didn't know where the nearly 1,000-foot-long ship would anchor or how it would manage getting so many visitors in and out of town.

They were also concerned about the impact of such a large ship on local air and water quality. Above all, residents said they wanted to have their concerns and questions addressed in a public forum. When they asked members of the York County Board of Supervisors for more information about the cruise company's plans, "they repeatedly said to us through the first half of this year that they didn't know anything," Luck said.

Yet, by the **end of May**, customers could begin buying tickets online for three different *Island Princess* trips in June 2024 with one-day stops at Yorktown.



A sign in Yorktown, VA, expresses opposition for a pilot project by Princess Cruises to visit the town three times in June 2024.



Tourists and locals visit a small beach along the York River in historic Yorktown, VA.
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The Preserve Yorktown group began obtaining documents through a Virginia Freedom of Information Act request that showed some board members did know about the cruise company’s plans as far back as December 2022. That’s when the chair and vice chair of the Board of Supervisors sent a letter to their representative in Virginia’s General Assembly requesting “a \$15 million special appropriation for the initial phase to support this major cruise line tourism commitment to Yorktown.”

The letter said Princess Cruises intends to run 2024 visits with the help of tender boats — smaller boats that would run visitors from the cruise ship to a public pier on the shore — with plans to eventually build a new pier for cruise ships at the privately owned Watermen’s Museum campus. The double-swing Coleman Bridge across the York River would need to open more frequently to allow the *Island Princess* to reach such a pier.

The county board members seem to be getting what they asked for. A **2023 amendment** to the state budget sets aside \$7.5 million in 2024 and another \$7.5 million in 2025 for the Virginia Port Authority to support “a cruise ship port-of-call location and related visitor support and tourism on the York River at Yorktown.”



Yorktown, VA, residents (from left) Elizabeth Wilkins, Jacques van Monfrans and Barbara Luck helped to form a group called Preserve Yorktown, which opposes plans by Princess Cruises to visit the town three times in June 2024.

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The funds are contingent on there being an agreement in 2023 with at least one cruise ship company planning to visit. The amendment also states that a workgroup and outreach efforts should involve stakeholders in the region and that project plans should demonstrate a positive return to the state for its investment.

Chad Green, who represents Yorktown on the county Board of Supervisors, said in an email that the board does not have jurisdiction over the cruise line or any agreements it makes with private entities like the nonprofit Watermen's Museum. Overall, he said the county should measure the success of the initial cruise ship venture by how well the county can preserve both "quality of life in the village and a steady stream of positive net income for the community."

Green, who is currently running as a Republican for Virginia's 69th District in the House of Delegates, said he could see both sides of the cruise ship debate. While the cruise ships will bring additional tourists to the area, he said, "I share many environmental concerns as well as concerns that large cruise ships may destroy all the things that we love about Yorktown."

Cruise ships run their engines around the clock and traditionally burn heavy fuel oil for power, which emits nitrogen oxides and sulfur oxides. Tougher 2020 standards from the International Maritime Organization requiring cruise ships to reduce sulfur emissions have caused companies like Princess Cruises to add scrubbing systems that greatly reduce pollution but don't eliminate it.

Princess Cruises' head of communications, Vicki Johnson, noted at the August meeting that the company doesn't "have the best track record in the world" when it comes to the environment. Princess was convicted of felony charges and fined \$40 million in 2017 for deliberately dumping oil-contaminated waste from one of its vessels. The U.S. Department of Justice said it was the largest criminal fine ever issued for intentional pollution from a ship. The company was fined another \$20 million between 2019 and 2022 for violating its probation terms.

Padgett said the company has since spent hundreds of millions of dollars to make its ships "the most sustainable engineered machines that exist," citing reductions in food waste and "closed-loop" systems for treating other forms of waste.

Full steam ahead

Not long after the Preserve Yorktown group started a petition and began staking “No Princess” signs in yards, Princess Cruises organized an informational meeting. The meeting, which took place at the American Revolutionary Museum on Aug. 14, was attended only by those who had received invitations and RSVP’d, though a recording of it was later posted to **Yorktown’s tourism website**. Attendees could not ask questions publicly but could ask questions at booths manned by company representatives after the presentation.

The meeting included cameos by TV conservationist Jeff Corwin and Jill Whelan, an actress from the 1970s and ’80s TV series *The Love Boat*. Both are paid ambassadors for Princess Cruises.

Princess Cruises’ President John Padgett explained at the meeting that he is a Virginia native who grew up in the Yorktown area, lifeguarding at the town’s beach as a youth. When people around the world ask him where he’s from, “I say, ‘Yorktown, where independence was born.’”



Statues in Yorktown, VA, highlight the major battle fought there during the American Revolution. That's part of the selling point by Princess Cruises, which plans to visit the small town as part of its “American Heritage” and “Canada & Colonial America” trips in 2024.

Whitney Pipkin

It’s always bothered him that people seem to know about Williamsburg but not Yorktown, he said. And he sees his cruise line as a way to change that.

“Yorktown is historic, but it doesn’t have access,” he said, noting the distance to international airports and traffic woes of Virginia’s Tidewater region. “That’s the problem Princess Cruises solves. We insert guests directly — via the deepwater characteristics of the river — into the commerce engine and then take them away.”

For Princess Cruises’ three one-day visits in 2024, the ship will anchor well offshore to accommodate its 26-foot draft. Passengers will be shuttled on much smaller 90-passenger tenders to the Yorktown waterfront, where buses will take them to various destinations. Padgett said about two-thirds of the ship’s 2,200 passengers typically go ashore and that the tenders allow daytime visitors to trickle in at a steady pace.

Some county documents reflect plans to eventually construct a long pier from the only privately owned property along Yorktown’s waterfront at the Watermen’s Museum upstream from the Coleman Bridge. But both Princess Cruises and Steve Ormsby, president of the Watermen’s Museum, have backed away from discussing details.



County documents indicate plans toward building a new pier for cruise ships in Yorktown, VA, at the privately owned Watermen’s Museum campus.

Whitney Pipkin

“We do have an ability to put a pier out there, but it would be expensive to put one out there that is capable of supporting a cruise ship,” Ormsby said. “It’s a possibility, but no funding has been reached.”

Meanwhile, at the Aug. 14 meeting, Princess Cruises presented Ormsby with a \$5,000 check to help pay for educational programs at the nonprofit Waterman’s Museum.

At the meeting, Padgett said building a relationship between the cruise company and a new destination is “a multiple decade journey.”

“My guests have to love Yorktown and Yorktown has to love my guests. That’s what we’re hoping to do with the three [visits] next summer,” he said. “My hope is that people love it. But if it doesn’t [work out], then we won’t come back.”

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