

Fred Olsen Cruise on the MV Braemar

Originally Scheduled for 27th Feb 2020 – 28th March 2020

We were in high spirits as we left the UK on the 27th February on a flight to the Dominican Republic, in anticipation of a 30-day cruise on the Braemar. The holiday of a lifetime, visiting many places in Central America and the Caribbean that we'd never been to before. Or so we thought. At that time, the coronavirus (Covid-19) was worrying, but it seemed to be contained mainly within China and Italy. Little did we know how much was about to change.

I believe that what initiated the resultant chaos and confusion, and drove what would ultimately be the domino effect of countries and ports introducing draconian restrictions on tourists, was the report that one passenger on the Braemar had reported flu-like symptoms. As a precaution, the passenger and four crewmembers the passenger had come into contact with were immediately isolated. There were no Covid-19 testing facilities on board, so these were just standard precautionary measures. The reaction of the Dominican Republic authorities was to prevent the Braemar from docking at La Romana, where new passengers were due to embark, and passengers who had completed the previous cruise were due to disembark for flights back to the UK.

The immediate problem facing Fred Olsen Cruise Lines was what to do with over 500 recently arrived passengers from the UK, many of whom had been travelling for almost 15 hours, and now without any accommodation. The logistics are hard to grasp, but everyone who had arrived at the port of La Romana was eventually accommodated across 7 hotels on the island, many at the Bahia Resort complex. My wife and I were amongst the last to be allocated a room, at the [Bahia Principe Fantasia](#) hotel, almost 26 hours after departing the UK. We were ultimately to remain there for 3 days, not knowing when, where or if our cruise holiday would begin.

After 3 days, during which time the Fred Olsen team back in the UK, in liaison with various UK Government departments (primarily the Foreign Office and the Dept. of Transport), were frantically trying to find a port anywhere in Central America and Caribbean that would let the Braemar dock to enable embarkation and disembarkation of passengers. This turned out to be the island of St. Maarten, a Dutch protectorate. So, the next logistical problem was how to get circa 500 passengers from several hotels across the Dominican Republic to La Romana airport for onward transit to the airport in St. Maarten, which was about 2 hour's flying time away. Buses were arranged, passengers assembled, two Airbus aeroplanes were flown from the UK to La Romana. All seemed to be going to plan, except the interminable time it took to check everyone plus bags and baggage into La Romana airport and through security, remembering that most of these passengers were quite elderly, some were disabled. Having got as far as the departure lounge, we waited, and waited and waited. First to be told there were no crew for the aircraft, and then told that permission had not been given by the authorities (not sure if this was at Dominican Republic or St. Maarten) for the flights. Eventually, at 10pm that night, over 8 hours after we had left our hotels, flight permission was granted, and crews found. We arrived at St. Maarten just after midnight on the 1st March, 4 days after our cruise holiday had been scheduled to start.

The next logistical problem was getting circa 500 passengers to where the Braemar was docked and moving roughly the same number of disembarking passengers from the Braemar to St. Maarten airport. When we arrived at the airport, there were only two 16-seater mini-buses available to get us all to the ship, which was about a 1-hour drive away. Eventually, more and larger buses turned up, and we eventually arrived at the ship at 2.15am on the 1st March. Every passenger had to undergo a temperature check before they were allowed to board. Despite being tired, hungry and thirsty, our spirits rose as we thought that, at last, our holiday could begin. Thanks to the captain and crew of the Braemar, who must also have had a very long and exhausting day, food and refreshments were provided. This was followed at 3am for our compulsory lifeboat drill, and then, at last to our cabins and our beds.

Significantly, St. Maarten was the first opportunity to test the 5 people currently in isolation for the Covid-19 virus. Samples were taken for analysis, and two days later the results came through as positive.

We were given a revised itinerary while at St. Maarten, omitting the destinations on the original itinerary (Santa Domingo, Cozumel and Belize City), and starting with Port Royal, Jamaica as our first destination, scheduled to arrive on the 6th March. We were only the second ever cruise ship to dock at Port Royal (and now probably the last!) and though we only spent 2 hours there, we were made very welcome and enjoyed the reggae tunes and dancing provided by a local entertainment team.

Our next ports of calls were:

- 6th March, Puerto Limon, Costa Rica
- 7th March, Colon, Panama
- 8th March, Cartagena, Colombia

All of these destinations made us welcome and passengers enjoyed the various excursions they had booked.

Around this time, the shipboard routine changed quite significantly. The captain was reacting to advice from the UK about 'social distancing', so only minimum levels of passenger service were maintained. Some of the bars were closed, two restaurants were closed, all dining was open session (buffet), served by ship's staff and there was no table service. On-board guest activities were curtailed, and the entertainment team and guest speakers were video streamed to cabins from an empty auditorium. Passenger – crew interaction was kept to an absolute minimum.

Our next destination was [Willemstad, Curacao](#) where we arrived on the 10th March. We were allowed to dock but not disembark, so any planned excursions had to be cancelled. We could only admire this pretty town, with its brightly coloured Dutch-inspired buildings, from the decks of the Braemar.

Things took a radical turn for the worst when, given the rapidly escalating concern about the spread of the Covid-19 virus, we were refused permission to dock at Barbados. This was

significant in the context that this was where many of the passengers were due to disembark for scheduled flights back to the UK. At this point, we were very much in limbo, with no ports in the region willing to let us dock. The captain kept us regularly apprised on the escalating discussions that were taking place in London, between Fred Olsen and the UK Government. In the meantime, we were beginning to run short of fuel, water, food and medical supplies. But despite what we were told were intense diplomatic efforts, there were no countries in the West Indies, not even British Commonwealth countries and British protectorates, that were willing to provide any humanitarian help.

After several days of not knowing where we were or where we were going, the captain advised that we had been given permission to take on supplies at Freeport in the Bahamas. This was later modified to a rendezvous point at [Great Isaacs Cay](#), a small uninhabited island about 30 miles from Freeport, where we would anchor. This was two days sailing from our current destination, and we duly arrived and anchored early in the morning of 14th March. We waited there until the evening of the 15th March when a small boat turned up with food and medical supplies. The crew of the boat refused to manoeuvre alongside the Braemar, or to help in transferring the supplies to the ship. Consequently, the captain had to up-anchor and get the ship in position to receive supplies, which was then managed entirely by the ship's crew. The crew of the small boat were fully kitted out in protective gear and masks, despite being at least 20 metres from the nearest Braemar crew member. It was clear that we were perceived as a Covid-19 plague ship, despite the isolation of the 5 confirmed cases.

During our time at Great Isaacs Cay, discussions in the UK were now at Prime Minister level and the COBRA committee on how to repatriate all of the Braemar passengers back to the UK. News came through on the 15th March that Cuba had agreed to allow us to dock and would provide all the necessary support to enable us to fly home. Four BA aircraft would be chartered to fly to Cuba for the repatriation.

We duly set sail for Cuba, arriving at the port of [Mariel](#) on the 16th March. The four BA aircraft would arrive by the 18th March.

On our disembarkation day, 18th March, 680 passengers were split into four groups, with flights scheduled to leave for the UK at 2-hour intervals, starting at 6pm. Ours was the third flight, leaving at 10pm. The last flight was for all those on board who had self-isolated due to illness, approximately 40 crew and passengers. None of these had been tested for Covid-19. The five who had tested positive would remain in Cuba for treatment.

The transfer to the airport was a lesson in how to efficiently and effectively move 680 people from the ship, to the airport, through security and onto the aircraft. It involved convoys of 14 busses at a time, escorted by police cars, outriders and ambulances – which I assume were there in case someone got ill during the transit. Perhaps this illustrates the workings of a communist country; demand-led resources that can be instantly martialled.

I will conclude with heartfelt thanks to: -

1. Captain Joso Glavic and his crew, for keeping us safe throughout the cruise. The captain kept us regularly informed on the fast-changing circumstances and despite

what must have been a very stressful experience, kept our spirits up. He was our favourite 'British Captain' – an ongoing joke after one of the media agencies miss-reported he was British.

2. The Cuban authorities and people, who made us feel very welcome during our brief stay with them. There were many messages of support from them on social media, and the hope that we would one day come back and visit their beautiful country. They even left each passenger a parting gift bag on the busses used for the transfer to the airport. Sadly, some people left this gift behind, perhaps not realising its value in terms of outreach and compassion from one country to another. Altogether it was so much more than what we received from our Commonwealth 'friends'.

We're now effectively a country in lock-down, with significant restrictions on travel. I'm not sure what the long-term future is for the cruise industry, and I have great sympathy for the crews of these ships. Most of them on short-term contracts and for non-UK registered ships, on less than the UK's minimum wage. On the Braemar, a significant proportion were from the Philippines, Thailand and India, and were no doubt reliant on the cruise industry for supporting their families' back home.

Given the opportunity, we will cruise again. I just hope this will be possible, eventually.

Steve Dale

Passenger, MV Braemar, 28th Feb 2020 – 18th March 2020