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Tales of Stowaway Virus and a Queasy Cruise

By DANA CANEDY

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla., Nov. 21 — Passengers on the Holland America Amsterdam cruise ship debarked at Port Everglades here this morning with more than the usual Caribbean vacation photographs and souvenirs.

Some had fevers and abdominal cramps and said they would need a vacation to recover from their vacation. Others, who managed to avoid a gastrointestinal virus, said they had a lot of stories to tell about spending 10 days on a sick ship.

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Harry and Florer the Amsterdam c Fort Lauderdale, ill on the cruise.

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"It was an adventure," said Kerry Fink, 41, who runs a small radio station in New York and was on the cruise with his wife Tammy, 37. "They had signs everywhere reminding us to wash our hands, and all the help was running around with plastic gloves."

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An outbreak of the Norwalk virus has hit the Amsterdam with such a vengeance that the Holland America Line is pulling the ship out of service for 10 days to try to disinfect it. More than 500 passengers and crew members have fallen ill on the ship's last four cruises.

The decision to stay in port came too late for Mary Ann McNulty.

"I took Tylenol and stayed in bed," said Ms. McNulty, a passenger from Harper Woods, Mich., who said she spent two days in her cabin with diarrhea and cramps. "Had I known, I wouldn't have gone on the cruise."

On the voyage that ended today, 64 passengers and 18 crew members out of 1,896 people aboard contracted the virus, which is spread by person-to-person contact and thrives in enclosed spaces. It clung stubbornly to doorknobs, tabletops and handrails despite aggressive disinfecting efforts.

Passengers and crew members came up with creative ways to stave off further spread of the virus. One man said he used his knuckles to push elevator buttons. Another carried a bottle of antibacterial solution in case someone touched him. Some people were leery of touching poker chips in the casino and forks in the dining room.

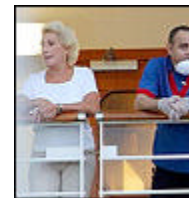
The crew closed the whirlpool to prevent the virus from spreading on the warm, damp deck. Instead of buffet service in the cafeteria, workers served passengers individually to cut down on the handling of platters of food. Salt shakers in the dining rooms were replaced with individual packets of salt and pepper.

One precaution drew an angry response from some passengers. A number of women complained that the professional "host dancers" who dance with single passengers to the music of the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra suddenly faded from the scene.

"They said the reason they canceled those dances was because of the contact from one to another, even if we wore gloves," said Margaret Tippens, 75, a passenger from New Orleans. "If I had known that the nightly host dancing with the big band would be canceled, I would have not gone on the cruise. That was the only reason I took that cruise."

Ms. Tippens and her friends partly filled their dance cards through the kindness of other passengers. "The men felt sorry for us," she said. "Some of them were married men and others were with their girlfriends."

The staff dispensed with part of the meet-and-greet with the ship's captain and crew that is a longstanding tradition on cruises. "The cordial custom of hand shaking will be suspended at each Holland America hosted party, and we urge all guests to follow this sanitary practice as well," said a letter given to passengers when the ship was at sea.



A worker on the Amsterdam, wearing a mask and plastic with passengers ship's owner will disinfecting it to Norwalk virus.

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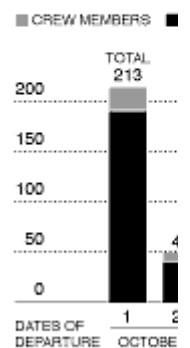
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FOR THE RECORD

Sick Bay

During the last four cruises ship Amsterdam contracted the Norwalk virus, six were crew members and 58 were passengers.



Source: Holland America

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"No one was shaking hands," said Gwen Roach, 69, an insurance agent from Pompano Beach. "Everyone was doing elbow to elbow."

Some passengers said just worrying about the virus was enough to make them queasy. "Whenever you felt a little woozy or tired, you're thinking, 'Am I getting sick?'" said Rivka Fischer, 54, of Toronto.

At Port Everglades, even people who had not been on the ship were taking precautions to avoid the virus. One woman arrived to pick up a friend from the ship wearing a surgical mask. A television reporter interviewed passengers wearing latex gloves. Some cabdrivers carried disinfectants to spray their car seats.

"I'll make them handle their luggage," said one cabdriver, who would give only his first name, Aristide. "I'm not going to touch anything, except for the money," he said. "I'll worry about that later."

A Holland America spokesman who met the ship tried to play down the problem. "Everybody's just fine," the spokesman, Erik Elvejord, said. "There is no epidemic."

As part of its 10-day cleanup, the company will replace pillows in all staterooms and pens and pencils throughout the ship. It will clean all bed covers, curtains, linens and blankets and sanitize all upholstery and hard surfaces. No permanent maintenance changes were announced.

An outbreak of a similar illness was reported today by Disney Cruise Line, which said about 100 passengers and crew members on the Magic had become sick, The Associated Press reported. The ship will be cleaned and disinfected at sea, the company said.

Holland America, which is based in Seattle and owned by the Carnival Corporation, based in Miami, has had problems with such outbreaks before. In August, the company pulled another ship, the Ryndam, out of service after passengers on a July cruise to Alaska contracted the virus. This month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention received reports of suspected Norwalk virus on Holland America's Statendam as it sailed to Hawaii.

Since 1997, the disease centers have received at least seven reports of Norwalk and other gastrointestinal viruses on board ships owned by several companies, including Princess Cruises and Disney.

Passengers today had mixed reactions about their experience on the Amsterdam and about Holland America's handling of the outbreak. Many said the company should have contacted them sooner and offered the option of taking another cruise or canceling their trips and receiving refunds. Instead, the company told passengers about the virus in a letter as they boarded the ship. The letter urged passengers to wash their hands frequently but made no mention of refunds or assistance with alternate

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vacation arrangements.

"I'm very angry that they did not give us the option to cancel," said Trudy Vincent, 75, of King of Prussia, Pa., who was traveling with a friend, Barbara Kiefel, 48, of Manalapan, N.J. "I'm going through chemotherapy, and that wrecks your immune system," Ms. Vincent said. She did not contract the virus.

Rose Abello, a spokeswoman for Holland America, said the company properly informed customers about the virus. "We had people in the terminal area to answer questions. And nobody, prior to board, said they didn't want to get on the ship."

Passengers said the cruise line was being disingenuous in suggesting that they had a choice to change their vacation plans.

"They told us about the virus as we entered the building," said Morley McDougal, a retired teacher from Calgary, Alberta, who was on the cruise with his wife, Marion. "Had I known beforehand I don't know if I would have canceled. We come 5,000 miles from here, and we were anxious to go on vacation."

Those confined to their cabins will receive refunds only for the days they were sick, the company said.

Other passengers took the outbreak in stride. "The whole thing, it was much ado about nothing," said Andre Feher, of Port St. Lucie, Fla., who was traveling with his wife, Stephanie. "We've gotten to travel all around the world, and we like this line."

Even passengers who were critical of Holland America said the crew did its best to make the trip enjoyable and contain the virus.

"They were everywhere, wiping banisters, vacuuming, spraying, washing windows," said Hal Mitrany, 65, an environmental engineer from Laguna Woods, Calif. "An effort was being made."

Still, not everyone was so sure they would soon be back on a Holland America cruise ship. "It will take me two or three days to cool down and get over this to think about it," Ms. Vincent said.

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