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WORDS: BEN CONNOR

Concordia Tragedy

What can the cruise industry learn in the aftermath of one of the world's worst cruise disasters?

The tragic sinking of *Costa Concordia* on January 13 this year captured the world's attention. From the bizarre actions of the ship's captain and accounts of a chaotic evacuation, to the lives lost and daily updates on the search for survivors, media coverage of the disaster soon reached saturation point around the world.

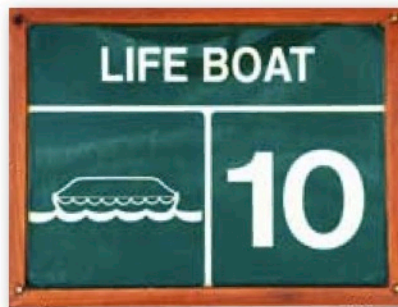
What does this tragedy mean for the cruise industry? Have people's perceptions of cruise travel changed as a result of the *Concordia* accident? Will they stop cruising? And can improvements be made to the industry's safety regulations?

Speaking with Cruise Critic in late January, Mike Driscoll, editor of *Cruise Week*, an agent- and industry- focused publication, said, "No-one is saying their business is being desecrated. There aren't massive cancellations. And what [agents] are fairly confident about is that their repeat customers are conducting business as usual." A poll on the Cruise Critic website confirmed this, with 65 per cent of the 6,000 respondents stating that they were unconcerned, as they saw the accident as an anomaly. Only four per cent responded that they would never cruise again.

Pre-booked first-time cruisers

seemed less confident, however, and were allegedly contacting agents, anxiously asking questions about ships and their safety records – an indicator that this tragedy could possibly put a dampener on what has been a rapidly growing industry.

The sinking of *Costa Concordia* has highlighted some glaring safety concerns that need to be addressed if the industry is to move forward.



Numerous cruise industry and maritime organisations have begun re-examining their emergency response and safety regulations and procedures. These include Carnival Corporation, the owner of *Costa Cruises* and 10 other cruise lines (a total of more than 100 ships); the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the UN agency responsible for maritime safety; and numerous other

cruise-ship-classification societies. General agreement would seem to exist that the sheer size and scale of modern ships necessitates more innovative, efficient systems of evacuation. The aftermath of the *Titanic* disaster, 100 years ago, brought regulatory changes that made it mandatory for a ship to carry enough lifeboats for all passengers plus an extra 25 per cent capacity. But with the severe listing of *Concordia*, deployment of several of her lifeboats proved impossible.

Other safety considerations include the absolute power currently afforded to captains (which, in the case of Captain Francesco Schettino, allowed him to pull off a stunt that led to numerous deaths, untold trauma and millions of dollars worth of damage); the criminalisation of sail-bys; and the current IMO regulations that only require a cruise-ship's muster drill to occur within 24-hours of departure. *Concordia* sank just three hours into her journey, at which time no muster drill had occurred.

We can only hope that all involved will learn from this disaster, developing better safety procedures and more sophisticated multiple-contingency evacuation systems so that we can continue to enjoy the wonderful world of cruising.