

INSIGHT CRUISE INSIGHT

# Is the 2021 Alaska cruise season in trouble?

By Johanna Jainchill   | Jan 26, 2021

The Carnival Miracle cruising in Alaska. 2019 was the last year ships carried passengers in the region, and the 2021 season may be shortened or constrained.



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We're less than one month into 2021, and people are already wondering if the upcoming Alaska cruise season, which was completely canceled in 2020, is in jeopardy.

Last week Royal Caribbean International said the Quantum of the Seas would stay in Asia this summer rather than reposition to Alaska, where it was scheduled to operate.

Princess Cruises and Holland America Line earlier this month canceled early Alaska sailings, thereby postponing the season until mid-May and even into June. Windstar last month canceled its 2021 Alaska season, and Cunard decided last year that the Queen

Elizabeth would not cruise in Alaska this year.

The threat of a second straight year without a cruise season -- or even a severely reduced season -- could spell disaster for Alaskan communities that rely on cruise tourism and would be another blow to the lines and travel advisors who depend on Alaska, a popular and premium-priced cruise product.

Among the challenges facing a cruise restart in the region is that large ships come under the jurisdiction of both Canada and the U.S., because U.S. law, the Passenger Vessel Services Act (PVSA), mandates that foreign-flagged ships call at least one foreign port on any U.S. itinerary. As of now, Transport Canada's cruise ban extends through March 1, but the agency has extended it continually throughout the pandemic.

In the U.S., meanwhile, the CDC put a path in place for cruising to resume, but it is proving to be a long and winding one: cruise lines continue to extend their suspensions to meet the demand of the CDC's Conditional Sailing Order, and many are already paused through April.

Mark Conroy, Silversea Cruises' managing director of the Americas, said that while everything will depend on Canada's reopening and the CDC's approval of cruise operations, "there will most likely be some discussion, if Canada does not open, to set up making technical calls whereby the ship enters Canada, has its documents cleared and sails without any guests disembarking, which would help to be compliant" with the PVSA.

CLIA said that if Canada's restrictions appear likely to remain in effect "for an indeterminate period, the cruise industry may consider asking for temporary relief from the PSVA."

Tom Garrett, a former director of tourism for Alaska who now owns Union Hill Travel in Kansas City, Mo., which specializes in travel to Alaska, said that although it's too early to tell what will happen overall, since most lines have cut out May and the first few days of June, "that means a 135 day season has been reduced by 26%."

Given the high startup costs for companies on the land side in the state, Garrett said "there is going to be a point where it will not be worth opening the land assets. And when that is the case, I would expect the cross-Gulf cruises to be canceled for the whole season.

"I think that the Southeast-only cruises [seven days from Vancouver and/or Seattle] can be left on the schedule for quite a while. So I don't think the entire Alaska cruise season will be lost this year, but I think there is a very good possibility that it will be much diminished in size and scope."

He hopes that if 100 million vaccine doses are administered in the next 100 days, the goal set by the Biden administration, "then we will be at a point where the majority of the cruising age population has been vaccinated by the end of April."

According to CLIA Alaska, more than 1.4 million people on 43 ships had been projected to spend \$793 million in 2020. A report published in October by the Federal Maritime Commission found that Alaska had suffered a revenue loss from the lack of cruising last year greater than any other state on a per capita basis.

In 2019, 1.3 million people came to Alaska to take a cruise, "twice as many people than the number who live in the state," said commissioner Louis Sola. "With the suspension of the cruise season, the economic activity of 1.3 million was wiped out of the Alaskan economy for the year."

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