

Outbreak hits Norway cruise ship, could spread along coast

3 August 2020, by Jan M. Olsen



Norwegian cruise ship MS Roald Amundsen moored in Tromsø, Norway, Monday Aug. 3, 2020. After 40 people, including four passengers and 26 crew members on the Norwegian cruise ship have been tested positive for the coronavirus, the operator says it was stopping for all cruises with its three vessels. The 40 people were admitted to the University Hospital of North Norway in Tromsø, north of the Arctic Circle, where the empty ship has docked. (Terje Pedersen/NTB Scanpix via AP)

A Norwegian cruise ship line halted all trips and apologized Monday for procedural errors after a coronavirus outbreak on one ship infected at least 5 passengers and 36 crew members. Health authorities fear the ship also could have spread the virus to dozens of towns and villages along Norway's western coast.

The confirmed virus cases from the MS Roald Amundsen raise new questions about safety on all cruise ships during a pandemic even as the devastated cruise ship industry is pressing to resume sailings after chaotically shutting down in March.

The Hurtigruten cruise line was one of the first companies to resume sailing during the pandemic,

starting cruises to Norway out of northern Germany in June with a single ship, then adding cruises in July to the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard.

The 41 people on the MS Roald Amundsen who tested positive have been admitted to the University Hospital of North Norway in Tromsø, north of the Arctic Circle, where the ship currently is docked. The cruise line said it suspended the ship and two others - MS Fridtjof Nansen and MS Spitsbergen - from operating for an indefinite period.

"A preliminary evaluation shows that there has been a failure in several of our internal procedures," Hurtigruten CEO Daniel Skjeldam said in a statement. He added the company that sails along Norway's picturesque coast between Bergen in the south and Kirkenes in the north is "now in the process of a full review of all procedures."

It has contacted passengers who had been on the MS Roald Amundsen for its July 17-24 and July 25-31 trips from Bergen to of Svalbard, which is known for its polar bears. The ship had 209 guests on the first voyage and 178 guests on the second. All other crew members tested negative.

But since the cruise line often acts like a local ferry, traveling from port to port along Norway's western coast, the virus may not have been contained onboard. Some passengers disembarked along the route and may have spread the virus to their local communities.

A total of 69 municipalities in Norway could have been affected, Norwegian news agency NTB reported.

The city of Tromsø is urging anyone who traveled on the ship or had any contact with it to get in touch with health authorities.



Crew members clean on board Hurtigruten's vessel MS Roald Amundsen, docked in Tromsø, Norway, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2020. Over 30 crew members and an unconfirmed number of passengers have so far tested positive for the coronavirus after two international cruises which resumed operation recently, since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. (Terje Pedersen/NTB scanpix via AP)

The Norwegian government announced Monday it was tightening the rules for cruise ships by banning ships with more than 100 passengers from docking in Norwegian harbors and disembarking passengers and crew members.

The ban will be in place for two weeks and only applies to cruise ships, not ferry boats. Health Minister Bent Høeie said the situation aboard the Hurtigruten ship served as "the background" for the decision.

Police in Norway said they would open an investigation to find out whether any laws had been broken.

It's not yet how the MS Roald Amundsen outbreak began. NTB reported that 33 of the infected crew members came from the Philippines and the others came from Norway, France and Germany. The passengers were from all over the world.

Skjeldam said cruise ship officials did not know they should have notified passengers after the first infection was reported Friday, adding that they followed the advice of the ship's doctors.

But Line Vold of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health said its advice was to inform passengers and crew as soon as possible so they could monitor their health and go into quarantine or isolation, if needed.

"We have made mistakes. On behalf of all of us in Hurtigruten, I am sorry for what has happened. We take full responsibility," Skjeldam said.

Hurtigruten says the operations of three ships—MS Roald Amundsen, MS Fridtjof Nansen and MS Spitsbergen—have been halted for an indefinite period.

In Italy, the Costa Crociere cruise ship line said three crew members from two ships in Civitavecchia, near Rome, have tested positive for the coronavirus. The cruise company said two assigned to the Costa Deliziosa were hospitalized and a third, assigned to the Costa Favolosa, was in isolation on the ship.



A view of the Hurtigruten's vessel MS Roald Amundsen, docked in Tromsø, Norway, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2020. Over 30 crew members and an unconfirmed number of passengers have so far tested positive for the coronavirus after two international cruises which resumed operation recently, since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. (Terje Pedersen/NTB scanpix via AP)

The Italian cruise company, which is part of Carnival Corp. said the crews of both ships were

being screened "in view of the possible relaunch of our cruises, as soon as the government gives the authorization." The Cabinet was to meet on the matter Sunday.

Costa Crociere said that all crew members were tested for the virus before leaving their countries, then undergo a second test once they arrive in Italy, after which they are put under a two-week monitoring period.

Cruise lines stopped sailing in mid-March after several high-profile coronavirus outbreaks at sea. More than 710 people fell ill aboard Carnival's Diamond Princess cruise ship while it was quarantined off Japan and 13 people died.

The Cruise Lines International Association, which represents more than 50 companies and 95% of global cruise capacity, said the resumption of cruises has been extremely limited so far. The voyages taking place must have approval from and follow the requirements of national governments, the group said.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control, for example, is not allowing cruise ships in U.S. waters at least through September.

The industry association said it is still developing COVID-19-control procedures based on advice from governments and medical experts. Once the guidelines are finalized, member companies will be required to adopt them, CLIA said.

A German cruise ship last week set sail from Hamburg, testing procedures for how cruise ships can operate safely during the pandemic. The ship sailed with less than 50% capacity and only went on a four-day trip at sea with no stops at other ports.

In the South Pacific, some 340 passengers and crew are confined on a cruise ship in Tahiti after one traveler tested positive for the virus.

The commissariat for French Polynesia said all those aboard the Paul Gauguin cruise ship are being tested and will be kept in their cabins Monday pending the results.

The South Pacific archipelago started reopening to tourists last month, with a requirement that all visitors get tested before arriving and re-test themselves four days after entering.

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