

CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

CALL FOR VIEWS ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCOTLAND'S CULTURE AND TOURISM SECTORS

SUBMISSION FROM DR KEN GRANT

Summary

It will be difficult in many tourism situations to completely practice social distancing. The Majestic Line is exploring use of contact tracing apps and regular antigen testing for crew and pre-cruise home testing for passengers as way to allow safe small ship cruising on the West Coast of Scotland. We believe it offers a possible solution to allow the wider tourism industry to get going again in Scotland.

Background

The Majestic Line offers luxury cruising on the west coast of Scotland with four vessels, each with up to twelve passengers and crew. Since we started in 2004 a small ship cruise industry has built up based primarily in Oban which brings significant numbers of often 'high end' tourists to the mainland west coast and Inner and Outer Hebrides. The cruising season is usually April to October.

The Majestic Line is unusual in that Dr Ken Grant the current MD/founder is a public health doctor / epidemiologist and has brought his medical knowledge to our approach to dealing with Covid19.

Impact of Covid 19 on The Majestic Line

Cruises for April/May and early June have been cancelled. The majority of clients have rebooked, the rest have had their monies refunded. International clients (about 30%) have been rebooked for next year. Cruising later in the season is under review depending on government guidance on moving out of lockdown. However, clients are anxious to come and we are getting enquiries from those who had planned to go abroad. Bookings for 2021 onwards are strong and we are getting a significant number of enquiries from clients who have previously gone on larger cruise ships and now wish to move to smaller local ones.

Our normal staff complement is 13 central office staff and 35 seasonal staff. We have 4 of the central team on furlough the rest are all busy with rebooking clients selling 2021 and maintain our boats. We have not been able to take on our normal complement of 35 seasonal staff. They are not eligible for furlough. We have a CBIL. The process worked well.

Cruising July Onwards

While the easiest and most economical approach would be to cancel the 2020 season and focus on 2021 onwards, we do not think this is the right approach for the following reasons:

- The tourism industry will need to adjust to Covid if it wants to survive;
- We need to provide employment for our seasonal staff;
- The business we bring in is important to the local economy;
- Our clients want to come;
- We believe with the following mitigation strategy we can deliver safe cruises.

Risk Mitigation Strategy

This obviously will have to be adjusted as government guidelines for post lockdown come out.

We have based it on 5 key principles:

- No one will risk their life for a holiday;
- We must be able to offer a holiday where the risk of Covid 19 is the same or less than in their home circumstances;
- We must not increase the risk of bringing in Covid 19 to the area we cruise in
- We must not put our staff at increased risk;
- We must be able to offer the same experience and standards on board that we provided pre Covid.

Given our boats rely on fresh air not air conditioning and time ashore is often in uninhabited areas, we believe we offer a safe environment but not totally risk free. We recognise total social distancing or wearing masks will not be possible while on board. We therefore have looked at three solutions. All will be on our website and discussed individually with clients. We recognise all are evolving rapidly and we will stay abreast of all developments and adjust as necessary.

Medical History

As a principle we do not normally ask guests their medical history. However, in this case we will ask all guests to inform us if they or any contacts have had Covid symptoms during the previous 2 weeks via a short questionnaire and if so, we will ask them not to travel and rebook or reimburse them.

Contact Tracing

We will ask all passengers to sign up to the UK contact tracing app with blue tooth when released and if they are identified in the 14 days pre-cruising as having been in

contact with a Covid 19 patient again ask them not to travel and again rebook them or reimburse them.

Testing for Covid19 Antigen

This shows whether people are incubating the disease/ae infection before symptoms arise. It has a proven track record including for home testing. Antigen testing is advancing rapidly and while currently relies on nasal and throat swabs, sputum and finger prick blood testing should be available shortly. We can do it using private labs and will not interfere with NHS testing. We believe if we test crew weekly and clients shortly before travel, we will be able to dispense with social distancing or masks on board. We will also have minimised the risk of people incubating Covid coming to the west coast.

Social Groups / 'Bubbles'

Depending on government guidance we may be able to offer cruises to family groups (who are already socialising) through whole boat charters. We are being approached for this.

Minimising Local Contact

We can run a cruise without going to centres of population -including boarding and disembarking. Indeed, this is one of the main attractions of our cruises. However, we feel it is important to contribute to the local economy -passengers from one of our boats can spend up to £1000 in a morning in Oban, Tobermory or Portree. However, we will adjust this depending on government guidelines and local sensitivities.

Relevance for the Tourism in Scotland

We believe our approach could be adopted more widely within the tourism sector and we would be happy to help with this. There may be a case for working with the private laboratory sector to set up an antigen testing centre for the tourism industry in Scotland.

Dr Ken Grant
Managing Director
The Majestic Line