

Coronavirus outbreak

Major cruise lines pull out of Asia for rest of season

Sailings from Singapore cancelled even as many ports suspend entry for cruise ships

Tiffany Fumiko Tay

Major cruise lines are cancelling their sailings from Singapore or pulling out of Asia entirely for the remainder of the season, putting the brakes on one of the region's fastest-growing tourism sectors. Some cancellations have come within the last several days, as more ports in the region shut their doors to cruise ships amid fears over the spread of the coronavirus.

Celebrity Cruises told The Straits

Times yesterday that it will be moving its Celebrity Millennium cruise ship to the United States three months earlier than planned.

"Up until today we had not intended to cancel the remaining season in Asia. However, due to continual and unpredictable changes in travel restrictions and port closures, we feel this is the best decision for the health and safety of all," a spokesman said.

Its Celebrity Constellation voyages on March 2 and 17, originally scheduled to disembark and em-

bark in Singapore, will now make a round trip from Dubai instead.

Royal Caribbean said two sailings on Quantum of the Seas, due to depart Singapore tomorrow and on Feb 24, have been cancelled in the light of "current regional travel conditions". "The Singapore market remains of great importance to us and we look forward to returning there very soon," a spokesman said.

The flurry of cancellations comes after a cruise ship which left Hong Kong on Feb 1 was turned away from Japan, Guam, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand, despite assurances by operator Holland America that there were no infected passengers on board.

After nearly two weeks at sea, the

MS Westerdam, carrying more than 2,000 passengers and crew members, received permission to dock at the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville yesterday morning. A spokesman said no Singaporeans were on board.

Ports in Hong Kong and South Korea have also suspended entry for cruise ships despite heightened screening and sanitation measures put in place by operators.

Travellers who had booked a regional cruise on the Sapphire Princess, due to depart from Marina Bay Cruise Centre yesterday, were given short notice of its cancellation.

Quality assurance inspector Matt Strine, who arrived in Singapore from the United States on Sunday,

said: "We found out less than 24 hours before we were to depart that it was cancelled via e-mail... We were really looking forward to it."

He will instead spend two nights on Sentosa before returning home, said Mr Strine, 43, who is on his first visit to Singapore. "It's a beautiful city. If not for the cruise problem, this would have been the vacation of a lifetime," he said.

The Diamond Princess remains under quarantine off the coast of Japan, with more than 200 passengers now confirmed to have the virus.

Norwegian Cruise Line said it has cancelled all Asian itineraries for the Norwegian Spirit from April 15 to Dec 7.

A 24-day voyage departing from Cape Town, South Africa, on March 22 will also now end in Greece instead of Singapore, with an extra three days added to the itinerary.

At least one cruise operator has added Singapore to the list of countries where recent visitors will require additional screening to board its vessels. This comes after the Republic, the country with the highest number of confirmed cases outside China, raised its disease outbreak response to orange last Friday.

British-American cruise line Cunard has also said the Queen Mary 2 will skip a scheduled stop in Singapore this month.

Ms Annie Chang, director of cruise at the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), said Singapore's cruise terminals remain open, though arriving ships must meet Singapore's entry requirements.

While it is too early to determine the full impact of the virus outbreak, Singapore is in a good position to recover, given the sector's strong growth and a diverse range of cruise brands and markets, she said.

The growth potential for cruises in Asia remains bright, said Ms Chang, with the number of cruise passengers sailing in South-east Asia expected to grow to reach an estimated 4.5 million by 2035.

Singapore, positioned as an Asian cruise hub, "remains well-poised to capture that, due to our geographical location and good infrastructure", she said.

The STB on Tuesday projected a 25 per cent to 30 per cent drop in visitor arrivals this year as the global spread of the coronavirus continues to batter the tourism sector.

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Japan to allow elderly passengers off cruise ship with 44 new cases

YOKOHAMA • Japan said yesterday that it would allow some elderly passengers off a quarantined cruise ship and into government-designated lodging, as the number of coronavirus cases on the vessel jumped to 218.

Thousands of passengers and crew on the Diamond Princess – the single largest cluster of infected people outside China – face several more days of quarantine, with many taking to social media to voice their concerns.

Those working on the ship have been reluctant to speak to reporters for fear of losing their jobs, but two crew members broke their silence in a video broadcast by Indian media yesterday.

"We are scared that if the infection is spreading, it is spreading so fast that we could also become affected," Ms Sonali Thakkar, a ship security officer, said in the video clip broadcast by NDTV.

Japan's Health Minister Katsunobu Kato said there were 44 new cases, including one crew member, arising from an additional 221 tests.

He also said some elderly passen-



Left: Passengers on the deck of the Diamond Princess, which has the single largest cluster of infected people outside China. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Right: The Westerdam arriving in Sihanoukville, on Cambodia's southern coast, yesterday. It had been turned away from several Asian ports. PHOTO: REUTERS



gers would be allowed off the ship if they test negative for the coronavirus. Those who opt to leave will be moved to government facilities to wait out a quarantine that is set to last until Feb 19.

Captain Stefano Ravera said: "The Ministry of Health has already tested guests 80 years or older who are staying in a cabin without a balcony, and those 80 years or older with chronic medical conditions."

Another cruise ship, the MS Westerdam, blocked from several Asian ports over concerns that a passenger could be infected with the virus, arrived off Cambodia yesterday. The ship was supposed to take its

1,455 passengers on a dream 14-day cruise around East Asia. But it was turned away from Japan, Guam, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand over fears of the epidemic.

Cruise operator Holland America

has insisted there are no cases of the virus on board, and China ally Cambodia announced on Wednesday that the ship would be able to dock in Sihanoukville, on its southern coast. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

President Halimah urges S'poreans to support healthcare workers

Clement Yong and Cheryl Tan

President Halimah Yacob has urged Singaporeans to stand behind the country's healthcare workers in the light of reports that some have been poorly treated.

Madam Halimah noted in a Facebook post yesterday that "it is up to us as individuals in our daily interactions with them to show our appreciation, support and empathy".

Her remarks came as Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said on Wednesday that showing nurses and doctors appreciation could "give them a morale boost to continue the fight".

The issue of how Singaporeans treat healthcare staff has gained attention in recent days, with several widely shared posts about people avoiding them on MRT trains circulating on social media.

Madam Halimah wrote: "It is really painful to read and hear about how our front-line healthcare workers are treated... Remember that they too are human beings and worry about their own health and that of their families as they plod on daily to take care of other people's family members."

"They had to cast aside their own fears and valiantly serve the ill out of a sense of duty and compassion."

Some healthcare workers have said that people in public spaces are giving them a wide berth when they are in uniform and that some private-hire drivers have been reluctant to pick them up. Some even said they are considering changing out of their uniforms after their shifts to put others more at ease.

Madam Halimah added in her

Facebook post: "Why then do some of us make their lives so difficult at a time when we need them the most? As I've said before, how we respond to this crisis defines us as a people... Let's do it the Singaporean way."

Earlier in the day, the President visited Christalite Methodist Home in Marsiling Drive, and interacted with the welfare home's elderly residents during their therapy sessions. She also distributed hygiene products including disinfectant liquid and hand sanitiser.

In a separate Facebook post after her visit, Madam Halimah wrote: "A collective community effort is important especially in helping the vulnerable groups in our society who may not have access to resources."

She had said on Wednesday that the President's Challenge, an annual event that mobilises resources to help the less fortunate, will be donating \$250,000 to the Courage Fund to further support vulnerable groups during this period.

Meanwhile, people and groups across the island have been rallying behind nurses and other healthcare staff. Some have penned them handwritten notes, while many Grab drivers said they are keen to join a new service called GrabCare to help medical workers get to and from healthcare facilities.

Donations have also started pouring in to funds that go to coronavirus patients, healthcare workers and their families.

The Government said on Wednesday that one million masks will be distributed to general practitioners and specialists in private practice, their staff, as well as their patients.

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A nurse (right) donning the new face shield prototype which comes with a frame that leverages 3D-printing technology, while another wears the face visor that healthcare staff can currently opt for in lieu of wearing protective goggles. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Pilot tests for prototype face shield to replace goggles

Vanessa Liu

For healthcare professionals working on the front lines, donning protective gear such as N95 masks and goggles, though necessary, can be uncomfortable and cumbersome.

Ms Lin Ying, 38, who works as a nurse at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), said: "After prolonged use, the goggles and masks, which put pressure on the nose bridge, can cause pain."

The lenses of the goggles also

tend to fog up, reducing visibility for the wearer and even resulting in giddiness at times, added Ms Lin, who wears the protective equipment for two to three hours on average when she tends to infected patients.

These problems prompted Dr Shawn Vasoo, senior consultant and clinical director of the NCID, to conceptualise the prototype of a face shield that may replace the protective goggles, together with staff from the Centre for Healthcare Innovation, NCID and Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH).

The shield – which consists of a clear plastic sheet held up by a spectacle frame, an elastic band or a Velcro strip – protects the wearer's face during risky procedures such as the suctioning of bodily fluids that might be potentially infectious.

Made using 3D-printing, these prototypes were modelled after an older face shield used during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) outbreak in 2003. They were showcased to the media at the Centre for Healthcare Innovation's Living Lab yesterday.

"When people are uncomfortable with the equipment they use, they start adjusting it, which might lead to contamination, and pose a certain risk to the healthcare worker," said Dr Vasoo.

The prototypes are slated to be rolled out for pilot testing in three departments within the hospital on Feb 21.

Currently, healthcare staff at TTSH and NCID can opt for a visor which comes with a surgical mask in lieu of protective goggles.

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