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U.S. Coast Guard Cruise Ship Consumer Fact Sheet

U.S. Coast Guard

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By Unknown Author

Vessel Safety. Ocean-going cruise ships of U.S. registry must meet a comprehensive set of Coast Guard safety regulations and be inspected annually by the Coast Guard to check for compliance. The safety regulations cover such things as hull structure, watertight integrity, structural requirements to minimize fire hazards, equipment requirements for lifesaving, firefighting, and vessel control, and requirements pertaining to the safe navigation of the ship. If the ship passes its annual inspection, it is issued a Coast Guard Certificate of Inspection valid for one year. The certificate must be displayed where passengers can see it.

Today, nearly all the ocean cruise lines employ passenger ships registered under flags of various foreign countries. (Note: The law requires that cruise-ship advertising in the U.S. disclose the country of registry.) Each ship is subject to the vessel inspection laws of the country in which it is registered. However, as a condition of permitting the vessels to take on passengers at U.S. ports, the U.S. Coast Guard requires the ships to meet the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (referred to as SOLAS.) SOLAS and other international regulations also require compliance with stringent regulations regarding structural fire protection, firefighting and lifesaving equipment, watercraft integrity and stability, vessel control, navigation safety, crewing and crew competency, safety management and environmental protection.

To insure compliance with SOLAS, the Coast Guard examines the ship when it first goes into service at a U.S. port, with quarterly checks thereafter. The examinations emphasize structural fire safety and proper lifesaving equipment. Fire and abandon ship drills conducted by the ship's crew are witnessed, and operational tests are made on key equipment such as steering systems, fire pumps, and lifeboats. The Coast Guard has the authority to require correction of any deficiencies before allowing the ship to take on passengers at the U.S. port. The records of these examinations (called Control Verification Examinations) are open to the public at the Coast Guard Marine Safety Office (MSO) which conducted the examination. To do a search for a specific vessel, contact our Port State Information Exchange web site at: <http://psix.uscg.mil> (<http://psix.uscg.mil/>).

Crewmember Competency. On U.S. passenger vessels, licensed individuals and crew must meet standards for experience and training set forth in Coast Guard regulations. The Coast Guard can revoke or suspend the individual's license or merchant mariner's document for acts of misconduct or incompetence. On foreign-flag cruise ships trading in the U.S., SOLAS requires the vessel to be sufficiently and efficiently manned. The officers' licenses and the vessel's compliance with manning standards are checked as part of the Control Verification Examination.

Medical Care and Services Are Not Covered Coast Guard regulations and SOLAS generally focus on requirements for the safe navigation and design of the cruise ship itself. There are many aspects of the daily care of passengers and their on-board accommodation that are not covered by Government regulation. One example of this is medical care. The Coast Guard does not require that passenger vessels carry a ship's doctor. Most, if not all ocean-going passenger vessels today do provide a doctor and medical facilities in order to offer attractive and competitive service. Passengers should realize that the quality of their medical care is not guaranteed by Coast Guard regulations. If you are concerned about this aspect of life aboard a cruise ship, contact the cruise line or travel agent for the particulars of medical services provided, both at sea and while visiting foreign ports.

Emergency Drills. Coast Guard regulations and SOLAS require that the master of an ocean cruise ship periodically hold fire and lifeboat drills. They are intended not only to give the crew practice, but also to show the passengers how to act in the event of an emergency at sea. Passengers should participate fully in these drills. The timing and frequency of the drills depends in large part on the length of the voyage. On voyages that will last more than one week, the first drill will be held before the ship gets underway (passengers who embark at the last minute sometimes miss this drill), with additional drills at least once a week thereafter. On voyages of one week or less, the drills must be held within 24 hours after leaving port.

Coast Guard and international regulations also require a notice to be posted conspicuously in each passenger cabin or stateroom. The notice explains the following: How to recognize the ship's emergency signals (alarm bells and whistle signals are normally supplemented by announcements made over the ship's public address system); the location of life preservers provided for passengers in that stateroom (special

life preservers for children will be provided, if necessary, by the room steward); instructions and pictures explaining how to put on the life preserver; and the lifeboat to which passengers in that stateroom are assigned. (Note: Passengers need not be alarmed if they discover that the total number of persons on board a cruise ship (passengers + crew) exceeds the total capacity of the ship's lifeboats. Modern cruise ships carry a variety of survival craft. Passengers are invariably assigned to lifeboats or similar survival craft. The total capacity of all the survival craft on board will exceed the total number of persons on the vessel).

When fire and lifeboat drills are held, crew members from the stewards department are generally responsible for assisting and directing passengers in the drill. Direction signs showing the path to reach lifeboats are posted in passageways and stairways throughout the ship. The crewmember in charge of each lifeboat will muster the passengers assigned to that lifeboat, and give passengers any final instructions necessary in the proper method of donning and adjusting their life preservers. If there is any portion of the emergency procedures the passenger doesn't understand, they should question the crew until the instructions are clear and completely understood.

Sanitation and Cleanliness. Oversight of sanitary conditions on passenger vessels is the responsibility of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS). The USPHS conducts both scheduled and surprise inspections of passenger vessels in U.S. ports. The inspections focus on proper sanitation for drinking water, food storage, food preparation and handling, and general cleanliness. The USPHS will provide the public with results of inspections on individual vessels, and take reports of unsanitary conditions on individual vessels.

Vessels Are Responsible for Proper Trash Disposal. As part of its mission to protect the marine environment, the Coast Guard enforces regulations regarding ocean dumping from vessels. The regulations make it illegal to dump plastic refuse and garbage mixed with plastic into any waters, and restrict dumping of non-plastic trash and other forms of garbage. These regulations apply to all U.S. vessels wherever they operate (except in waters under exclusive jurisdiction of a State), and to foreign vessels operating in U.S. waters out to and including the Exclusive Economic Zone (200 miles off shore.)

Terminal Security. In accordance with Federal regulations, terminal operators and cruise lines share the primary responsibility for shoreside and shipboard security of passengers. The Coast Guard examines all security plans and can require improvements in their security measures. Passengers embarking on international voyages may expect to have their baggage searched or passed through screening devices before boarding. The terminal operator and cruise line have strict procedures for passenger identification and visitor control. Passengers who wish to have friends visit the ship prior to sailing should check with the cruise line well in advance. All these security measures are designed to prevent the introduction of unauthorized weapons and persons on the cruise ship.

Financial Responsibility. The Federal Maritime Commission requires that operators of passenger vessels carrying 50 or more passengers from a U.S. port must be financially capable of reimbursing their customers if the cruise is cancelled. The Commission also requires proof of ability to pay claims arising out of passenger injuries or death for which the ship operator may bear some liability. It is important to understand that the Commission does not have the legal authority to automatically secure these financial settlements for individual consumers. If a cruise is cancelled, or there is an injury incurred during the cruise, the consumer will have to initiate action on his or her own behalf against the cruise line.

HOW TO COMPLAIN

Vessel Safety: Persons who wish to complain about a safety-related matter they have observed on a cruise ship should contact the Coast Guard Marine Safety Office (MSO) responsible for the Control Verification Examination of the ship. Interested persons can get a referral to the appropriate MSO by calling the Coast Guard toll-free Consumer Hotline: 1-800-368-5647. The most popular ports for cruise ships are Miami, FL; Juneau, AK, and San Juan, PR. The Coast Guard MSO telephone numbers are: (305) 535-8705 (Miami); (907) 463-2450 (Juneau), and (787) 729-6800 (San Juan).

Sanitary Conditions: Reports of unsanitary conditions on a cruise ship can be made to: U.S. Public Health Service, Chief, Vessel Sanitation Program, National Center for Environmental Health, 1850 Eller Dr., Suite 101, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, 33316. Telephone: 954-356-6650.

Illegal Dumping: Passengers on cruise ships who observe any dumping of plastic at sea should report it to the [National Response Center](http://www.nrc.uscg.mil) (<http://www.nrc.uscg.mil>) by calling 1-800-424-8802 or the nearest Coast Guard MSO (to locate, call the Coast Guard Hotline.) A written report can be mailed to:

Commandant (G-MOR-3)
Response Operations Division
U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters
2100 Second Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20593-0001

Terminal Security: Persons who wish to complain about security procedures in a terminal, or report lax security should contact the Coast Guard Marine Safety Office. Interested persons can get a referral to the appropriate MSO by calling the Coast Guard toll-free hotline: 1-800-368-5647. (<https://www.consumeraffairs.com/>)

Cruise Cancellation and Financial Reimbursements: The Federal Maritime Commission cannot order a cruise line to reimburse passengers for cruise cancellations, or to pay claims for injuries or fatal accidents. However, to the extent they are able, Commission staff will try to assist individual consumers who are having trouble obtaining financial settlements in these areas. Contact: Office of Informal Inquiries and Complaints, Federal Maritime Commission, 800 North Capitol St., NW, Room 1052, Washington, D.C. 20573-0001 Telephone: 202-523-5807.

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