

Safety is one of the biggest priorities for cruise ship operators, yet a recent spate of high-profile incidents have demonstrated that even with the most thorough of preparations, the sea will always be dangerous and unpredictable. This has led critics to question whether the demand for bigger ships and unusual destinations has resulted in safety being compromised, and whether these incidents were the result not only of uncontrollable factors such as the weather, but also human failing. The industry is keen to defend itself, however, arguing that its safety procedures are continually renewed and updated to meet the highest possible standards.

With millions of satisfied passengers enjoying problem-free voyages every year, operators believe cruising is still one of the safest ways to travel.

Gerry Ellis, director of compliance and designated person ashore at The Yachts of Seabourn, considers good staff training to be the cornerstone of passenger safety. One of the biggest risk areas for any operator is fire, and Ellis believes the industry treats the issue with the appropriate level of precaution, with statutory regulations requiring crew members to undergo extensive training. 'Our officers and crew are our emergency services,' he says. 'Obviously it's not possible to call the fire brigade at sea, so

we need to make sure we are well trained in skills such as firefighting, emergency management, crowd control and lifesaving. Our onboard fire teams have as much equipment as those on shore, and they are trained and capable of using it.'

Modern ships are also designed with fire safety in mind, with sophisticated sprinkler systems and the ability to flood certain areas if necessary.

Rene Roussel, vice-president, nautical and compliance for Holland America Line, agrees that crew members should be trained to act quickly in the event of a problem, even if it means dealing with it on the spot. 'We teach our people that when there's a fire they should just put it out,' he

Safety first

115

Recent incidents at sea, along with increased travel to Arctic waters, have raised questions over the industry's safety procedures. Andrea Ashfield talks to P&O's **Chris Metson**, The Yachts of Seabourn's **Gerry Ellis**, Holland America's **Rene Roussel**, and ASOC's **Sian Prior** and **Ricardo Roura** about how far operators are going to protect their passengers.



explains. 'One person can quickly evaluate whether it's safe to proceed. Often the problem is just a trash can fire. We teach our crew that they can do things quickly, because the worst thing at sea is a fire.'

Training initiatives

Holland America has invested heavily in training, and for the last seven years its crew have taken part in regular safety programmes, which can be carried out either at sea or on land. Roussel believes that an increase in staff turnover across the industry makes these initiatives more important than ever. 'We're seeing a limit on the number of seafarers available to sail ships, especially with the baby boomer generation retiring,' he says. 'For a variety of reasons, going to sea is not the romantic career it used to be, so training is more important now and will be for many years to come.'

Communicating safety procedures to passengers is also a high priority, and it is vital that cruise operators use every opportunity to keep people informed. Chris Metson, fleet safety manager at P&O Cruises, believes that even though passengers appreciate the need for safety on board, it is necessary to make a continuous effort to get the message across. 'We have good attendance at the initial drill because it's a legal requirement,' he says. 'We encourage people who are on board for longer than a week to attend the muster station if they wish, although take-up is low. In addition, we have a safety film playing in the cabins on the day we embark.

Our new ship, *Ventura*, has interactive TV programming, which means passengers can't get into the system until they have watched the safety video. They can't ignore it; if they switch off halfway, it continues from the same point next time they switch on.'

Arguably, cruise operators cover safety in more depth and detail than the airline industry. 'We make our passengers take part in drill exercises when they come on board,' says Ellis. 'We take the names of those who don't attend, find out why and offer alternative information. Safety procedures are constantly on the televisions in the suites and positioned on the doors. We're very conscious of the fact that passengers need to be made aware and we are insistent that they are prepared.'



More remote locations demand a particular safety response.

'Our onboard fire teams have as much equipment as those on shore, and they are trained and capable of using it.' **Gerry Ellis**

Remote locations

The trend for new and exciting destinations has also resulted in questions over safety, prompted in part by the sinking of the *M/S Explorer* in the Antarctic Ocean in 2007, and the accidental grounding of the *Spirit of Glacier Bay* in Alaska in 2008. For some companies, the risk generated by visiting these remote areas is too great, especially when faced with potentially adverse conditions. However, they remain popular with tourists, and statistics gathered by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) show that from 2007 to 2008, more than 46,000 sightseers journeyed to the region. 'This included sea, air and land-based travel, with those arriving by sea making up the bulk of the figures,'

explains Ricardo Roura, coordinator of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition's (ASOC) Protocol and Tourism Campaigns. 'Around 25% of passengers do not land in Antarctica,' he says. 'Instead, they cruise around in large-capacity vessels, in some instances with well above 2,000 passengers onboard.'

According to ASOC advisor Sian Prior, there are a number of risks inherent in visiting the region. 'These include ships that are not suitable for the weather conditions, poor training standards for ice-covered waters and a lack of navigational regulations. Also, the numbers of ships visiting the area at certain times of the year has increased.' Other potential problems highlighted by the organisation include unknown hydrographic conditions, a lack

of vessel tracking and monitoring systems and the large distance away from search and rescue facilities in the event of an incident. 'This isn't to suggest that all ships are substandard or that crews are poorly trained, but there are some which are not as good and this is a risk, both to passengers and other ships in the area,' Prior observes.

While most responsible cruise operators evaluate these risks carefully before sending ships to the region, ASOC believes there are vessels in the Antarctic that are unsuitable for its potentially challenging conditions. The association believes the introduction of compulsory regulations, in addition to the voluntary guidelines set out for IAATO members, would go some way to addressing the situation. 'There are currently no internationally agreed regulations, standards or guidelines for vessels operating in the area, unlike the Arctic,' notes Prior. 'The existing guidelines for the Arctic are in the process of being reviewed and extended to cover Antarctic waters. However, this process is likely to take a further 18 to 24 months.'

Assessing the risk

However, many cruise operators feel it is possible to ensure passenger safety in the Antarctic and other remote areas. 'As soon as you get underway you start taking risks, and our job is to manage

'I think it's the most unsung thing we do,' says Roussel. 'However, there is always room for improvement and we need to be careful.'

Holland America is currently planning to take part in a mass rescue training

'The existing guidelines for the Arctic are in the process of being reviewed and extended to cover Antarctic waters.' **Sian Prior**

them,' says Roussel. 'We've sailed across the ocean for hundreds of years; we do it all the time and don't hear any concern. In the Antarctic, the risk does increase but it is manageable.'

Holland America's crew receive specialist training before sailing to the region and the areas in which it operates are limited. Retired coastguard icebreaker captains are also used as pilots.

Despite criticism engendered by recent events, the industry feels it is doing its utmost to comply with regulations and in turn, keep its crew and passengers safe.

exercise conducted by the Alaskan coastguard in 2009, allowing the company to review the way in which its safety procedures would work in the event of an incident.

In general, the cruise industry has a good safety record, but recent incidents serve as a warning against complacency. There is always more work to be done, and by investing in training and continually examining and improving procedures, operators can continue to ensure the safety of passengers and crew at sea. [wc](#)



Visit us at Seatrade Cruise Shipping Miami, stand nr: 1829

Unrivalled cruise expertise

We never forget that your guests may judge you on our performance.

[Unitor Marine Products](#) | [Technical Services](#) | [Maritime Logistics](#) | [Ships Agency](#)

www.wilhelmsen.com/shipsservice

