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Royal Caribbean Set to Make First Voyage to U.S. Virgin Islands Since Pandemic in July; USVI Prepares for Visit

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Celebrity Edge will be in the territory this month on a voyage that spans the Bahamas, St. Martin and the USVI, said Royal Caribbean on Thursday. **By. CELEBRITY CRUISES VIA FACEBOOK**

Royal Caribbean executives on Thursday detailed protocols that are in place as the cruise line prepares to make its first voyage to the U.S. Virgin Islands in July since the onset of the coronavirus. Previously, Royal Caribbean executives said the first trip would be sometime in June, however Gov't House said in a release issued Wed. June 15, 2021, that the first voyage will arrive on July 6.

Jayne Halcomb, director of business and destination development at Royal Caribbean, said on Thursday during the Bryan administration's Press Box that the cruise line was looking forward to setting sail again after more than a year of a Covid-induced No Sail Order that halted cruising from U.S. ports.

"We are thrilled to resume our cruise ship operations in the region," she said. Ms. Halcomb revealed that Royal Caribbean in June 2020 partnered with Norwegian Cruise lines to establish what the two companies called "the Healthy Sail Panel," which included scientific medical and technical experts in fields of public health, infectious disease, biosecurity, epidemiology, hospitality and maritime operations" to plot a safe return to cruising. The panel produced seventy-four recommendations that "mapped the fundamental elements necessary to mitigate risk and enable our safe return to service," she said. "We've also welcomed the guidance of national and international regulatory agencies."

Ms. Halcomb said the two companies exceeded all recommendations provided by the panel to "make cruising one of the safest ways to explore the world again."

"We've set up numerous sanitation stations around the ship, we've increased our medical staff, we've enhanced our medical facility on board," she said. "There will be a mask policy, some sort of social distancing policy and some more." The cruise line will also "require some testing and showing of vaccination cards prior to arrival as well," Ms. Halcomb added.

Joshua Carroll, vice president of destination development at Royal Caribbean, added, "We've been in partnership with the U.S. Federal Government, state, local government and teams in the destinations that we visit and are trying to balance all of the requirements of all of those entities."

He said the balancing act of requirements has one clear goal in mind: "that's ensuring that we are delivering the safest possible vacation and the healthiest possible vacation that protects our guests, the communities we visit and our crew."

Mr. Carroll spoke of a recent policy change from allowing only vaccinated individuals to now allowing unvaccinated vacationers as well, a change most likely implemented as part of an agreement to adhere to [a Florida law](#) that outlaws cruise companies from requiring proof of vaccination from Florida ports. There are similar laws in states such as Texas and Alabama, however Florida is a major cruise hub and the largest in the U.S.

Mr. Carroll said he expects the number of unvaccinated individuals to be "infinitesimally small," and said those passengers will be subject to additional protocols at their expense — not the cruise line's or vaccinated persons'.

"You have laws in some of the places that some of our ships leave from that we are required to adhere to," he said.

When asked if Royal Caribbean ships' medical team are able to handle an outbreak of Covid-19 cases, Mr. Carroll said yes. "We've upgraded the medical facilities on all of our ships. We've brought on board the ability to test in an isolated situation to understand if a particular guest or crew member and their close contacts have been positive for the virus," he said. This would ensure positive cases remain "extraordinarily isolated" and other passengers "are able to get off safely and the cruise would continue."

Ms. Halcomb said passengers will be instructed "to adhere to all local regulations ensuring reduced exposure to the guest, the crew and the community of each destination."

Mr. Carroll revealed that the first ship arriving to the USVI will be Royal Caribbean's Celebrity Edge, which will be coming out of Fort Lauderdale, Florida on June 26. The trip's itinerary includes the Bahamas, the USVI and St. Martin. "We have our eyes set on that date," he said.

Over 95 percent of persons on the ship will be vaccinated, Mr. Carroll revealed.

After hearing the date, V.I. Dept. of Tourism Commissioner Joseph Boschulte said, "I'm happy to hear that there is continued emphasis on the safety protocols. People don't go on vacation to get sick... but nonetheless we still have to take the necessary precautions."

Mr. Boschulte said he was looking forward to working with the V.I. Port Authority and Royal Caribbean "as we finalize that inaugural visit in the Covid-era."

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said, "We have to figure out what we have control over," before adding, "We have control over quite a bit actually so I would consider this our third meeting that we had with Royal Caribbean in the last two weeks, which is great. That means we are collaborating and communication is there."

She added, "We are committed to ensuring that we know who is actually coming to the territory, their Covid positivity, their vaccinated rate — those things we are truly committed with but we go back to balance health and finance. I think we've been doing a remarkable job with that and will continue to do that."

Mr. Boschulte noted that the conversation on the Press Box with Royal Caribbean was just one cruise line, "but we are also in conversations with the rest of the cruise ships that come to the territory." He expects more cruise lines to arrive "in the late summer, early fall."