

Safer, greener, better quality – Marseille is cruising again!

After a 17-month hiatus, the cruise business is restarting in French ports. With 36 port calls this summer and a maximum of two vessels in port simultaneously, Marseille is also back cruising, but in a safer and greener way and with an even higher quality of service.

A restart that is safer, within a stricter health protocol

As early as March 2020, a technical panel was set up, involving the port and local health authorities - Port of Marseille-Fos, Bouches-du-Rhône Prefecture, Marseille Fire and Rescue Service, PACA Region Health Executive (ARS), Institut Hospitalo-Universitaire Méditerranée Infection (infectious diseases hospital) and the Marseille Provence Cruise Terminal. As part of their resumption of business, the sea and river cruise companies are relying on this unique arrangement to guarantee that turnaround and transit operations proceed smoothly and in a safe health environment.

Indeed, in coordination with the Marseille-Fos cruise terminals, they have put in place safety measures that go beyond those imposed by French and European regulations. Whereas regulations require social distancing and more frequent disinfecting of open spaces, the cruise companies have gone further by setting a 70% ceiling, organising daily temperature taking, putting in place specialized medical units on board ships, regulating boarding and preventing any air on board being recycled.

For excursions, a protective “bubble” is in place for passengers, on disembarkation and throughout their route, to avoid any risk of contagion for passengers, professionals or locals. Consequently, all persons coming in contact with excursion passengers, such as guides and drivers, must provide a negative PCR or lateral flow test. The excursions are being arranged in groups of at most 35 persons. The passengers are spread out over the Marseille Provence region to avoid congestion at the most popular sites and to ensure they enjoy the best possible visitor experience.

A greener restart for better air quality in Marseille

The new beginning is symbolized by the return of two cruise companies, MSC Cruises and Costa Cruises, who have positioned their latest flagships, both of which represent the pinnacle of environmental efficiency and customer experience, the Costa Smeralda -powered by liquefied natural gas, or LNG- and the innovative and connected MSC Seaside.

This year, 2021, is the first year the Marseille Cruise Club’s Blue Charter will be implemented in Marseille waters. Drawn up in 2019 and signed by local and national authorities and Costa Group, MSC Cruises, Royal Caribbean Cruises Limited and Ponant, the Blue Charter -a world first- sets out four strict rules of conduct that surpass current regulations:

- Using 0.1% low-sulphur fuel, or other systems such as scrubbers, LNG or catalytic converter that reduce the environmental footprint, within the port control zone;
- Reducing speed to 10 knots upon entering the port control zone;
- Promoting port calls by LNG-powered vessels and developing dedicated bunkering infrastructure;
- Using shore-to-ship power at berth by 2025.

The Port of Marseille Fos, with local and central government support, has invested more than €50M in a scheme to provide shore-to-ship power connections. Marseille Fos is the first port in France, and the only Mediterranean port, to provide shipping companies with power connections, a solution that cuts air pollution when berthed to zero.

Having put the service in place in 2017 for the Corsica ferry routes, with access to international ferries due in 2022, the Port of Marseille Fos is firmly committed to equipping two cruise terminal berths by 2025.

To reduce air pollution even further, the Port of Marseille Fos is encouraging the energy mix. Consequently, the vessels not berthing at berths with power points will be the LNG-powered vessels. Burning LNG eliminates almost all sulphur (SOx) and particle emissions, reduces nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions by 80% and carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions by up to 25% compared to current marine fuels.

In 2025, with more than half of the ships using shore-to-ship power and around one third LNG-powered, more than three quarters of port calls will be more environmentally friendly for Marseille's air.

A restart focussed on quality, job creation and boosting the local economy

According to a BVA survey carried out for the Bouches-du-Rhône Prefecture, the Sud Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur Region and the three local chambers of commerce and industry in 2017, the cruise industry generated €375M for the Marseille-Provence economy, of which:

- €50M millions through port and tourism activities (direct earnings)
- €79M through passenger and crew spending (indirect earnings) - *86% of passengers spend during their visit. The average amount spent is €43.20, covering a range of items: restaurants, transport, personal effects, souvenirs...*
- €246M through the knock-on effect of these earnings (induced impact)

In Marseille, the cruise sector accounts for some 3000 jobs. Of these, 2000 are direct jobs, including tour guides, restaurant staff, taxi and bus drivers, travel agents, customs officers and port staff, plus another 1000 in company head offices and shipyards. In addition to the economic benefits for the local region, there is also the showcase effect.

Between 80 and 90% of passengers disembark (depending on the weather among other things) and spend four to six hours on land; visiting places during port calls is, after all, one of the reasons for going on a cruise. Visiting the Marseille Provence area during a port call can inspire ideas for a return visit: 64% of transit passengers plan to come back to Marseille within the following three years and 88% of them are willing to recommend the destination to their friends. Satisfaction rates show that 98% of passengers are either satisfied very satisfied with their visit.

Cruising allows the region to extend its tourist season beyond just the summer: only 25% of cruises call in the July-August period.

Lastly, the cruise industry provides Marseille and its surrounding region with an international exposure: 130 different nationalities were documented in 2019.

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