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It will cruise through the perfect storm, again. Be ready.

Brad Paisley, an American country artist, recorded the song «Perfect Storm», talking about its difficulties, in 2014. Too late. Two years earlier, someone with almost the same surname, Tony Peisley, had provided a report revealing (almost) everything on its title: questioning whether ‘Cruising through the perfect storm’ is possible, Tony provided the answer as regards the one able to manage so: cruise shipping.

Is this time different? Should we revisit the catchphrase coined by Tony due to COVID19? Or, at least, qualify the answer to it? I would invite you to explore this in the midst of the crisis. True, uncertainties are many. Yes, COVID19 has already qualified another commonly used catchphrase: “cruise shipping has experienced 30 years of uninterrupted growth”. Adding “Until the COVID19 days” is essential.

With cruise shipping and ports being in the spotlight, many continue to doubt. When my PortEconomics colleagues Aimilia Papachristou and George Vaggelas and yours truly started producing PortGraphics on cruise lines announcements regarding their intended days of return, social media postings received some sceptical reactions. This is not unsubstantiated. There are cases where a cruise vessel remains the location that has produced more COVID19 cases than any other place or location in the country or even continent (Australia). Then, within a context of mishandling of several incidents on the multiple outbreaks on-board cruise vessels, exaggerating negative tabloid titles are always easy to develop. Or at least as easy as (un)intentionally inflated ‘positive headlines’ in normal conditions.

There are though six grounds to argue that cruise will cruise this storm again – even though shipbuilders have been reportedly nervous about the prospects of new orders or on-time deliveries of new builds.

First, the love of a broad community of people for being on-board. For them, a cruise is (justifiably or not) the ‘time of their lives’. It is also the love of people who have already been on-board. The so-called repeaters are the militants. They will keep heading to another cruise with another cruise line every now and then. A cruiser will cruise over four times in his/her life. Not surprisingly to many, there are already reports that bookings for 2021 are already on the rise, as well as news that, between two offered alternatives, cruisers prefer vouchers for future cruise itineraries rather than direct refunding for a canceled cruise.

Second, the impressive size of source markets comparing to the number of those cruising in the pre-COVID19 days. Last year was the first year ever that almost 30 million people decided to take a cruise. The

potential and the low penetration in too many countries is the “bread and butter” for a rich industry that employs, undoubtedly, some of the most sophisticated marketing campaigns and promotion mechanisms.

Third, the ‘difficult to be ignored’ impact of cruising. Tell me whatever you want. Challenge however strongly you wish the magnitude of the impact. And you might be right. Still, the impact to our ports, and foremost to our communities and port-cities is difficult to fade away ‘just like the wind’. Many people at the high-streets will feel the costs, while many local economies can hardly afford it.

Fourth, the ‘family approach’ that dominates the industry. This is evident in the 63 vessels that have already found a place to harbour in the Mediterranean part of Europe alone. Caring has extended reciprocally; the donations and humanitarian aid of cruise lines are indicative and, at least, as convincing as in the past. The reply of all cruise industries to COVID19 is just a reflection of the type of bonding that has developed in the cruise world. Those involved in it have certainly experienced the connection between cruise lines, ports, and stakeholders.

Fifth, and foremost, there is the impressive levels of adaptation that cruise shipping has already demonstrated in the past. The fact that neither the financial tsunami nor the Costa Concordia unfortunate accident was enough to challenge cruise growth in the turn of the previous decade is anything but a coincidence. Of course, we need to find what was wrong this time. Was it an operational failure as cruise lines jockey for increased profits? Or it is a regulatory failure that ignored the potential of a similar crisis? The absence of procedures, applicable protocols, and practices. Or in that case, was proved that the cruise world was just as unprepared as the rest of the world? In any case, adaptation seems inevitable and we can expect the return to be associated with new practices, adjusted procedures (i.e. related with sanitation measures for cruise passengers and crew, visits on-board, baggage handling, ship supplies, waste reception facilities, even port dues), sanitary provisions, essential innovation, and, (who knows?) even some temporal social distancing measures. Yet with the use of new technologies providing substantial adaptation potentials, and the financial capabilities of most if not all the 60 cruise brands, one might be confident that we will soon re-experience the growth and seemingly unstoppable globalisation of a remarkably resilient industry.

Ports need to be ready. Ready to welcome. Ready to adjust. Ready to implement. But also ready to reopen the discussion on the many pending issues on how to transform the forthcoming growth of cruise activities in our ports to one that will be environmental, societal, and economical sustainable. This is something that ports need to start preparing the soonest possible.

In this vein, cruise ports associations, whether global, regional, or sectoral, have a key role to play in advancing and assisting these adaptations (as does the scientific community). Besides, we already know that matching the three “Cs”, namely *Cruise*, *Cities*, *Crises* respectively, with a fourth “C” (*Corporate social responsibility*) in the light of the lessons learned by the fifth one (*COVID19 pandemic*) is too important for all.

ESPO keeps going – week 5

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And all these bring us to the sixth ground to wait for cruise to return. For the cruise world, the *Perfect Storm* is “a twisting turning adventure”. To RCCL, that provides in on four of its vessels “*It’s the time to put on your brave face, because there are plenty of thrills on the agenda. Get ready to tackle hair-raising twists, turns and adrenaline..- you’re in for the ride of your life*”. Ports should be up to the challenges that will follow this ride.

Stay well, keep safe!!