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How travelers were affected by the COVID-19 crisis

Case study: Pagodas and Pearls – a cruise to nowhere



Figure 4.1: Ed and Barbara Sobey

For Ed and Barbara Sobey, Pagodas and Pearls was their winter escape from the soggy Pacific Northwest. The all-inclusive luxury cruise ship, the Crystal Symphony, was to sail from Guam on February 2, 2020 over to the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan, disembarking in Hong Kong on Feb 15. “We looked forward to scuba diving in Saipan, visiting an old shipmate in Manila, and seeing the geological wonders of Ha Long Bay in Vietnam,” they said. Ed was a speaker on the ship looking forward to sharing his love of the ocean and his concerns for its health.

Eventually, the ship was permitted to land in Singapore. The ship had arrived a few days early so the Sobey's used it as their hotel while they wandered about. "First thing we noticed was that many locals were wearing face masks. Not uncommon throughout Asia, but the percentage of people with masks was higher than normal. Outside every mall pharmacy was a long line of people waiting to get in. The attractions, office buildings, and some malls had people taking temperatures of everyone passing."

The remainder of the journey was pretty smooth for the Sobey's, with Crystal taking care of their transportation to the airport and their flights home. "This story has two important messages for people interested in taking a cruise," said the Sobey's. "Go with the best cruise line you can afford. Crystal took care of us. You may have reasons to book your own flights but, if you have the cruise company book them, any hiccup in the schedule is their responsibility not yours. Some of our shipmates were spending hours and hundreds of dollars to change flights and then to change them again."

The couple's next cruise, from Tahiti to Fiji, was due to start in late March aboard Paul Gauguin Cruises. Ed's presentations on coral reefs, sharks, and island geology were all prepared, and they were both looking forward to diving at islands across the South Pacific. Of course that didn't happen, but they do want to travel by ship again. "We feel that the cruise ships won't risk bad publicity by sailing before it's safe. We restrict our cruises to smaller ships on the better lines. And, we are anxious to hear what extra precautions the industry is taking to make our next cruise safe."

Source: Personal communication with Ed and Barbara Sobey, May 2020

Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter 1, at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, thousands of travelers – like our seafaring couple in the opening case study – had travel plans disrupted, and many were stranded abroad. This chapter will focus on such disruptions, but also touch on a certain segment of travelers who were oblivious to the crisis – either due to a lack of knowledge or to a lack of common sense! Consumer behavior (related to travel) during quarantine will then be examined, followed by a synopsis of the research undertaken during the lockdown concerning future travel behavior, as the industry sought to understand who would travel first and when, once lockdown regulations were eased.

Disruptions

Chapter 1 discussed how most governments introduced strict controls on overseas travel in response to the spread of COVID-19 leaving many tourists trapped abroad. Countries like Peru and Morocco put travel restrictions in place with little