

On a 'ghost ship' in Asia amid coronavirus fears

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Correspondent

Last month, when my wife, Kathi, and I embarked on a month-long trip to Asia, we had no idea that we were about to become part of an international news story. I'm referring, of course, to the strange saga of our cruise ship, Holland America's *Westerdam*, variously labeled the "Ghost Ship," "Flying Dutchman," or "Pariah Ship" by various news media.

Repeatedly denied entry into any port due to fears of the potentially deadly coronavirus, the ship made international news as it wandered the South China Sea for two weeks, searching for a port of haven. What was it like aboard the ship during this bizarre Odyssey? Well, part of the time it was like living in the plot of a grade-B horror movie, in which the characters are pursued by a deadly menace but every path of escape is blocked. Still, we were never quarantined; and the mood on board was often quite festive.

On the other hand, the stress and concern were always present. For example, after the captain announced yet another port cancellation during one evening dinner, a lady at a nearby table began sobbing. So, yes, it was stressful — and, at this point, continues to be. We are lucky to be home now, but news reports say that a woman from

our cruise has now tested positive for the virus.

Our cruise got off to a great start in mid-January with visits to Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, and four stops in a rather remarkable Vietnam. However, because the *Westerdam* inadvisedly made a port call in Hong Kong, just as the coronavirus crisis struck, the cruise took an unexpected turn, or rather several of them.

The first surprise came on our way to the Philippines, where I was looking forward to visiting the country where my father saw heavy fighting with the Coast Guard during the retaking of the Philippines in World War II. Just a few hours from docking in Manila, that country became the first to refuse us entry due to fears of the virus. That action stemmed from our stop in Hong Kong and the first death in the Philippines from the virus.

Meanwhile, for obvious reasons, the cruise's final destination was changed from Shanghai, China, to Yokohama, Japan. So, China was obviously off the list; but Yokohama was of interest to me, since that was the port where the Coast Guard ship, on which I was serving, took its mid-patrol break during a

Far East deployment in 1971.

Taiwan was the next to pull the welcome mat; and South Korea soon fell off the itinerary, too. So, then we headed directly for Japan, with several planned stops, including Nagasaki and Okinawa, where my wife's father fought in World War II with the marines. By then, every time the captain came on the public address system with "a very important message," everyone groaned in unison. Japan, already dealing with a horrible outbreak on another cruise ship — the *Diamond Princess* — couldn't risk another and turned us away. By this time, it was abundantly clear that we were in a very difficult situation; and the cruise was officially "terminated." Except that it wasn't, because the ship still had no place to go.

Even so, in spite of the *Westerdam's* peculiar cruise to nowhere, the mood among the passengers was remarkably upbeat. Sumptuous meals, glitzy Broadway-style production shows, and myriad activities continued unabated. Our situation was vastly better than that of the *Diamond Princess* in Japan, where hundreds of passengers fell ill with the potentially deadly virus and were quarantined



PHOTO BY CRAIG EISENBEIS

Travel on the *Westerdam* in Asia was impacted by the rapid escalation of the international coronavirus health crisis.

in their rooms. As a result, an undercurrent of anxiety about a similar fate was ever-present, even though everyone's body temperature was scanned four times over a period of several days.

The *Westerdam* briefly started on a track toward Guam but was denied entry there as well. So, the ship turned southwest, retracing our route north of the Philippines, without a real

destination. We were eventually told that "two (undisclosed) ports" had agreed to take us; and, after a few days of aimless wandering, Thailand was announced as our destination and we received notice of our flights scheduled out of Bangkok.

Meanwhile, numerous news reports stated that Thailand's minister of health

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