



## Cruise industry feels the pinch



**Fiona Carruthers** *AFR Travel Editor*

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As the \$45 billion global cruise industry continues to feel the shocks of [coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), closer to home, luxury Sydney travel agency Mary Rossi Travel spent the past week rewriting newsletters and itineraries, deftly tweaking their promoted destinations.

"Australians are definitely still travelling – they're just flying over the top of Asia and going straight into Europe, or heading across the pond to New Zealand to stay in a lodge," says the agency's owner, Claudia Rossi Hudson.



New Zealand's looking good. A hop across the pond is increasingly popular with travellers keen to steer clear of Asia. Australia's Baillie Lodges have just bought famed Huka Lodge on the North Island. Huka Lodge Taupo

She adds that cruise bookings are down 5 to 10 per cent. "The thing in travel today is people have so many choices, so it's easy to opt for something different.

"There's been slightly less interest in booking a cruise over the past week – however, I'd qualify that by saying most of our clients still intend to cruise later this year; they're more delaying booking – waiting for the worst of the virus to clear, then they'll decide."

It's a pattern occurring in travel agencies the world over as coronavirus continues to disrupt business as usual, with *The New York Times* reporting cruise bookings are generally down 15 per cent.

Certainly the effects on the industry have been distressingly visible with Diamond Princess now halfway through its two-week quarantine period in Japan. So far, 175 of the 3700 people on board Diamond Princess have tested positive for coronavirus.

On Friday, [Cambodian authorities allowed](#) 1455 guests and 802 crew to disembark from MS Westerdam in Sihanoukville, in the country's south-west on the Gulf of Thailand, after 20 samples taken onboard Westerdam were all confirmed negative for coronavirus.

Westerdam is operated by the Holland America Line; the ship had been stranded in the South China Sea for days, with a number of countries, including Thailand, Japan and South Korea refusing to allow it to dock.



Emergency workers disembark the Diamond Princess, docked in Yokohama, Japan, since February 3. **Bloomberg**

Meanwhile, as frustration and fear continue to mount on board Diamond Princess, Japanese health officials are planning a voluntary disembarkation of guests within the next few days.

Full refunds have been guaranteed to passengers on both ships; both are operated by companies belonging to the British-American Carnival Corporation, the world's largest leisure travel company.

Another curve ball sparked by the virus is ships changing course. Early last week, Cunard's Queen Mary 2 was diverted from its Asian itinerary (which had included Hong Kong) to sail into the West Australian port of Fremantle to begin an Australian itinerary.

Time will tell how many more ships might be affected. The industry's international representative body, Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), has banned anyone who has been in China (including Hong Kong) or Macau to board their member ships, which include all the big lines.

Royal Caribbean and Norwegian Cruise Lines have also banned all citizens from China from sailing with them for the month of February.

"Any guests holding a Chinese, Hong Kong or Macau passport, regardless of when they were there last, will not be allowed to board our ships," a statement from Royal Caribbean said.

Commenting on this, and the Australian government's controversial decision to extend the Chinese travel ban until February 22, Mrs Rossi Hudson said "if the virus doesn't clear up in a couple of months, it could be a very real problem for our cruise industry", with the southern hemisphere cruise season starting in September.



A Cambodian man holds his national flag in front of the MS Westerdam, owned by Holland America Line. It docked in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, on Friday. AP

"Despite all the negative things around the ban on Chinese nationals and the understandable controversy it causes, on the other hand, these bans on movement are actually building confidence that we'll be OK here in Australia."

The Australian Tourism Industry Council has requested another \$76 million tourism relief package from the federal government on top of its existing \$76 million bushfire relief fund.

A record 9.3 million tourists came to Australia last year, with China the largest source country with more than 1.4 million visitors.

"ATIC believes this unprecedented state of affairs impacting the Australian tourism industry requires a further necessary and immediate investment of \$76 million," executive director Simon Westaway said.

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