

Business

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A year after Diamond Princess, cruise industry eyes return

Analysts say smooth sailing is not likely before second half of 2021

TOKYO: David Abel and his wife Sally might have had the cruise from hell last year on the coronavirus-hit Diamond Princess, but they can't wait to get back to sea. A year after the ill-fated ship went into quarantine off Japan, the cruise industry is hoping passengers like the Abels will help steer them to calmer waters. Analysts say smooth sailing isn't likely before the second half of 2021 at the earliest, but bookings are already picking up.

The Abels both caught coronavirus on the Diamond Princess, but they've booked five cruises for late 2021 and early 2022, and are eyeing a sixth.

"We can't wait to get back to sea," David Abel told subscribers to his YouTube page in an early February video. "There's nothing better than waking up in the morning in the world's most exciting and interesting cities. We love the sound of the ocean."

He acknowledged some people "have concerns" but insisted he believes "cruises will be one of the safest types of vacations human beings could ever take". When the Diamond Princess arrived off the Japanese city of Yokohama on February 3, 2020, the global death toll from the mysterious "new coronavirus" was around 400 and Japan had registered a handful of infections.

Carrying 2,666 passengers and 1,045 crew, the Diamond Princess was supposed to be meandering around Asia, but things quickly changed when a passenger tested positive after leaving the boat.

By February 4, Japanese authorities quarantined the ship and all on board. Testing showed the virus had spread widely. Over 700 people on board would eventually test positive for the virus and 13 people died.

Sarah Arana, an American social worker, looks back on the experience as "incredibly surreal." "I don't have

any regrets about it," the 54-year-old told AFP, saying she felt she had a front-row seat to the pandemic's start and the science around handling the virus.

'Not brilliant'

A year on, the lessons learned from the pandemic mean tough restrictions for the cruise industry. Canada has barred cruise vessels from its waters until February 2022. And the US Centers for Disease Control advises against cruises, though authorities released rules last year for a phased resumption.

Operators will be required to have a lab on board for virus testing, and trips must last no more than seven days, with masks mandatory on board. No surprise then that most cruises in the area have not resumed. Carnival Cruises now hopes to restart US operations in late April, as does Royal Caribbean. Norwegian Cruise Line is targeting early May. But there is cause for hope said Patrick Pourbaix, director general for France, Belgium and Luxembourg at MSC Cruises, which restarted Mediterranean cruises last August.

Its worldwide bookings for summer are at 60 percent of pre-pandemic levels, with winter 2021-22 at 80 percent - "not brilliant, but not catastrophic," Pourbaix said. One Filipino former Diamond Princess crew member, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP he is desperate to return to work despite his experience on the ship.

"We were very afraid," he said. "We knew the virus was spreading but we were being asked to work."

But being unemployed has been "very difficult... very stressful", he said, and he believes operators will ensure staff safety when cruises resume. Matthew Smith, an



YOKOHAMA: In this file photo taken on February 16, 2020, a police car drives past the Diamond Princess cruise ship, with people quarantined onboard due to fears of the new COVID-19 coronavirus, at the Daikoku Pier Cruise Terminal in Yokohama port. — AFP

American lawyer who was on the Diamond Princess, said he and his wife look back on photos from their cruise with very different emotions. "For her, the photos bring back memories of a very unhappy experience... I see pictures of a unique experience, an adventure of sorts, that I have no bad feelings about," he said.

Smith said he had found the last year in the United States "much more of a miserable experience", and the

couple currently have three cruises booked.

Arana, the social worker, feels differently, saying she will never board another cruise ship, in part after learning operators have limited liability for what happens to passengers. But after her quarantine on board the Diamond Princess, she does have some advice for those considering a trip: "Get a balcony cabin... Make sure that you've got that balcony and fresh air!" —AFP



ISTANBUL: A physical imitation of a Bitcoin at a crypto currency "Bitcoin Change" shop, near the Grand Bazaar, in Istanbul. Bitcoin soared above \$50,000 for the first time yesterday after surging by almost 75 percent this year. — AFP

Bitcoin surges past \$50,000 for first time

LONDON: Bitcoin soared above \$50,000 for the first time yesterday as an increasing number of corporate heavyweights back the world's most popular virtual currency. At around 1235 GMT, Bitcoin hit an all-time high of \$50,547.70, marking a 4.4-percent gain since Monday.

Bitcoin, once the preserve of internet geeks and hobbyists, has since exploded in popularity and has now rocketed by almost 75 percent in value so far this year. "The crypto king has crossed the 50K price level for the first time as institutions are all over it," said AvaTrade analyst Naem Aslam.

"There is a lot of FOMO (fear of missing out) among traders as the price is going through the roof and we have limited supply." It later pulled back to stand at \$49,080.30 at about 1345 GMT.

"The rally has still a lot of power left and the move is going to continue towards the actual target of \$100,000," Aslam told AFP. "Of course, there will be some bumps but investors should consider them as an opportunity to bag some bargains."

Bitcoin has been on a meteoric rise since March, when it stood at \$5,000, spurred by online payments giant PayPal saying it would allow account holders to use cryptocurrency. The unit blasted its way past \$45,000 last week after Elon Musk's electric carmaker Tesla invested \$1.5 billion in the virtual unit.

In a further boost, Tesla also unveiled plans to accept the cryptocurrency from customers buying its vehicles. Wall Street player BNY Mellon then jumped aboard the Bitcoin bandwagon, announcing plans to accept digital currencies.

The moves came after Mastercard also announced it would accept the unit, even as many regulators remain skeptical. Adding further legitimacy, Twitter chief Jack Dorsey revealed last week that he and rap mogul Jay-Z were creating a fund aimed at making bitcoin "the internet's currency".

Bitcoin, which was launched back in 2009, hit the headlines in 2017 after soaring from less than \$1,000 in January to almost \$20,000 in December of the same year. The virtual bubble then burst in subsequent days, with bitcoin's value then fluctuating wildly before sinking below \$5,000 by October 2018. However, strengthening corporate support has transformed the outlook this time around, commentators say. —AFP

Amazon to make devices in India for the first time

MUMBAI: Amazon will begin making Fire TV sticks in India, the US tech giant said yesterday, its first device manufacturing line in the country as it fights for a share of its booming e-commerce market.

Amazon is locked in a battle for dominance with Walmart-backed Flipkart and Reliance, owned by India's richest man Mukesh Ambani, as well as thousands of local traders who have accused the US firm of

driving them out of business. Its latest announcement comes as Prime Minister Narendra Modi ramps up his flagship "Make in India" drive, aimed at urging foreign companies to manufacture goods in the South Asian nation and reduce imports. "We are delighted to announce Amazon's first manufacturing line in India to produce hundreds of thousands of Fire TV Stick devices every year catering to the demands of the Indian customers," Amit Agarwal, head of Amazon India, said in a statement.

"This further reiterates our commitment to the Government of India's 'Make in India' initiative," he added. The announcement followed last year's pledge by Amazon owner Jeff Bezos to invest \$1 billion in the country and create a million new jobs. The firm will work with a subsidiary of Taiwanese manufacturer Foxconn to begin production of Fire TV

sticks at a factory in the southern city of Chennai later this year. Communications minister Ravi Shankar Prasad welcomed the announcement, saying it would "enhance domestic production capacities, and create jobs as well".

"India is an attractive investment destination and is poised to become a major player in the global supply chain in the electronics and IT products industry," he added.

The nation of 1.3 billion people has seen huge job losses due to the coronavirus pandemic, with a months-long lockdown causing the economy to contract by nearly a quarter between April and June last year. As infections have slowed however, hopes of an economic recovery have taken hold, with New Delhi forecasting 11 percent growth in the 2021-22 financial year. — AFP



SINGAPORE: People walk during lunch time at the Raffles Place financial business district in Singapore yesterday. — AFP

Singapore rolls out new budget boost for virus-hit firms

SINGAPORE: Singapore yesterday unveiled a fresh multi-billion-dollar package to help pandemic-battered businesses and fund a vaccination drive, as part of the city-state's annual budget. The coronavirus has plunged the financial hub into its worst-ever recession, with the crucial aviation and tourism sectors hit particularly hard as global travel ground to a halt. Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat announced the new package totalling Sg\$11 billion (US\$8.3 billion) as he unveiled the budget in parliament.

A substantial chunk will be allocated to helping

workers and businesses still affected by the pandemic, including in the travel and aviation sectors. More than 40 percent of the funds will go to financing public health and measures to ensure a safe reopening of the economy, he said.

This includes inoculation efforts-vaccines are given for free to all residents-as well as the tracking of people possibly exposed to a coronavirus carrier. Heng said close to 250,000 people have received their first dose, and 55,000 have had their second job. The latest package of financial aid is on top of the nearly Sg\$100 billion rolled out last year. Singapore's economy, which shrank a record 5.4 percent last year, has started regaining strength in recent months but Heng warned that the recovery is uneven.

"The global battle against Covid-19 is still far from over. Many places are still experiencing high levels of infection." Singapore has had a relatively mild outbreak with nearly 60,000 cases and 29 deaths, and in recent times has recorded very few local transmissions. — AFP

5G phones may interfere with aircraft: Regulator

PARIS: The latest generation of smartphones, 5G, can interfere with aircraft altitude instruments, the French Civil Aviation Authority warned yesterday as it recommended they should be turned off during flight. "The utilization of 5G devices onboard aircraft could lead to risks of interference that could potentially result in errors in altitude readings," a spokesman for the agency said.

The potential phenomenon is due to "signal interference from a close frequency source of a strength that is similar or even superior to that of altimeters." This interference can cause errors "in instruments that are extremely critical during landing," said the agency, known by its French acronym DGAC. It sent a bulletin on the issue to airlines last week, recommending that 5G phones should either be turned off completely or put in "airplane mode" during flight.

Most countries have long required that mobile phones be turned off or placed in airplane mode due to concerns that previous generations of mobile telecommunications networks can interfere with a plane's navigation and communication equipment. The DGAC also recommended that in cases of disruption to an aircraft's equipment that the flight crew immediately notify air traffic controllers who can then alert authorities at the airport. DGAC also noted that it had laid out conditions for the positioning of 5G base stations in order to limit the risks of interference during landing at French airports.

The strength of signals from 5G base stations placed near France's main airports has been restricted, said the DGAC, which has been conducting additional testing since November when French telecommunications operators were given the green light to begin rolling out 5G services. It is continuing to monitor 5G base stations around all French airports in cooperation with the agency responsible for radio frequencies. — AFP