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One of Royal Caribbean's Largest Cruise Ships Makes Maiden Voyage to St. Thomas

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Odyssey of the Seas Captain Per Norway Kristoffersen, center, and VIPA Exec. Dir. Carlton Dowe, center right, pose for a photo with others during the ship's maiden voyage in St. Thomas on Jan. 5, 2021. By. KYLE MURPHY FOR VI CONSORTIUM

ST. THOMAS — Royal Caribbean's 1,138-foot long, 135-foot wide Odyssey of the Seas — one of Royal Caribbean's largest cruise ships — made its maiden voyage to St. Thomas at Crown Bay on Wednesday, where V.I. Port Authority Executive Director Carlton Dowe and the ship's captain, Per Norway Kristoffersen exchanged gifts to mark the occasion.

The ship has the capacity to carry 5,510 guests in total but only brought 2,029 passengers on Wednesday's voyage. It also had onboard 1,497 crew members.

Mr. Kristofferson is familiar with the territory as he formerly captained the Oasis of the Seas for over four years. He told the Consortium it was a “fantastic experience” to bring passengers to the “beautiful Virgin Islands” on the new vessel. Odyssey of the Seas' first voyage began on July 31, 2021.

After the brief ceremony, Mr. Dowe spoke to the Consortium about the challenges the Port Authority has faced with managing cruise ships at the Crown Bay dock (the Monsanto Marine Terminal), with the emergence of the highly contagious Omicron variant of Covid-19. He said while it has been difficult, the communication among parties involved, including Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, Royal Caribbean and V.I.P.A. has made the situation manageable.

“We have had some issues where they couldn’t come into port because of the agreement that we have,” Mr. Dowe said, referring to the no more than 1 percent positivity rate criteria for ships to be allowed to dock in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Anything above that percentage and the ships have to be turned away.

Mr. Dowe reminded the public that over 95 percent of passengers on those cruise ships are vaccinated, “but we got to maintain safety, we got to remain concerned,” he said. The Omicron variant is known to spread in the vaccinated and unvaccinated.

Mr. Dowe said V.I.P.A.'s goal is to protect the local community, and he revealed that ships have been turned away. As of Tuesday, the territory had prevented five ships from berthing at its ports, including at least one on St. Croix because their Covid-19 positivity threshold was above 1 percent.

“It’s uncharted waters for all of us,” Mr. Dowe stated. “From time to time we will have these cancellations, we hope not... I’m hoping and praying come the end of January hopefully we see this thing decrease as quickly as it increased. Hopefully it can be quicker than that.”

“We are going to be as cautious as we can. Wear your mask, take your vaccine and we still have to find a way to operate,” the executive director concluded.